

Rewriting the World: Gendered Violence, the Political Imagination and Memoirs from the “Years of Lead” in Morocco

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Prison literature (*littérature carcérale* or *adab al-sujun*) has shed light on censored dimensions of Moroccan postcolonial history. By sharing their personal memories, former political prisoners have triggered a debate on state violence under Hassan II (1961–1999). This exploration of the gendered and relational dimensions of violence and testimony draws on the published memoirs and interviews of Nour-Eddine Saoudi and Fatna El Bouih, two former Marxist-Leninist political prisoners. Specifically, it identifies the means by which Saoudi and El Bouih theorised their personal experience to denounce the system of repression in Morocco. Their testimonies illustrate the role of memory as a transformative site of agency and political imagination, exhibiting hope for a different future by encouraging Moroccans to engage with their dark past.

Especially in the last fifteen years, prison literature (in French, *littérature carcérale*; in Arabic, *adab al-sujun*) has shed light on memories and histories silenced in the official historiography of postcolonial Morocco. The testimony of former political prisoners has triggered a debate on past state violence and encouraged the rewriting of a chapter of Moroccan history that was marked by the institutionalised repression of the political opponents of Hassan II (1961–1999). This period, 1961 to 1991, has come to be known in Arabic as *sanawat ar-rasas* (“the years of lead bullets”) and in French as *les années de plomb* (“the years of lead”). In the wake of the political liberalisation initiated by Hassan II in the 1990s and continued since 1999 by his son and successor Mohammed VI, cultural production and civic activism persuaded the new king in 2004 to establish an equity and reconciliation commission, the Instance Équité et Réconciliation (IER), to investigate state crimes and compensate its victims (Slyomovics 2005a, 2009; Vairel 2008).

This paper explores the gendered and relational dimensions of violence and testimony by engaging with the spoken and written words of Nour-Eddine Saoudi and Fatna El Bouih, two former political prisoners who had been activists in the student movement in Casablanca during the late 1960s and 1970s.¹ Specifically, I explore how they experienced and narrated state violence as a process embedded in the intimacy of their bodies and selfhood and in their affective and social worlds. My intention is to draw attention to the complex ways in which both violence and testimony implicate social constructions of femininity and masculinity that contribute to shaping how violence is lived and publicly narrated.

The personal and political trajectories of Saoudi and El Bouih intersect. Close friends since they were students, they both became involved in the Marxist-Leninist movement. As a result of their political views and activism, they

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¹ The analysis draws on interviews in French with Saoudi and El Bouih and on ethnographic research (October–November 2012 and April–May 2013) on cultural production, violence and the memory of

the Years of Lead, which was carried out mainly in the Rabat-Casablanca conurbation as part of the ZMO project “Transforming Memories: Cultural Production and Personal/Public Memory in Lebanon and Morocco”.

were disappeared in the secret detention centre Derb Moulay Chérif in Casablanca and then imprisoned for years in civilian prisons in Morocco. In 2001, El Bouih published *Hadith al-‘atama*, a memoir in which she recounts the experience of torture and detention in what she calls a “feminine voice” (2008, v). Her book was translated into French as *Une femme nommée Rachid* (published in 2002) and into English as *Talk of Darkness* (2008). In *Atlassiate* (2006), El Bouih collected testimonies from women in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Central Morocco who suffered state violence in the aftermath of the 1973 uprising against the regime. Nour-Eddine Saoudi edited *Femmes-Prison: Parcours croisés* (2005), a collection of oral and written testimonies by the female relatives of political activists documenting the traumatic consequences of the activists’ disappearance and detention for their female relatives, as well as these women’s courage and civic activism. Saoudi first published brief prison accounts abroad in the early 1980s; he published his memoir, *Voyage: Au-delà des nuits de plomb*, which he had begun writing in prison, in 2007 in Morocco.

Scholars have drawn attention to the active role of women in the struggle against Hassan II’s regime and have analysed El Bouih’s memoir to understand the gender dynamics of sexualised violence against female activists during the Years of Lead (Slyomovics 2005a; Slyomovics 2005b, 132–64; Guessous 2007; Orlando 2009, 48, 71–96; Orlando 2010). Women activists doubly challenged the *makhzen* (government, administration, authority, system): as political opponents and as women who transgressed the dominant gendered norms that prevented them from entering the male sphere of politics. By telling their personal stories, these women named forms of sexualised violence that touched intimate dimensions of their sense of self and remained surrounded by silence, shame and social stigma. In other words, scholarly attention to women’s voices has shown not only that political violence is gendered, but also that the passage from pain to public speech is laden with gendered and relational implications (Slyomovics 2005a, 2005b, 2012; see also Hegasy and Dennerlein 2012; Das 2008). In contrast, the gendered implications of men’s experiences of violence and testimony remain largely unexplored.

My paper seeks to explore the intricate relationship between violence, gender and voice in the interviews and published memoirs of Saoudi and El Bouih. The juxtaposition of the two authors provides further insights into the sexualised and gendered dimensions of repression in Morocco and into gendered notions of honour, silence and shame when appearing in public. The inevitable slippages between “what happened” and “the representation of what happened” make it hard to distinguish the violence they actually experienced and their public testimony about it. Nevertheless, the ways Saoudi and El Bouih exposed or veiled particular aspects of their experiences enable me to examine the tensions between voice and silence as a gendered discourse on pain.

Saoudi and El Bouih have used the autobiographical genre as a form of activism to theorise their personal experience and denounce the system of repression in Morocco. Their memoirs detail how the regime used physical and symbolic violence to shatter their voice, sense of selfhood and political agency through the *unmaking* of their subjectivity and everyday worlds. Elaine Scarry (1985, 35) has argued that physical pain has no voice and visibility because it cannot be articulated verbally. For Scarry, pain not only resists language, it also destroys it because it unmakes the world through the annihilation of a person’s self and voice. The insight that violence shatters the everyday world captures important dimensions of the lived experience of Saoudi and El Bouih. Nevertheless, my analysis extends Scarry’s argument by showing how they have struggled to resist annihilation and articulate in words, images and silences the unsayable experiences of pain and subjection. Veena Das and others (Das 2003, 2006; Das et al. 2000, 2001) have shown how people strive to make their ordinary worlds liveable again in the aftermath of conflict and war. These studies contend that violence not only destroys, but also works to produce certain types of agency and subjectivity. Following their lead, I explore the everyday practices through which Saoudi and El Bouih sought to remake their ordinary worlds during and after detention, thereby making them inhabitable and meaningful again.

