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“A Kind of Literary Archeology”: Excavating Morocco’s Slave Past under the Protectorate (1912–1956)

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(Received 07 February 2024; revised 27 July 2024; accepted 04 November 2024)

Abstract

Slavery persisted in Morocco well into the twentieth century and throughout the French Protectorate (1912–56), long after it was abolished in other French-occupied territories (1848). While work by historians has illuminated a previously shadowy history of race and slavery in Morocco, less attention has been paid to the growing corpus of literary texts representing enslaved subjectivities under the Protectorate. Through their literary excavations of the slave past, such works retell the history of Moroccan slavery from the perspective of those most affected. This essay takes translator Nouzha Fassi Fihri’s *Dada l’Yakout* (2010) as a case in point. Although marketed as a novel, the text is also a dense oral history that channels the voice of an enslaved woman who really existed: Jmia, who was abducted as a child at the beginning of the twentieth century and died in 1975. Considered as “Moroccan other-archive” (El Guabli 2023) and imaginative archeology, literary works chart a way forward for reckoning with the enduring legacies of slavery and the slave trade in Morocco.

Résumé

L’esclavage a perduré au Maroc jusqu’au XXe siècle, tout au long du protectorat français (1912–1956), bien après son abolition dans d’autres territoires occupés par la France (1848). Alors que les travaux des historiens ont mis en lumière une histoire jusque-là obscure de la race et de l’esclavage au Maroc, moins d’attention a été accordée au corpus croissant de textes littéraires représentant des subjectivités asservies sous le protectorat. À travers leurs fouilles littéraires sur le passé esclavagiste, ces œuvres racontent l’histoire de l’esclavage marocain du point de vue des personnes les plus touchées. Cet essai s’appuie sur l’exemple de *Dada l’Yakout* (2010) de la traductrice Nouzha Fassi Fihri. Bien qu’il soit commercialisé comme un roman, le texte est aussi une histoire orale dense qui focalise sur

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la voix d'une femme esclavagisée ayant vraiment existé : Jmia, enlevée enfant au début du XXe siècle et décédée en 1975. Les œuvres littéraires, considérées comme des « autres archives marocaines » ou *other-archives* (El Guabli 2023) et une archéologie imaginative, tracent la voie à suivre afin de faire face aux héritages durables de l'esclavage et de la traite au Maroc.

Resumo

A escravatura foi praticada em Marrocos até pleno século XX e durante todo o Protetorado Francês (1912-1956), muito depois de ter sido abolida noutros territórios ocupados pela França (1848). Ao passo que a investigação historiográfica tem lançado luz sobre a história, outrora obscura, da raça e da escravatura em Marrocos, tem sido dedicada menos atenção ao crescente *corpus* de textos literários que representam as subjetividades escravizadas sob o domínio do Protetorado. Através da arqueologia literária do passado esclavagista, essas obras recontam a história da escravatura marroquina a partir da perspectiva das pessoas que mais foram afetadas. Este ensaio toma como exemplo paradigmático o texto *Dada l'Yakout* (2010), do tradutor Nouzha Fassi Fihri. Embora classificado como romance, esta obra é também uma densa história oral que veicula a voz de uma mulher escravizada que realmente existiu: Jmia, raptada em criança, no início do século XX, e falecida em 1975. Consideradas como o “arquivo-outro marroquino” (El Guabli 2023) e como arqueologia imaginativa, as obras literárias abrem caminho para um ajuste de contas com os persistentes legados da escravatura e do tráfico esclavagista em Marrocos.

Keywords: Morocco; slavery; abolition; literature; neo-slave narrative; testimony

But fortunately today there is on both sides of a really common cause less of the sand of controversy and more of the dust of digging.

—Arturo A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” ([1925] 2008, 329)

But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me.

—Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory” (1995, 192)

Slavery persisted in Morocco into the twentieth century and throughout the French Protectorate (1912–56), long after it was abolished in other French-occupied territories (1848). While work by historians has illuminated a previously shadowy history of race and slavery in Morocco, less attention has been paid to the growing corpus of literary texts representing enslaved subjectivities under the Protectorate. Such works remake conservative chronologies of abolition, grapple with the ambiguous end of Moroccan, and attempt to narrate the history of Moroccan slavery from the perspective of those most affected.

Digging up the past

In a short essay on the “systemic silence” surrounding the enduring legacies of slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade in present-day Morocco, Maha

Marouan turns to a shadowy presence—a nameless and faceless figure—in her own family tree:

No one ever spoke of my great grandmother. I did not know her name. She was a marginal character There are no pictures of her in our family albums. Nobody knew anything about her except that she was from Senegal, that she was “gifted” to my family But what about who she really was? What was her real name? Which part of Senegal did she come from? Which language did she speak? Who were her parents? How was she separated from her family? How was she brought to Morocco? (2016, 268)

To begin to answer, or at least investigate, some of these questions, Marouan chooses to “dig below the surface” (269) by accessing her own family’s reticent, partial, and far-from-neutral memory. “I dug into the existing historical material and archival documents,” she writes, “but none gave me an insight into the lived experiences of slave women. I decided then to pick up the phone and call those in my family who still remember and who were willing to talk about it” (269). It is the “incomplete remembering” afforded by “dig[ging] into the archive of personal stories” that, for Marouan, ultimately “opened the door to *what could be imagined, rewritten and pieced together*” (269–71; my emphasis).

Marouan’s questioning—her enslaved great grandmother’s uncertain identity and irretrievable subjectivity, her eventual conclusion—namely, that “existing historical material and archival documents” are unable to yield any real “insight into the lived experiences of slave women”—as well as her speculative way forward (“imagining,” “rewriting,” “piecing together”), all resonate readily with the terms of engagement of a whole body of (predominantly Anglo-American) New Historicist scholarship and a particular mode of Americanist/Black Studies inquiry into the archive of Atlantic slavery—or even earlier, to Arthur Schomburg’s injunction in 1925 to “dig up” the past.¹ Indeed, the faceless and nameless absence-presence of Marouan’s great grandmother might well be considered an instantiation of “Venus,” the name Saidiya Hartman gives to the emblematic enslaved woman in the archive of slavery and colonization, whose fate, Hartman writes, is “the same fate as every other Black Venus: no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all” (2008, 2). Faced with such facelessness, Marouan’s recourse to more personal, imaginative, and narrative modes of inquiry also resonates strongly with what Toni Morrison, writing about aesthetic engagements with the slave past, calls “a kind of literary archeology” (1995, 92):

On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth.

If the metaphor of digging presents itself here—in Marouan, Schomburg, Morrison—as an apt means of characterizing twentieth- and twenty-first-century engagements with the slave past, it is less the work of the gravedigger that is at issue than that of the archeologist: the former seeks to create a burial place; the latter deals in ruins and remains. Here, I focus on how literary texts perform the often painstaking work of excavation with respect to Morocco’s slave past, showing how a handful of contemporary Moroccan novels written in French “dig up” (in the sense of to uncover and lay bare) and “dig into” (in the sense of to explore and investigate) the long-buried history of slavery under the French Protectorate (1912–52).

In revisiting and reimagining the slave past, recent literary works offer themselves up not as historical evidence but as *imaginative archeology*: that is, as speculative excavations of a past that rely on fiction to “yield up a kind of truth” not available or accessible elsewhere. In so doing, these literary excavations of Morocco’s slave past—which frequently draw on other discursive modes, including oral history—offer important counternarratives to prevailing colonial and postcolonial scripts by making visible a history of violence that continues to shape contemporary dynamics. More than simply buried, in Morocco, this history remains both taboo—insofar as a broader national discourse minimizes or denies the magnitude of the trans-Saharan slave trade and its legacies—and fundamentally unknowable, insofar as existing historical sources and archival documents—in French, Arabic, Darija, and Berber/Amazigh—even if they shed important light on the workings of slavery and the slave trade in Morocco, fail to make enslaved subjectivities, and especially the subjectivities of enslaved women, legible beyond their “encounter” or “collision” with power (Foucault 2000, 161). Perhaps more so than other discursive forms, literature—precisely because it is not bound to truth claims, and readily incorporates elements of other discourses and genres—stands to shift the prevailing narrative on Moroccan slavery by pointing up the incompleteness of historical accounts, attending to the voices of the enslaved under the Protectorate by reimagining them, and reckoning with the ambivalent inheritance of slavery in the Maghreb, the effects of which continue to be felt today.

In turning to literature, and specifically to the genre I will call the “Moroccan neo-slave narrative”—following Bell (1987) and Rushdy’s (1999) formulation of the genre in Anglo-American contexts—as a source of insight into histories of enslavement, this essay aims to build upon and productively extend the purview of what Brahim El Guabli (2023), writing about the “years of lead” (1956–99), calls a “Moroccan other-archive.” “Other-archive” is the name El Guabli gives to the set of diverse forms of cultural production that recover or reimagine the stories of subaltern figures ghosted by the postcolonial state. Put a different way, “other-archives” exist alongside and *contra* “actually existing archives” (Cvetkovich 2003, 268) and official histories, offering alternatives to state-sanctioned narratives. As imaginative archeology and “other-archive,” the Moroccan neo-slave narrative opens space for “yet-to-be-written” histories of enslavement in Morocco and the Maghreb (El Guabli 2022, 74). The form provides a mode of historical reckoning that is attentive to the personal, affective, and subjective dimensions obscured in or occluded by “traditional” archives, breaking

the long-standing silences around slavery in Morocco. In this sense, Moroccan neo-slave narratives fulfill Edward Said's broader observation in *Culture and Imperialism* about postcolonial writing as a resistant rewriting in which the past is mobilized "as instigation for different practices, ... as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences" (Said 1993, 31). They set out to identify and counter the "bundle of silences" that traditionally have structured historical narratives relating to slavery in Morocco (Trouillot 1995, 27).