My approach interweaves a textual analysis of their prison memoirs with conversations and interviews conducted in

2012 and 2013, when we discussed their prison memoirs and their motivations to write, the difficulty of remaking a life after prison, their visions of the present, and their current civic engagement. The consistency of their oral and written memories arguably suggests that writing and testimony contributed to shaping a narrative about past events. Their oral statements provide further insights into the delicate process through which they sought to piece themselves back together and re-socialise the embodied memories of violence in the aftermath of their traumatic experience.

Since the creation of the Instance Équité et Réconciliation, cultural production from the Years of Lead has become one focus of the monarchy's project to rewrite and remember the country's postcolonial history. Saoudi's and El Bouih's oral and written testimonies reveal a pedagogical aim of transmitting to younger generations marginalised memories of the past as a means to better understand the present and its ambiguities. They invite us to think of memory as a transformative site of agency and political imagination, which reveals their hope of contributing to a different future by promoting Moroccans' engagement with their dark past.

1. The New Left and the *Makhzen*

Morocco gained its independence from France in 1956. After an initial struggle for power between the royal palace and the political and military forces that had fought for national liberation (mainly the Istiqlal and the Armée de Libération Nationale), Sultan Mohammed V was able to establish an authoritarian regime and in 1957 took the title of king. His successor Hassan II (1961–1999) entrenched the king's constitutional position by co-opting some of his potential opponents while crushing opposition parties with repression and mass trials (Vermeren 2006, 19–30; Pennel 2000, 297–316; Saoudi 2004, 261–89).

In 1965, two events deeply affected social and political developments. First, the government enacted measures to restrict access to secondary education, which was crucial for upward social mobility; after the French left, having a high school education enabled Moroccans to enter the civil service. In the context of a political and economic crisis, students, unemployed youths and slum dwellers rioted in

Casablanca in protest against this reform. On 23 March, the regime suppressed the riots; hundreds of protesters were injured, killed or disappeared. Hassan II imposed a state of emergency to suspend all political and trade union activities, which remained in place until 1970. In 1970, he promulgated a new constitution that further entrenched his power. Second, the leader of the left-wing Union National des Forces Populaires, Mehdi Ben Barka, was abducted, tortured and killed in Paris.

El Bouih and Saoudi belong to a generation that was deeply influenced by these events and, in the early 1970s, they joined the clandestine Marxist-Leninist movement as the revolutionary alternative to the existing left-wing parties. Against the global backdrop of political and student movements that culminated in the May 1968 student uprisings in France and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the dream of social, cultural and political change animated young Moroccans (Rollinde 2002, chap. 7). In the late 1960s, the “New Left” (*al-yasir al-jadid*) emerged from the radical wings of the Union National des Étudiants Marocains, the Union National des Forces Populaires and the Parti du Libération et du Socialisme. Three clandestine Marxist-Leninist organisations – 23 Mars (named after the Casablanca uprising), En Avant and later Servir le peuple – emerged out of the university and high-school milieu (Rollinde 2002, 142–48; Saoudi 2007, 58–60; Vermeren 2006, 49–50).

In 1971 and 1972, two military coups unsuccessfully sought to oust the monarchy, and fifty-eight officials and soldiers who were accused of being involved in the coup and sentenced in a mass trial in 1973 were disappeared in the secret prison of Tazmamart, where they suffered inhumane conditions for eighteen years (see, for instance, the memoirs of Tazmamart survivors Ahmed Marzouki [2000] and Mohammed Raiss [2002]). In a climate of political turmoil and radicalisation, thousands of students and activists were arbitrarily arrested and disappeared during the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1974 and 1976, waves of arrests targeted the Marxist-Leninist movement. Saoudi was kidnapped in 1974 and spent ten years in prison, while El Bouih was kidnapped in 1977 and detained until 1982. Like many opponents of the regime, they were tortured for

months in Derb Moulay Chérif. In 1975, Hassan II launched the Green March to seize Western Sahara, which was then under Spanish occupation, and annex it to the Kingdom of Morocco. This enabled the king to reaffirm national unity and forge an alliance with the opposition parties (Vermeren 2006, 68–69). As a consequence, the radical left-wing prisoners lost political support.

Since the early 1980s, a few prisoners have published in foreign countries their poetry, fiction and personal accounts about prison and torture.² The majority, however, published prison testimonies in Morocco after Hassan II's death.³ The political transition, far from being simply a top-down process, also resulted from the struggle of human rights activists, former prisoners and their families. Beginning in the 1970s, Moroccans in France created associations to denounce state repression and abuses. In Morocco in the 1970s and the 1980s, activists founded human rights associations, including the Association Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme (Moroccan Association for Human Rights, established in 1979) and the Organisation Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme (Moroccan Organisation for Human Rights, established in 1988) (Rolinde 2002, chap. 10). In 1999, when Mohammed VI established the Commission d'Arbitrage (Indemnity Commission) to compensate the victims of state abuses, former political prisoners set up the Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice (Moroccan Forum for Truth and Justice) to contest the regime's policy of turning the page without establishing historical truth or juridical accountability (Slyomovics 2001, 2003, 2009).