The existence of an *African neo-slave narrative* has been denied and debated, against the backdrop of—I think, overstated—claims by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2002, 259), who has suggested that "there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery," and Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang (1996, 219), who writes that, in modern African literature, "[t]he vastest depths and stretches of African history, slavery and the slave trade are never regarded in a sustained way or mined in any serious fashion for their lessons, their truths and their metaphors."² It is true that scholarship on the neo-slave narrative remains overwhelmingly focused on trans-Atlantic (Africa–Caribbean) trajectories, New World Slavery, and the Black Atlantic, bracketing a more recent but far less discussed history of enslavement on the continent.³ It is also true that this is part of a more general trend in French-language African cultural production, given that—with important exceptions such as Yambo Ouologuem's incendiary *Le Devoir de violence* ([1968] 2018), Ousmane Sembène's *Ceddo* ([1977] 2001), and Léonora Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013)—the primary and secondary literature has at times remained silent on the history of Africans enslaving other Africans, limited the geographic purview of representations of African slavery to the littoral, and arrested the "timeline" of slavery in the French empire at 1848, the year of the second "definitive" abolition of French slavery, well before slavery actually ended in the world of French empire.⁴ However, North African literature has made significant if understudied contributions to the neo-slave narrative in French. The works that interest me here redraw the critical, cartographic, and chronological borders of contemporary engagement with the memory of slavery in Morocco. They challenge the dominant historiography on race and slavery by writing into and against prevailing scripts of enslavement to stage enslaved subjectivities in the first person. Above all, such novels remind us that we need to dig tirelessly into the past in order to guarantee an abolitionist future.

In what follows, I focus in particular on how literature unearths the story of an overlooked historical figure, the maternal Black *dada*—enslaved African women who served variously as wetnurses, maids, nannies, domestic workers, cooks, and servants in Moroccan households.⁵ In contrast to hired "daughters of the house" (Montgomery 2019)—a diminishing practice in which rural girls were placed in middle- or upper-class Moroccan homes as domestic workers—Dadas were kidnapped or contracted through bogus marriages, enslaved, and sold as children or adolescents. Once a *topos* in nineteenth-century Orientalist texts, the *Dada* has, in contemporary Moroccan literature, become a powerful "site of memory" where histories of enslavement can be seen to surface.

Following an overview of slavery under the Protectorate, I provide a brief survey of the role of Dadas in Moroccan literature. I then turn to Nouzha Fassi Fihri's novel *Dada l'Yakout* ([2010] 2018).⁶ Using Fassi Fihri's narrativization (and novelization) of one *Dada*'s experience of capture and enslavement as a case

study, I show how the burgeoning genre of the Moroccan neo-slave narrative offers a compelling model for literary “excavations” of Morocco’s slave past.

An Open Secret: Moroccan Slavery during the Protectorate

It bears repeating that long after France’s second, “definitive” abolition of slavery in 1848, a trans-Saharan internal African slave trade persisted, and forms of slavery continued to flourish—legally and openly in some places, clandestinely in others—in territories occupied by France until well into the twentieth century. Put simply, “French” slavery did not end in 1848 but continued to endure, adapt, and transform. This aligns with James Walvin’s (2006, 137) broader observation that slavery in general has “remarkable abilities to revive and reinvent itself and to spring back to life when it had seemed dead and gone” as well as with Benedetta Rossi’s (2015, 304) caution that the “abolitionist bias of most contemporary research ... may hinder our understanding of societies in which legal pluralism makes possible the simultaneous and tense coexistence of abolitionist ideologies, on the one hand, and worldviews in which slavery is seen as integral to the constitution of society, on the other.” In Morocco, a clandestine slave trade and the local institution of domestic slavery persisted well into the mid-twentieth century, despite mounting international abolitionist expectations and anti-slavery pressures—especially from the *Ligue française pour la défense des droits de l’Homme et du citoyen*.

In contrast to Orientalist tropes representing Moroccan slavery as benign, well-regulated, and limited to wealthy households, slavery was a widespread, pernicious, and highly disruptive institution (see Ennaji 1998). As late as 1950—for some, a year more readily associated with burgeoning independence movements across the continent—French colonial official Jean Lapanne-Joinville wrote in his report on slavery in Morocco that, even on the eve of decolonization, “It is not certain that the abduction of children does not continue to feed the last vestiges of slavery today” (5).⁷ Slavery declined, became anomalous, and eventually ended, in Morocco only in the decades following independence (Thomson 2011).

The persistence of domestic slavery in Morocco throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century was possible only through French colonial policies that compromised abolitionist principles in favor of colonial alliances and imperial ambitions (El Hamel 2013, 241–69; Goodman 2013). These policies aimed in theory at eliminating the public slave trade as a means of gradual abolition, but in practice avoided interfering directly in the workings of Moroccan slavery and, in certain cases, outright facilitated it (Schroeter 1992, 193; Seddon 2000, 208; Goodman 2013, 101). This was true in much of the Sahara-Sahel region and in neighboring sites of the French empire, such as Algeria, where enslaved persons continued to be transported clandestinely from Morocco after abolition; in Mauritania, where slavery would not be abolished officially until 1980; as well as in Mali and Niger (El Hamel 2013, 243, 246).

Despite the apparent incompatibility of slavery with the French ideal of *liberté* and France’s signing of the International Slavery Convention (League of Nations

1926) outlawing slavery, French colonial officials appeared less interested in outright abolition and more concerned with managing metropolitan abolitionist expectations without infringing on Islamic authorities or jeopardizing colonial alliances with the Moroccan government or *makhzan* (Goodman 2013, 102). In practice, the French merely sought to make Moroccan slavery less visible as an institution and to curtail, as Lapanne-Joinville writes, “the aspects of slavery that shocked [Europeans] the most” (12). If slavery in Morocco would become, after independence, “taboo,” throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century it remained an open secret.⁸

Colonial “management” of appearances relating to Protectorate slavery in Morocco extended to how French and Moroccan authorities represented, delimited, and theorized slavery in relation to blackness (Goodman 2013, 115–21). The French invasion of Sudan, and especially the French occupations of Timbuktu (1894) and Touat (1900), disrupted the flows of the trans-Saharan slave trade and thus precipitated a shift in slave origins, leading to increased enslavements of Moroccan-born as opposed to West African-born slaves. This meant that under the French protectorate there existed what Goodman calls “a lived continuum of color and human geography within which blackness and slavery were generally associated with one another” (Goodman 2013, 115). As Ennaji (1998, 62) writes: in Morocco, “black was the color of manual labor.” “Blackness” in the context of Moroccan slavery could mean many things and map onto multiple different identities and lived realities. Enslaved women of West African or sub-Saharan origin as well as dark-skinned women from rural Berber tribes south of Marrakech typically were referred to indiscriminately as *négresses* in French or as *drawi* (from *Drâa* “river”) in Darija—a term that, by the twentieth century, could mean not merely “Black” or “dark-skinned” but could also imply “descended from enslaved persons.” Although the historic peak of slaves of West African origin occurred in the 1890s—and despite the presence of male “drudge” and military slaves—the majority of slaves in Morocco during the twentieth century remained “Black” and female (Goodman 2015, 404).

Among enslaved Black African or “*drawi*” women in Morocco, the figure of the Dada is particularly emblematic of the institution of Moroccan slavery, in part because Dadas were so central to the social and biopolitical life of the Moroccan family unit throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and because the status of ‘Dada’ represented the culmination of decades of enslavement and servitude: Dadas typically came of age in slavery, serving first as *jariya* or “concubines” in their youth and adolescence before nursing and caring for the children of their enslavers with whom they occasionally also had children. A majority of Dadas were Black African girls and young women who were stolen and trafficked across the Sahara; others were dark-skinned “Berber” children taken from small villages in the south of Morocco or along the Algerian border. While Orientalist writers typically represented Dadas with a mixture of exotism and sentimentality—as fixtures of the Moroccan household and emblems of a more “benign” form of slavery⁹—this effaces the routinized violence to which these women were exposed and the traumatic pasts which they carried with them. In the absence of first-hand accounts by the enslaved, literary texts are unquely poised to adumbrate these realities.

Voicing Dada

Like many enslaved persons, Dadas traditionally have been relegated to the fringes of historical narrative or refused the right to narrative altogether. As Mohammed Aït Rami (2021, 163) suggests, Dadas are the “forgotten women” of Morocco’s history. The same has often been true of literature and criticism. Dadas have only figured substantively in the Moroccan literary imaginary in the past three decades. Few scholars—with important exceptions such as Aït Rami (2021), El Guabli (2022) and McDougall (1998)—have endeavored to attend to the ways literature records and refracts the stories of the many women who were kidnapped, trafficked, and sold into slavery in Morocco during the first half of the twentieth century.

In literature, Dadas appear only to disappear. Early literary references to Dadas in Moroccan literature are scarce, fleeting, or purely ethnographic. The first Moroccan novel in French, Abdelkader Chatt’s *Mosaïques ternies* ([1932] 1990)—now out of print and largely forgotten—only briefly mentions an enslaved woman named “Yakout.”¹⁰ In Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel *Moha le fou, Moha le sage* (1978), an enslaved Dada is described in some detail as she is forced to accompany one of the novel’s characters during his pilgrimage to Mecca as both his servant and concubine. She is, revealingly, mute.