In response to the former prisoners' and activists' demands for truth and justice, Mohammed VI established the Instance Équité et Réconciliation in 2004, headed by the

former Marxist political prisoner Driss Benzekri, who had been imprisoned from 1974 to 1991. The IER was charged with investigating human rights violations between 1956 and 1999, compensate the victims and prevent repetition, while making it a condition that perpetrators not be mentioned (Mohsen-Finan 2007; Labdaoui 2007; Hazan 2008; Vairel 2008; Wilcox 2009). The IER recommended that the government institute two programs to promote Moroccans' reconciliation with their violent past. The communal reparations (*jabar al-darar al-jama'i*) programme was launched in 2007 to direct resources to areas of Morocco that had been targeted by state violence or had been marginalised as the result of uprisings against the regime or due to the presence of secret detention sites. This program has also funded the creation of monuments and memorials and the transformation of secret detention centres into museums and community centres (Dennerlein 2012; Slyomovics 2012).⁴ The second program, IER 2, provided for the creation of national archives, support for academic research on Moroccan postcolonial history and in general the preservation of memory.⁵

2. Nour-Eddine Saoudi and the Descent into the "Unknown"

Nour-Eddine Saoudi was born in 1951 in Casablanca into a lower-middle class-family originally from a village in the Middle Atlas Mountains. He joined the clandestine Marxist-Leninist movement when he was a student at the Institut Supérieur de Commerce et d'Administration des Entreprises (ISCAE).

In *Voyage: Au-delà des nuits de plomb* (2007), Saoudi recounts the events that had led to his arrest in 1974, his disappearance in Derb Moulay Chérif and the farcical 1977 mass trial. He describes the process of writing, which he had begun while he was in prison, as "a painful exercise,

2 This body of literature includes the well-known prison account of Abdellatif Laabi (1982), a poet and founder of the literary review *Souffle*, the famous prison memoir of the Marxist-Leninist activist Driss Bouissef Rekab (1989) and the graphic novel on torture by Abdelaziz Mouride (2000), smuggled out of prison page by page and published in France in 1982 and then in Morocco in 2000. For an overview of Moroccan prison literature, see El Ouazzani (2004), Bartuli (2004), Zekri (2006, 199–231); Elinson (2009) and Orlando (2009, chap. 2; 2010).

3 The Conseil National des Droits de l'Homme's list of prison writings published in Arabic and French since 1956 shows that this production has intensified significantly since 1999.

4 For a detailed description of these projects, see also http://www.ccdh.org.ma/IMG/pdf/panorama_des_projets.pdf.

5 See <http://www.ccdh.org.ma/spip.php?article4396>. The Conseil National des Droits des l'Homme, the body appointed to implement the

recommendations, submitted six existing films on the Years of Lead to renewed editing and is planning to do the same with the prison literature (personal communication with Mohammed Khamlichi, November 2012).

because, in plunging me into this dark past, I somehow relived, through my memory, all the ordeal of my incarceration (abduction, torture, trials, hardship, hunger strikes ...)", but found that writing his prison memoir was like a "second liberation" (2007, 11), because it lifted the burden of memory.⁶ During our first meeting in November 2012, however, Saoudi made it clear that he had not written his memoir for himself: "I was a teacher in high school and I realised that the young were completely unaware of the recent history of their country. I wrote the book for these young people" (interview, 15 November 2012). Saoudi was motivated by the pedagogical aim of providing the young with the tools to engage with the past as an essential condition for reflecting upon the present and imagining the future. To do so, he situated his personal memory against the backdrop of the historical events that shaped his generation's political imagination. In his view, prison testimonies often lack attention to the political, social and economic conditions under which disappearance, arbitrary arrests and torture occurred: "I tried to provide a historical explanation so that young Moroccans could get an overall idea of the social and political context that led our generation to rebel, to become politically active and then to be arrested" (interview, 15 November 2012).

In his memoir, Saoudi underlines that his political engagement had led him to question Moroccan political life, and also the dominant gendered practices shaping social and family ties: "With my political awareness, not only did my perception of society change, but also that of my family and the relationship between its members" (2007, 77). Saoudi's sensitivity towards the interplay of gendered and generational hierarchy led him to refuse the patriarchal and authoritarian masculinity that he felt his father and his generation embodied and to search for other ways of "being a man". This cemented the bond with his mother, with whom he had spent much time since his childhood, helping her weave carpets and do housework, which were considered solely women's work. His political activity was interrupted by his abduction in December 1974, when he was twenty-three years old.

At our first meeting, Saoudi emphasised the "formative dimension" of prison because this traumatic experience pushed him to examine the fundamental choices in his life, such as his political engagement, but also to reflect upon his conflict-ridden relationship with his father. While he was in prison, he translated scholarly works from French to Arabic, taught other detainees and wrote articles on economic matters for French journals; he has continued these activities since his release in 1984. Despite the suffering that he endured, he maintains that detention had provided him with "an exceptional opportunity of maturation and human, cultural, intellectual and political enrichment" (2007, 24). In his depiction of the prison universe, Saoudi explores the activists' connivance and betrayals, the naiveté of their political practices and the unexpected solidarity of the few jailers who sympathised with their situation and provided material help. Above all, Saoudi's memoir is an examination of state oppression, and a testimony of personal and collective struggle for material and moral survival under conditions of brutality and arbitrary treatment.

3. Horizons of Pain and the Struggle against Despair

"Like a sharp sword, an excruciating cold pierces my whole body, which is curled up on itself. Foul odours invade my nostrils, choking me. My body was a mass of pain, head to toe. [...] I had become a 'dismembered' body" (Saoudi 2007, 23). With this image, Saoudi throws the reader into the universe of the "Derb" and its rulers, the *Hajj* (the jailers and tormentors). *Hajj* is the title given to a person who has undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca and is also used to address elderly people as a sign of respect. Besides ensuring the jailers' anonymity, forcing the prisoners to address their persecutors with this honorific title represented a form of symbolic violence. The reversal of moral values in the "Derb" reinforced the undoing of the everyday world.

On the day of his arrival, Saoudi writes, "death was desired more than life" (2007, 23). After he was brutally tortured and disfigured, he was confined in a corridor, blindfolded and manacled, for a month. Only sleep provided some res-

⁶ All quotations from Saoudi's memoir (Saoudi 2007) translated from the French by the author.

pite. For Saoudi, torture and degradation served to extract information, but most importantly: “They intended to punish prisoners so that they would never even think of repeating what they had dared to do and, through them, to dissuade all citizens from engaging in oppositional political action and formation” (2007, 29).