The past three decades have seen enslaved women represented in Moroccan literature with more sustained attention and sensitivity, however. This is part of a more generalized trend in Moroccan literary production since the 1990s: what El Guabli has identified as “the sub-Saharan turn in Moroccan literature,” in which Moroccan novelists “now represent sub-Saharan African characters” (including enslaved sub-Saharan African characters) with “vividness and vigor” and in ways that embody “the human, racial and religious continuum between North and sub-Saharan Africa” (El Guabli 2021). Ben Jelloun’s novel *Le Mariage de plaisir* (2016), for instance, tells the story of Amir, a Fassi merchant, and Nabou, a Dada from Senegal brought to Morocco in the 1940s through a marriage contract.

Among recent treatments of enslaved subjectivities in Moroccan literature, Mahi Binebine’s first novel, *Le Sommeil de l’esclave* (1992), can be classed more easily into the genre of the neo-slave narrative, given that it confronts a cross-generational history of enslavement by telling the story of an enslaved Black Dada from childhood to old age and mostly in the first-person. In Binebine’s novel, an otherwise nameless Dada’s moving first-person narration of her and her brother’s abduction and enslavement by Tuareg raiders as a child is refracted within—and ultimately domesticated by—an extended second-person singular address in the frame narrative: that of a young Moroccan man who ventriloquizes the story of “his” Dada, repeating it back to her, decades after he heard it as a child, “in order to make sense of his own” (Binebine 1992, n.p.). For all its merits, *Le Sommeil* concludes with a paternalist fantasy of reunion and reconciliation that all too neatly packages a text structured by nightmarish trauma and abuse: returning to the frame narrative, the novel closes with a scene of anagnorisis between Dada and the young male narrator, who affectionately hoists “his slave” (*son esclave*) into his arms and carries her around like a child (130).

Translator Nouzha Fassi Fihri's lesser-known novel *Dada l'Yakout* (2010), republished in 2018 by the Moroccan imprint Le Fennec, shares thematic and formal concerns with Mahi Binebine's portrayal and voicing of a Dada figure in *Le Sommeil*, at least on the surface. Indeed, both novels can be seen to confront head-on the "systemic silence" around slavery in Morocco through personal story-telling. Like Binebine's *Le Sommeil*, Fassi Fihri's novel also uses a dialogic narrative form and embedded story-telling scenario to articulate and transmit a personal history of enslavement, gender violence, resistance, and survival. But whereas the narration of the titular *esclave* of Binebine's novel ultimately is co-opted and framed by the male child she nursed, Fassi Fihri's text, as its title also suggests, places Dada and her narrative subjectivity more squarely at its dialogic center. Fassi Fihri's novel is all the more interesting when considered as "other-archive" and "imaginative archeology," because, although labeled and marketed as fiction, it quite literally "dig[s] into the archive of personal stories" given that it is largely based on the experiences of the enslaved woman who cared for Fassi Fihri and her siblings during their childhood in Fès (Marouan 2016, 271). As Fassi Fihri explains in a private interview:

Mo-dada comme nous l'appelions, mes frères et sœur et moi, était comme notre deuxième mère. ... C'est de sa propre bouche que j'ai recueilli son histoire, entièrement vraie et authentique. La partie relative à sa famille après son kidnapping m'a été contée par sa nièce, après qu'elle a retrouvé sa famille.

(Mo-dada, as we called her, my brothers and sister and I, was like a second mother to us ... It's from her own mouth that I culled this entirely true and authentic story. The part concerning her family after her kidnapping was recounted to me by her niece, after she had found her family again.)
(Interview with author, March 2023)

The documentary nature and evidentiary status of *Dada l'Yakout*—the fact that the novel is also on some level the reimagined transcript of authentic oral texts—changes our relationship to the novel as *fiction* and to the genre of the neo-slave narrative as imaginative undertaking (Bell 1987, 289; Rushdy 1999). Fassi Fihri's novel is also a "feminist oral history" (McDougall 1998, 287) that both excavates and imaginatively transforms Dada's story.

Telling the story

In *Dada l'Yakout*, an enslaved woman named Jmia (literally: "born on a Friday"), renamed Yakout, and now known as Mo-Dada ("mother Dada") to the children in her care, narrates the story of her kidnapping at the age of seven at the beginning of the twentieth century and the decades of enslavement that followed. Seated cross-legged in the middle of the *petit salon* of a riad in the medina of Fès one evening, with the children of the house pressed against her, Dada/Yakout is suddenly transported elsewhere at the children's request to "tell her story" and

narrate the past: transported into “un passé enfoui dans les plis de son âme” (a past *buried* in the folds of her soul) (3; my emphasis). Through Dada’s narration of this long-buried past, the novel unfolds as a circuitous tale unraveled before an attentive audience: the children and women of the household in Fès in which Dada remains enslaved, an audience into which the reader is also conscripted.

A modern-day Scheherazade, Dada deftly unwinds the story of her capture and enslavement before the children are sent to bed each night. But whereas Scheherazade narrates precariously, suspending her tale each night to stave off death and disaster, the narration of Fassi Fihri’s Dada works over and through disaster, giving shape to worlds that have already ended and ruptures that can never be sutured. She revisits a traumatic past—sometimes in the first person, other times in the third person—as a means of exorcising it, a fact that becomes explicit near the end of the novel. Cutting across space and time, her narration stages the ambivalences, paradoxes, and cruelties of French colonial rule, all while bearing witness to the horrors of the institution of twentieth-century slavery and the fierceness of Moroccan resistance to occupation.

The novel itself takes the form of a dense and discontinuous oral text in which nearly every paragraph is enclosed within guillemets: a long and serpentine citation of Dada’s story. For all its fluency and craft, Dada’s narrative is hardly free-flowing, however. Rather, it frequently is constrained, compromised, and curtailed by both external and internal pressures—shaped, that is, at every turn by the conditions of her enslavement, past and present. Her tale will be interrupted nightly: when the children tire, turn antsy (141), and are sent to bed (232); when they interject in protest, horror, or consternation (127); when Dada’s voice grows hoarse or breathless (163); when she must tend to household tasks (22); or when she is overcome with grief and pain (63). Occasionally, it will be days or even weeks at a time before Dada resumes her narration. The telling of the story will be suspended, for instance, when relatives descend on the household and Dada is occupied, along with “the other slaves,” tending to the family’s guests (64); when she briefly falls feverish and ill (111); or while the family travels into the Moyen Atlas for vacation (311).

The tale’s interruptions and deferrals mirror the myriad ruptures of enslavement, its “points de suspension” becoming metonyms for a precarious life marked by discontinuities, abandoned projects, and foreclosed futures. As Dada intimates, “« Que de points de suspension dans ma vie ! Que de choses commencées et restées inachevées ! Ou à l’état de projets. Une esclave est interdite de projets à long terme. »” (Only ellipses in my life ! Only things begun and left unfinished ! Or in progress. A slave is forbidden from long-term projects) (151). Her own tale appropriately will be riddled with starts and stops, but with a major difference: though its telling spans months (and over 300 pages), this is a long-term project that Dada is determined to finish. In this sense, it is decidedly unlike *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is unfinishable.

The frame narrative—the story-telling scenario of the children gathered around their aging Dada as evening falls—swiftly gives way to the work of memory and to reported speech, as the text is otherwise given over almost entirely to Dada’s narration and recounted in her voice. A far cry from Ben Jelloun’s mute Dada in *Moha le fou, Moha le sage*, Fassi Fihri’s Dada becomes the

nexus of the novel's story world, the locus of speech, and the *conteuse* par excellence. Only very occasionally, at moments of rupture in the narrative, are we returned briefly to the scene of enunciation—evening, in the *petit salon*—and awakened abruptly from the spell of Dada's story by third-person narration. This intervening narrative voice, usually focalized through the children's perspective, punctuates Dada's nocturnal tale and suspends its magic, if only for the evening. These sparse interventions suture—however imperfectly—the gaps and lapses in Dada's tale, but they also heighten the story's drama, since we never know for certain when, how, or if, Dada's tale will resume.

Often bordering on free indirect discourse, these brief narrative incursions hew closely to Dada's state of mind. In this, they shed light on the immense psychosomatic toll telling the story has. As the evenings progress, we come to understand that Dada's tale is a “confessional” text, the telling of which promises, finally, to put a painful past to rest:

Elle avait besoin de se retrouver seule pour donner libre cours à ses larmes. Cette confession au crépuscule de l'existence l'éreintait en même temps qu'elle lui faisait du bien. Elle allait mettre fin à ces réminiscences qui la faisaient encore souffrir, même après tant d'années. (64)

(She needed to be alone to give free rein to her tears. This confession at the twilight of existence exhausted her even as it did her good. She was going to put an end to these reminiscences which still made her suffer, after so many years.)

The therapeutic nature of Dada's confessional storytelling eventually becomes explicit near the end of her narrative, when she recognizes the act of telling her story as a means of “breaking the chains of memory” and as “a therapy” that would allow her to heal (281). Indeed, the conclusion of her tale affords a kind of freedom, albeit a highly ambivalent one, as Dada—still enslaved—is released from the grips of traumatic memory: “Arrivée au bout de son récit, elle n'y revint plus jamais. Comme si, par la parole, elle avait extirpé les racines du mal qui la rongeaient et s'était retrouvée libre, pour de bon” (Having reached the end of her story, she never returned to it. As if, through speech, she had deracinated the roots of evil that gnawed at her and found herself free, for good) (326).