On arrival at the “Derb”, detainees’ hair was shaved off and their names replaced by numbers. These practices were meant to prevent prisoners from recognising each other and to systematically shatter their subjectivity. “Our transformation into common numbers was a way to erase, deny our identity. To dehumanise, degrade and weaken us”, Saoudi writes (2007, 31). Under the surveillance of the *Hajj*, everyday life was regulated by strict rules; the prisoners were kept from speaking, seeing and moving. Sexualised verbal and physical harassment was an integral part of the violence that male prisoners endured. In his memoir, Saoudi (2007, 25) mentions the term *pé* (abbreviation of *pédé*, “fag” in English) that was used to insult and humiliate the prisoners. He does not address this aspect further in his prison memoirs, but told me that he had felt profoundly violated not only as a human being, but also as a man:

In their system of violence the macho dimension was part of their way to destabilise and break the male prisoners’ morale by addressing them with the most abject terms – “faggot”, “I will fuck you”, “son of a bitch” – and by the agony of the bottle, when prisoners were forced to sit on a bottle.

(interview, 2 May 2013)

Saoudi’s words reveal dimensions of state violence that remain silent and veiled in his memoir, but which he briefly mentions in a previous written account.⁷ In prison, verbal harassment and sexual violation aimed to reinforce the male prisoners’ feelings of powerlessness by unsettling their sense of masculinity. In their written testimonies, other male prisoners refer to the use of bottles and electric devices for sexual torture and describes the experience of being violated (for example, Bouissif Rekab 1989, 78).

Saoudi emphasised that women activists found it painful to talk publicly about the “macho character” of the physical and verbal violence they suffered. For male prisoners too, he explained, the gendered dimension of state violence remained (and remains today), a sensitive topic because it threatens the prisoners’ image of virile masculinity, as predominantly conceived in Morocco: “According to the normative image of the dominant man in society, the masculine is virile, ‘active’ and not ‘passive’; ‘sexual passivity’ is associated with femaleness.” (interview, 2 May 2013) Saoudi’s reflections show that male prisoners experienced sexual violation and threats of rape as the violent emasculation of their gendered selfhood, but also that voice and silence about these kinds of intimate violations are contextually negotiated alongside and against social constraints and gendered imaginaries about masculinity.

Far from depicting the prisoners simply as passive victims, in his memoir Saoudi describes everyday life in the “Derb” as: “A multifaceted resistance to this degrading environment. A rejection of the degradation that they wanted to impose on us and a tenacious clinging to our humanity” (2007, 109). He documents the practices through which the prisoners beat the surveillance system. By pulling away threads from the blindfold, they could see the *Hajj* without being seen. “Because the blindfold was black, not white, the gaps in the weave were not visible to the guards. Hence, I could recognise the visages of the ‘masters’ of these sinister places” (2007, 35). Saoudi stresses that despite the jailers’ attempts to isolate the prisoners from each other and the outside world, they had worked out methods to communicate: “We had to break the ‘order of silence’ and brave the punishment to confuse the investigators, but also to preserve our humanity” (2007, 116). The deprivation of sight led the prisoners to hone their olfactory and auditory senses. This bodily transformation enabled them to recognise the *Hajj* by their smell and voices, and hence monitor their movements and anticipate their arrival. Saoudi writes that prisoners organised debates, sang, laughed and

7 Listing the various forms of torture that male prisoners endured, Saoudi mentions “the use of electricity on the sensitive parts of the body; method of the ‘bottle’” (1982, 187).

composed and recited poems. He also writes about his recurring dreams of fleeing from prison and of having sex – an oneiric search for freedom and sexual pleasure that he interprets as essential for his personal balance:

I said to myself that fortunately our torturers could not “imprison” our dreams, our imagination or our minds. Likewise, they could not prevent us from dreaming, from surfing in the imagination beyond the cells and bars of the places of detention.

(2007, 125)

Dreams, imagination and creativity were the invisible weapons with which prisoners sought to transcend the horrific world of the “Derb”.

Saoudi shows how “the politics of disappearance” (2007, 29) penetrated the prisoners’ affective and social worlds as the institutionalised strategy to punish and terrorise their families and society in general. Pointing to the relational and gendered implications of violence, he recounts his disappearance and detention through his mother’s eyes, thereby turning his autobiography into a multi-vocal narrative. When she heard about Saoudi’s abduction, his mother tried to commit suicide – an act that is formally condemned in Islam. Saoudi writes: “My abduction and my ‘disappearance’ for long and interminable months caused disruptions within my family and indelibly marked the life of each of its members [...] time stopped for them” (2007, 94). Like other families, the Saoudis were deceived and intimidated by the secret police. For instance, his father was led blindfolded through prisons in search of his son; he received false promises of his son’s release and even the request for a ransom, which prompted Saoudi’s mother to attempt suicide again. The traumatic consequences of his disappearance on his family were intensified because people in the neighbourhood shunned them. Some people regarded the radical left as anti-monarchical and dangerous, and this explains their lack of solidarity. Moreover, as Saoudi notes: “Most of them were scared of the police, of being prosecuted for the simple reason of having relationships with my family” (2007, 74). Disappearance was also a means to prevent the population from supporting the regime’s opponents.

In August 1975, Saoudi and seventy-eight other detainees were transferred to the Ghbyla, the civilian prison of Cas-

ablanca named after the cemetery, where they were subjected to an unusually restrictive “special regime”. Short family encounters were allowed in a noisy and crowded visitor’s room. The prisoners organised a hunger strike to protest against their conditions. Deprived of other means of political agency, they turned their bodies into a site of protest by inflicting pain on themselves for ten days, until they obtained permission to continue their studies and to access books. Saoudi completed his university studies at the Institut Supérieur de Commerce et d’Administration des Entreprises in 1976 and obtained another degree in history in 1985.

After the Green March, Hassan II was able to regain broad public support and restore national unity; as a consequence of the agreement between the king and the political parties, many Union National des Forces Populaires activists were released from prison, while the Marxist-Leninist activists remained in prison because they lacked political support. In response to their prolonged arbitrary detention, the prisoners initiated another hunger strike to force the state to either bring them to trial or release them.

For the first time in the history of the country: more than 244 political prisoners were on unlimited hunger strike in a political context of “national consensus” and “social peace” in which the status of political prisoner did not officially exist.

(Saudi 2007, 153)

Eventually, in January 1977, the prisoners were put on trial. Yet the trial, which the prisoners envisioned as an opportunity to inform the Moroccan public about their political position and to denounce their arbitrary detention, turned out to be a farce. The verdict was harsh: Saoudi was sentenced to twenty-two more years of imprisonment for “conspiring against the security of the state”. His mother attempted to commit suicide for the third time.

In March 1977, Saoudi and other prisoners were transferred to Kenitra Central Prison. Despite increasing tensions among the Marxist-Leninist activists, he and his companions tried to render their life in prison liveable by organising cultural, artistic and craft activities. In 1979, they initiated a third unlimited hunger strike for official recognition as political prisoners. After thirty-nine days of hunger strike, the activist and poet Saida Menebhi died.

Outside prison, male political prisoners' disappearance and detention had led their female relatives to perform novel gender roles and modes of femininity both at home and in the public sphere. Together with other female relatives, Saoudi's mother engaged in public demonstrations and sit-ins to denounce the authorities' indifference to the political prisoners' situation. Only on the forty-fifth day, did a delegation of members of parliament and prison administrators visit the prisoners and promise to intercede with the government. Although their living conditions subsequently improved, the government never officially recognised them as political prisoners.

Saoudi was released on 24 August 1984 under a royal amnesty. Making a new start in life without any institutional support was difficult, he said. With two university degrees, Saoudi concealed his past as a political prisoner and found a job as a proofreader with the right-wing newspaper *Le Messag*. He wished to be financially independent and rebuild his life, but was initially able to earn only low wages. In 1985, he began teaching in a private school of management, while continuing to work as a journalist and translator. In 1999, Saoudi helped to establish the Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice and the Observatoire Marocaine des Prisons, which monitors prison conditions. It was not until 2000, when he was granted a passport and hence the possibility to move freely, including abroad, that he felt he had regained his freedom and citizenship.

4. A Perspective on the Present

For Saoudi, human rights movements and prison testimonies have helped open a debate on past state violence and challenge the prisoners' stigma as criminals, as "the scum of society" (interview, 15 November 2012). Although only a minority of Moroccans read prison literature, these books have received considerable attention in the media and in public debate. According to Saoudi: "Through our testimonies we've shown that there were people who were unjustly jailed; one shouldn't condemn everyone" (interview, 15 November 2012).

Saoudi said that many things still have to be done to improve prison life. He stressed, however, that political prisoners' hunger strikes and activism have contributed to

improving the situation of all prisoners, who now experience living conditions inconceivable in earlier decades. Prisoners can now study, go to the doctor and receive visits in a decent environment. Notwithstanding the important political changes since Hassan II's death, he said: "There are still red lines, of course, there is still the figure of the king." (interview, 15 November 2012). The term "red lines" refers to taboo topics that people feel they cannot openly discuss, such as the monarchy, Islam, sexuality and Western Sahara. Saoudi is convinced that prison testimonies can contribute to preserving the memory of the past, which is essential to the construction of a better tomorrow. He is critical of the king's desire to "turn the page" regarding past state violence: "Between history and the present there is a permanent relation. Yesterday is history, today is the present and it will be history; so it's not possible to say: let's stop, let's turn the page" (interview, 15 November 2012). In other words, both memory and history are germane to the present and the future of Moroccan society, but post-colonial history still remains to be written and the past remains to be fully investigated. Political prisoners' personal memories can provide scholars with the means to write an "objective and real history", as he put it, to correct the official version imposed by the monarchy. Even though personal memory is inevitably subjective, Saoudi said that historians and critical readers can approach objectivity by comparing various prison testimonies. Rather than "collective memory", he preferred to talk of a "plural memory" (*mémoire plurielle*), which includes multiple voices and subjective experiences within a broader historical frame (interview, 19 April 2013). He is wary of the institutional projects underway in Morocco to preserve memory:

People who defend human rights should be vigilant because those in power keep their enemies under surveillance and want to control many things, but this [the institutional project] is another opportunity for struggle that, in my view, intellectuals and people concerned with the culture of human rights must not underestimate. There isn't only the political elite, it's not mono-dimensional and one has to be engaged and vigilant at this level.

(interview, 15 November 2012)

Far from interpreting the institutional processes that commenced with the Instance Équité et Réconciliation as the final goal of the struggle, Saoudi regards them as the politi-

cal arena where former political prisoners and human rights activists should continue to call the state to account for past abuses and continue to promote democratic change. While he recognised that the IER officially opened the past to investigation, Saoudi emphasised important shortcomings: “The persecutors are still there and go on doing their job. There are still unresolved cases of disappearance” (interview, 15 November 2012). In his view, this reveals a political will to “conceal” important dimensions of the memory of the Years of Lead. For Saoudi, public memory is essential not only because it challenges the state’s narrative of Morocco’s violent past, but also because it is an “intellectual legacy” (*patrimoine mental*) that shapes people’s vision of the past and inspires their actions in the present (interview, 19 April 2013).

5. Fatna El-Bouih and the Re-Gendering of the Female Voice

Fatna El Bouih was born in 1955 in Ben Ahmed in the Casablanca region. A scholarship enabled her to attend the Lycée Chawqi in Casablanca, where she became involved in the student movement. She was briefly arrested in 1974 as a leader of a high school students’ strike, and in 1977 she was disappeared in Derb Moulay Chérif due to her membership of the Marxist-Leninist group 23 Mars.