This “freedom” is hard-won, arrived at only through Dada's sheer perseverance—as well as the occasional narrative “subterfuge.” Faced with almost incommunicable pain, Dada often distances herself from her own experiences and navigates some of the most difficult episodes of her enslavement in the third person:

N'osant utiliser la première personne pour en parler, elle utilisa un subterfuge, parlant d'elle-même à la troisième personne, et nous comprîmes (circonflex on the 'i') qu'elle disait « elle » et « la petite fille » pour permettre aux mots de décrire des événements trop douloureux. (32)

(Not daring to use the first person to speak of it, she made use of a subterfuge, speaking of herself in the third person, and we understood that she was saying “she” and “the little girl” to allow the words to describe all too painful events.)

Speaking in the third person, Dada acknowledges how slavery has made her alien to herself: “Yakout devint une autre personne. Elle fut comme vidée de son moi et forcée à adopter un « moi d’emprunt »” (Yakout became another person. It was as if she had been emptied of her “self” and forced to adopt a “borrowed self”) (83). While the mere fact of telling her story restores a kind of wholeness—a form, a shape—to fragmented memories and a fragmented self, the *trame* of Dada’s oral text and the dense weave of the narrative are, like the body of their protagonist-narrator, traversed by scars (329). Through Dada’s narration, Fassi Fihri’s novel insists on the cathartic power of narrative to exorcise even the darkest histories and the capacity of literature to become a vessel for other people’s stories, both real and imagined.

Staging slavery under the Protectorate

In *Dada l’Yakout*, Dada’s meandering descent into the past functions not merely as an exploration of personal history, but as a means of unearthing the slave past of an entire nation. Spanning decades of enslavement, her story thus navigates between recounting a singular experience of slavery and testifying to a far-reaching system of servitude.

Dada’s narrative bridges the moment of her abduction at the age of seven in Marrakech to the condition from which she currently narrates, as an enslaved aging Dada in a household in Fès. From beginning to end, however, Moroccan slavery emerges clearly in Dada’s first-hand account as a violent, disruptive institution sustained by rapacious men of all classes who prey on women and children, even members of their own family. She recounts her experiences of domestic labor and sexual slavery; the various roles she is made to occupy (household slave, cook, concubine, dada); the different men who purchased, sold, and abused her; the homes in which she was a prisoner; and the urban centers—Marrakech, Rabat, Casablanca, Fès—through which she was trafficked.

While Dada herself harbors no illusions about the nature of the French Protectorate—“the Protectorate,” she says, “is, in fact, nothing other than pure and simple colonization, thinly disguised under so-called civilizing pretenses” (299)—she reserves her most acerbic judgment for the inhuman institution of slavery itself, which proves the ultimate “aberration” (40). She equally recognizes the ambivalences and paradoxes of French occupation: namely, that the French represented both a form of subjugation but also, through the letter of the law, a possible avenue to freedom. As she admits, shifting to the third person:

“Like everyone else, Dada did not like the French. She wished that they would go away as quickly as possible. But she couldn’t prevent herself from

feeling for them a bit of gratitude. It was they who had abolished slavery in Morocco ... However, she did not understand how they could rise up against slavery while depriving an entire people of their freedom.” (303, quotation marks in original)

On the one hand, Dada condemns colonization and hopes for an independent Morocco; on the other hand, she sees in France at least the nominal promise of abolition.

In its representation of slavery under the Protectorate, Dada's story ultimately gives form to the myriad disruptions and violences experienced by a multitude of trafficked and enslaved women throughout Moroccan history. Indeed, Dada's narrative persona itself mediates between the singular and the paradigmatic, between a *je* and a capacious *nous*. As her narration progresses, quotation marks as well as the voices and languages they contain multiply. She gradually weaves together her own story with the stories of the various enslaved women she has known, loved, and with whom she has worked. In this sense, the novel's narrative structure posits Dada as a gathering-point and the center of a polyvocal (and plurilingual) text that represents the cosmopolitan nature of the enslaved population in Morocco's urban centers.

Through Dada, Fassi Fihri stages a multilingual textual cohort of enslaved women of various origins:

« Venues du lointain Soudan ou du Mali, du fin fond de la Mauritanie ou d'un village gabonais enfoui dans la végétation, volées aux leurs par des caravaniers qui en faisaient commerce, importées de Turquie comme une vulgaire marchandise ... ou kidnappées ça et là dans le pays et vendues au plus offrant, toutes ces femmes s'étaient retrouvées sous le même toit par le plus pur des hasards et devaient cohabiter, vaille que vaille. »

« Elles parlaient toutes les langues, mais surtout un langage que toutes les femmes comprennent à travers le monde, celui de l'amour et de ses arcanes. Celui de la haine aussi. » (192, guillemets in original)

(“Coming from distant Sudan or Mali, from the depths of Mauritania or from a Gabonese village buried in vegetation, stolen from their people by caravanners who made business out of them, imported from Turkey like a common commodity ... or kidnapped here and there in the country and sold to the highest bidder, all these women had found themselves under the same roof by the purest of chances and had to live together, come what may.”)