When I first met El Bouih in Casablanca in 2012, she told me that she had started writing her memoir in prison to record how female political prisoners experienced arrest and detention. “It was a way to express oneself, to commit to memory what we lived through and especially what the ordinary women inmates went through; I felt I had to do this because I observed them, I looked at them, I helped them, I taught them to read” (interview, 19 November 2012). As El Bouih explained, writing helped her to carve out a space where she could voice her feelings and relate the experiences that deeply marked her during detention. She published her memoirs only in 2001, when, encouraged by Fatema Mer-nissi, “I understood that I should publish my prison memoir, that I should speak out, that there was a female courage to be valorised” (interview, 19 November 2012).

Initially, her desire to bear witness and make her personal experience public clashed with the socially imposed silence, shame and social stigma surrounding political violence

against women. In an interview (Slyomovics 2001b), El Bouih said that a sense of *hchuma* prevented her from talking about her personal experience. The term *hchuma* translates as “shame” and “decency”, but evokes a complex set of meanings, sentiments and bodily dispositions connected with the values of female modesty, deference and propriety, especially in relation to sexuality (see Namaane-Guessous 1991, 5). Political violence against women was a taboo topic in Morocco and has remained a sensitive issue among former political prisoners. When El Bouih became involved in the feminist movement in the early 1990s, she realised that even feminists had difficulty addressing political violence: “I worked in reception centres for battered women. Violence is always assumed to be conjugal and domestic, but political, state violence is a silent violence, nobody talks about it.” To break the silence surrounding political violence against women, since 1994 El Bouih has been sharing her personal experience in newspaper articles and television interviews. She is motivated to speak out because:

In Morocco, we’ve known political detention as male. I wanted to show that political detention is female as well. Even torture: torture is always male. Men are tortured. I showed that torture is also female and how women reacted to torture.
(interview, 19 November 2012)

In El Bouih’s opinion, women activists were submitted to sexualised violence to erase their gendered subjectivity. “They didn’t want to recognise that we were women. They gave us a number and a man’s name. The woman is *haram*, is silence.” While denouncing the specific forms of gendered violence that women endured, El Bouih wanted at the same time to de-naturalise the dominant image of Moroccan women as passive or weak subjects: “I wanted to address a Moroccan public primarily to say that in Morocco there are women who contributed to the creation of democracy, to human rights; they were tortured and proved their courage” (interview, 19 November 2012). El Bouih’s search for what she calls a “feminine voice” interweaves with her desire to tell the untold history of women’s commitment to social justice in Morocco. Susan Slyomovics (2005a, 80–81) has pointed out that El Bouih situates her narrative within a literary tradition of female opposition to patriarchal oppression by evoking the figure of Scheherazade, the legendary heroine of *A Thousand and*

One Nights who dares to challenge male tyranny with her storytelling. El Bouih emphasised, however, that her focus was not so much on her own life. Rather, she used the autobiographical genre as a form of activism to show the systematic ways in which the state perpetrated violence against women's bodies and subjectivity. Her testimony privileges women's subjecthood over victimhood to document their everyday acts of resistance and of giving voice.

6. Narrating Women's Suffering

El Bouih's memoir opens with an oneiric image, the unbounded landscape surrounding the Bou Regreg River that interweaves with the embodied memory of her immersion in the *hammam*. The territories of fantasy and imagination, which connect these images of pleasure and liberty, are suddenly occupied by her nightmares as a child, when her father's storytelling about the abducted women in *A Thousand and One Nights* reappeared in her dreams. Her father reassured her that these stories happened centuries ago. As a prelude to her own kidnapping, she writes: "It never crossed his mind, God rest his soul, that they could happen again in our time" (2008, 1).

El Bouih was abducted on a quiet afternoon in 1977. A policeman who was waiting for other Marxist activists dragged her into the house while she was visiting a female friend. At the police station, she was interrogated amid a flow of insults and injuries. "[O]n that dark day I learned that I was a slut, the daughter of a slut, a prostitute, the daughter of a prostitute, a whore and the daughter of a whore" (2008, 4). The association between political activism and promiscuity reveals the extent to which women's involvement in political activity was perceived as a transgression of the socially prescribed gender roles of modest daughter, dutiful wife and devoted mother. El Bouih writes: "Morality dictates that I busy myself solely with my studies and mind my own business, they kept repeating over and over again during the interrogation" (2008, 4).

After she was interrogated, El Bouih was disappeared in the secret detention centre *Derb Moulay Chérif*. In the chilling

universe of the "Derb", El Bouih was re-gendered as "Rachid 45". The punishment for her engagement in the "male sphere" of politics was the loss of her gendered identity. In this reversed social universe of moans and screams, of nauseating odours and the blurring of day and night, El Bouih was arbitrarily detained for seven months with six other women activists.⁸

El Bouih's memoir is a struggle to transpose into words and images the unspeakable violence whose traces remain in the women prisoners' body and sense of selfhood. In prison, sexual violation, threats of rape, enforced nakedness and body searches were systematically used to humiliate, terrorise and intimidate women prisoners (see also Slyomovics 2005b; Guessous 2007). Rape, in itself a traumatic experience and intimate violation, was all the more shameful because the view prevailing in Morocco regards virginity as embodying honour, values and respectability not only of the girl in question, but also of her family. However, El Bouih said that women activists had suffered more from the prison's pressure to erase their gendered subjectivity than from physical violence: "In comparison, physical violence was something bearable, our struggle was mostly against moral violence" (interview, 19 November 2012). She readily conceded that physical and moral violence had profoundly violated male prisoners' sense of virility and masculinity, too; but she thought it misleading to equate women's experience with men's. "Violence against men aimed to undermine a feeling of strength; in contrast, violence against women aimed to negate the woman in society. This was something we struggled against" (interview, 19 November 2012). El Bouih never submitted to being re-gendered as a man: "I never replied when they called me Rachid. They called me Rachid, I didn't answer. My name isn't Rachid, do you understand? I wasn't a man, I was a woman. It was a struggle." (interview, 19 November 2012) Her statement indicates that silence, too, has a voice and can be a form of resistance.

In the context of a narrative of suffering and violence, El Bouih's memoir documents the everyday practices with

8 Maria Zouini, Widad Baouab, Latifa Jbabdi and Nguia Boudaa, Khadija El-Boukhari. El-Bouih's

memoir includes personal accounts by Latifa Jbabdi and Widad Bouab, which were both published pre-

viously, in 1994, in newspaper articles in the newspaper *Ittihad Ichtiraki*.

which she and the other women prisoners struggled to preserve themselves and find a voice under conditions of subjection and dispossession. Deprived of their senses and subjected to physical and symbolic violence, they still communicated by touching each other's bodies, which went unnoticed by their jailers.

After seven months in Derb Moulay Chérif, El Bouih and the other women prisoners were transferred to the Ghbyla and then to Meknes Prison. In civilian prisons, the women had a small room in which, thanks to the "privileges" that the other political prisoners before them had obtained with their hunger strikes, they could practice a resemblance of normal life by scheduling sports, debates, study groups and writing. Making life liveable in prison, however, was hard, El Bouih related.

You have the choice in your life, the freedom to live, but the worst torture is being obliged to share only a few square meters of living space with someone. One has to find ways to learn to live with others in difficult moments.

(interview, 19 November 2012)

In 1980, El Bouih and the women prisoners started a hunger strike to demand their trial or immediate liberation. In her memoir, she described the devastating effects of the hunger strike on their debilitated bodies and minds. Following the drifting trajectories of her thoughts, the narrative voice shifts from the first to the third person.

She sips her coffee and roams far and wide, thinking of the future. She will be cheerful, outgoing, make friends, forgive, make friends, love more, forgive, enjoy the whole world as nobody has ever done before, she will fall madly in love.

(2008, 30–31)

The narrative shift suggests an attempt to depart from her self and her suffering. By dislocating her pain from herself, El Bouih also seemed to discover her inner resources and envision a different future. The prison authorities left women to face the tyrannies of time; during this unbearable time of waiting, El Bouih navigated between her memories of childhood and her dreams for the future.

After her trial took place in 1980, El Bouih was sentenced to five years imprisonment for her membership of the

Marxist-Leninist group 23 Mars. She writes that the cruelty of her sentence was "The rape of a flower in full bloom. Five years for the crime of imagining a better tomorrow, a world where human rights are respected, a world for women far removed from their inferior status" (2008, 37). Despite its arbitrariness, for El Bouih the verdict was a respite from the all-consuming experience of waiting. Arbitrary treatment by institutions was not limited to the prisoners, however, but also touched the lives of their families, who made long journeys to pay visits that the guards could refuse at the last minute. Nevertheless, these moments of intimacy, even under the watchful eyes of prison guards, were essential to El Bouih's psychological and emotional survival.

In prison, El Bouih was able to scrutinise the forms of violence that women perpetrated on other women in a dehumanising institution. Her memoir details the everyday life of regular women prisoners, their work in prison and factories, their intimidation by inspections, the punishments and injury that female guards inflicted on women whom prison deprived of voice and agency. El Bouih witnessed with astonishment the search for freedom of Ilham, a little girl born in prison, who insistently pointed to the outside world she had never known. Since her mother's arrest, her family had rejected her. The day her maternal uncle came to pick her up, the little girl followed this stranger without hesitation. During our conversation, El Bouih recalled this episode, which she also relates in her memoir. "She was a baby born in prison, who had never known freedom, never seen the outside world. She grew up with us; she was bonded to us. The day someone came to pick her up, she didn't know him, but she went with him, bye-bye. I go outside." (interview, 19 November 2012) This event made El Bouih realise that she had never thought of escaping. She suddenly understood the extent to which she had internalised the unnatural condition of imprisonment. "What have they done to me?" she asked herself (interview, 6 May 2013). By retelling not only the everyday experiences of women activists, but also those of regular women prisoners, El Bouih draws attention to intimate and pervasive dimensions of violence, reminding us that violence produces subjection before fuelling resistance and voice.

7. A Life after Prison

In the final chapters of her memoir, El Bouih tells the story of Fatima, a woman in her sixties who had spent seventeen years in prison. The night before her release, Fatima wondered what she would find in the outside world and how to resume normal life after years of detention, violence and transfer from one prison to the next. Recalling this woman's stolen life, El Bouih reflects on the fears and uncertainties that permeated the outside world, which had already rejected this woman. And she wonders: "[W]ould she be greeted with open arms? Would release dispel her sorrows?" (2008, 75). El Bouih's memoir denounces the brutality of prison, but also the continuity of violence that women suffer outside due to the state's indifference and stigmatisation by their family and local community.

During our conversations, El Bouih explained that the transition from prison to the outside world is a very delicate time. After her release in 1982, she was able to count on love and support from her family and friends, and she started teaching Arabic in a high school in Casablanca. Yet she found it difficult to inhabit the ordinary world again: "For me, liberation was the hardest moment, not prison. I was introduced to life when I was not prepared." (interview, 19 November 2012) Neighbours approached her as if nothing had happened, talking about mundane problems. Friends and relatives took her to the seaside, to the cinema, without understanding her need to "re-apprehend" living. She recalled her difficulties responding to her family's expectations and cares, to their loving efforts to welcome her into their world. Celebrating her release, they tried to get her to dance and engage in conversation. But, she explained: "They didn't know that I couldn't, I couldn't. That was the most painful experience, the first period after my liberation was so hard" (interview, 19 November 2012). She needed years to resume her everyday life and political activity. Loving and becoming the mother of two daughters helped her to remake a life (interview, 6 May 2013). Likewise, civic commitment and public testimony enabled her to introspect and share her painful memories of violence: "I realised that every time I gave an interview, I became stronger because I said to myself 'I have to say what happened'" (interview, 12 November 2012). Despite the gendered implications of public testimony, speaking out released her from the sense of shame and vulnerability.

Prison testimonies fight back against the regime's policies of silence, and have thereby played a vital role in opening up a debate on the Moroccan past. As El Bouih emphasised: "One should consider that part of this history hasn't been written because there was only one history, state history, produced by the monarchy's historians – they are called *mu'arrikh al-malik* – but there are other histories to relate" (interview, 19 November 2012). She regards both oral and written accounts of the past as essential sources for writing Morocco's postcolonial history.

For El Bouih, remembering the past has important implications for the present and future of Morocco; it not only means bearing witness, but also entails active engagement in society. Her personal experiences motivated her, like other former political prisoners, to become involved in the Observatoire Marocain des Prisons and to establish in 2005 Relais Prison-Société, an association devoted to rehabilitating ex-prisoners and integrating them in society.

For a few years now, El Bouih has also been working on a project that aims to turn Derb Moulay Chérif into a museum and a community centre, which is part of the IER's communal reparations program (see above). By being part of this institutional project of reparation, El Bouih hopes to obtain state funding, which is indispensable for getting experts involved in the project. On the other hand, she thinks that collaborating with Moroccan institutions may hedge in her freedom of expression and action with "red lines" and taboos. In her view, former political prisoners and activists should cooperate with the state, but maintain their independence and cross these red lines. During our last meeting in May 2013, though, El Bouih expressed her frustration that the communal reparations project in which she was involved had not started yet. "Without a museum in Derb Moulay Chérif, there won't be any reconciliation!" (interview, 6 May 2013)

8. Conclusion

After Hassan II's death, prison literature has been a critical site where fragmented and painful experiences of the violent past are transformed into a multi-vocal memory. Even though prison literature is important to historically redressing the Years of Lead, my interest in personal nar-

ratives is not restricted to what they tell us about the past. Rather, I have explored the work that personal memory, in becoming an act of testimony (and hence public), has done and can do in the present and future. By making personal memories public, former political prisoners have raised awareness about and encouraged a historical review of past state violence. In particular, my analysis has shed light on the gendered and relational dimensions of violence and testimony by discussing the prison experiences and the political imagination animating Nour-Eddine Saoudi and Fatna El Bouih. From different perspectives, their personal accounts show how the *makhzen* used physical and symbolic violence to shatter their voice and political agency, by unmaking their subjectivity as well as their affective and social worlds. Furthermore, they have drawn attention to their struggle to find a voice during and after the experience of torture and detention.

Viewing their words and prison memoirs from this twofold perspective, I focused on the intricate relationship between violence, gender and voice. Both El Bouih and Saoudi endured overlapping forms of violence. Sexual torture and gendered violations were integral to their experience of political violence during the Years of Lead. Despite the specifics of physical and moral violence that Saoudi and El Bouih endured, the “feminisation” of male prisoners and the “masculinisation” of female prisoners reveal the gendered dynamics of power and domination whereby the regime tried to shatter their political agency and symbolically reaffirm the social order they had dared to challenge. These forms of victimisation have remained difficult to voice because they touched on intimate dimensions of the prisoners’ sense of self and gendered subjectivity. By engaging the traumatic layers of their embodied memories in the act of testimony, Saoudi and El Bouih move between voice and silence in the face of the challenge of saying the unsayable. While the act of writing and speaking about their experiences of torture and subjection has had therapeutic effects, descending into the memory of the Years of Lead has remained a painful endeavour.

Their public testimony does not escape the ambivalence of language and its gendered cultural norms. By asserting a “feminine voice”, El Bouih explores the specificity of

female prisoners’ experiences of political violence, as well as the dehumanising effects of prison on non-political women inmates. She endeavours to transpose into words the untold memories that reside in the violated bodies of women, by navigating the depths and absences of language and bringing it to the point where words become screams, silence and images. Her narrative voice, with its shifts from the first to the third person, often slips into a metaphorical and dreamlike language, because there are unsayable pains that cannot be described, but only screamed or evoked.

In contrast, Saoudi’s memoir about male prisoners does not focus on gendered violence. While his narrative remains focused on torture and human rights violations without reference to gender, his oral testimony discloses how the sexualised dimensions of the psychological and physical violence that male prisoners suffered are still a sensitive issue because even talking about them reflects on the victims’ masculine image, as predominantly conceived in Moroccan society.

Saoudi’s memoir describes the effects of his disappearance and incarceration on his family members and on his mother in particular. Political violence, arbitrary treatment and suffering during the Years of Lead were not limited to people who were politically active, but profoundly affected family and social networks. Saoudi reminds us that disappearances were an integral part of the politics of terror with which the regime sought to prevent people from engaging in politics.

By narrating their sufferings, both El Bouih and Saoudi have publicly shared their personal experiences and illuminated the structure of oppression and violence under Hassan II. Notwithstanding the unprecedented violence that generations of political activists and their families witnessed and suffered during the Years of Lead, Saoudi and El Bouih do not define themselves simply as victims. Rather, they construct themselves as collective subjects who have struggled to preserve their subjectivity under conditions of torture, dispossession and subjection. They call attention to the collective strategies that enabled them to preserve their political agency and humanity. Imagination, creativity, acts of solidarity, storytelling and autobiographical writing are

some of the means they have tried to use to make the world liveable and meaningful again. Beyond the threshold of prison, El Bouih and Saoudi had to find ways to remain in the present and resume their violated lives against the backdrop of intimidation and historical amnesia.

El Bouih and Saoudi emphasise the processes of change that characterise Morocco today. Yet they also draw attention to the persisting official silence surrounding the names of the persecutors, the limits to freedom of expression on

sensitive issues and the ambiguities of the institutional processes through which Morocco rethinks its history and preserves the memory of the Years of Lead. Saoudi and El Bouih are animated by the pedagogical aim of transmitting a memory of the past to the next generations. Their motivations, though, transcend a merely *preservative* vision of memory. By offering a personal glimpse into institutionalised violence, they also aspire to provide the young with the means to better understand the mechanisms of oppression in the present and to imagine a different future.

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