“They spoke all languages, but above all a language that all women around the world understand, that of love and its mysteries. That of hate, too.”)

Though written in French, *Dada l'Yakout* is attuned to the limits of its own idiom. Implicitly, the latent multilingualism points to the possibility of engaging other, Arabic and Amazigh, sources that would further illuminate histories of enslavement. This becomes clearest near the end of the novel when Dada reveals that she is speaking Arabic, not French. Her mother tongue, we learn, is “Berber” or Tamazight (306). Herself a professional translator, Fassi Fihri positions her protagonist-narrator as a translational figure in multiple senses: one who mediates between a lost minority indigenous language (Tamazight), a dominant language (Arabic), and a colonial one (French), but who also mediates between generations—conjugating Morocco’s past in the present for the Morocco of tomorrow. The latent multilingualism of Dada’s narration is part of its more general subversion of dominant scripts of Moroccan slavery. Dada’s narrative evinces a linguistic pluralism that stands to challenge hegemonic colonial and postcolonial conceptions of Moroccan identity (El Guabli 2023).

However much she reveals, and however capacious her narrative, Dada ultimately only ever tells part of her story. Her narrative is also the result of acts of “incomplete remembering” (Marouan 2016, 269) as well as omissions and redactions—the secreted of episodes that will remain unnarrated and known only to her. Dada, in other words, will take some of her stories to the grave: “Tout était là cependant. Collé aux parois de son être, et ne s’en détacherait qu’avec sa propre disparition” (It was all there though. Clinging to the inner walls of her being, and would only detach itself from her through her own death) (75). In this way, Fassi Fihri symbolically grants Dada that which she had been denied throughout her life: control of her own narrative.

Of course, no narrative agency can ever be wholly conferred post-factum to the Dadas of Morocco’s history: it can only be imagined. Fassi Fihri’s voicing of Dada—not simply as imaginative archeology but as literary *citation*—manages to push against prevailing historical discourses, from which enslaved women were excluded, centering the narrative of an enslaved Dada who really existed and retelling the history of Moroccan slavery from the perspective of those most affected.

Excavating the past, or “the dust of digging”

Dada l'Yakout ultimately provides a prescient and rather literal image for the type of literary “excavation” and imaginative “archeology” envisioned here as constitutive of the memorial project of the Moroccan neo-slave narrative. As Dada’s narrative comes to a close, she offers up an extended description of her evenings spent alongside the “*esclave-concubine*” Yasmine, now an aging dada herself, who had been enslaved in the same household years prior and became Dada’s confidante. The passage draws together many of the threads and latent imagery of Dada’s tale—indeed, becomes an allegory for the tale itself—and is worth citing at some length:

« La nuit, à l’heure propice aux confidences, lorsque le cœur s’épanche, notre ancienne blessure saignait de nouveau, mal cicatrisée malgré les

apparences. ... Puis nos langues se déliaient et nous parlions de nos vies antérieures. Nous évoquions nos rêves comme nous aurions décrit des pierres précieuses qui se seraient avérées fausses. ... nous tentions de nous rappeler l'avant-esclavage, l'ère de notre égo intégral. Pour ce faire, nous creusions avec nos ongles, avec nos cils cerclés de poussière, avec nos artères tendues comme des arcs. Nous nous arrêtions pour reprendre notre souffle, accrochées l'une contre l'autre, puis replongions dans le souvenir. »

« Nommer les choses pour les recréer, les rebaptiser, en refaçonner les contours, les imaginer s'il le faut. Même si elles ne sont pas conformes à la réalité ou tout à fait apocryphes, qu'importe ? L'essentiel est de se donner un passé de substitution et de se convaincre qu'il est le nôtre. Y installer notre corps meurtri et l'y laisser se reposer, enfin. L'y laisser mourir, s'évaporer, monter vers le ciel en volutes de suie et d'encre, débarrasser notre âme des marques du fer de l'esclavage, comme le chien se débarrasse de ses puces. Dans un formidable haut-le-corps. » (280–81, guillemets in original)

(“At night, at the hour conducive to confidences, when the heart pours out, our old wound bled afresh, badly healed despite appearances ... Then our tongues loosened, and we spoke of our past lives. We evoked our dreams as we would have described precious stones that would have turned out to be false ... We tried to remember the time-before-slavery [*l'avant-esclavage*], the time of our integral ego. To do this, we dug with our fingernails, with our lashes ringed with dust, with our arteries tensed like bows. We stopped to catch our breath, clinging to one another, then plunged back into memory.”

“Naming things to recreate them, rebaptizing them, reshaping their contours, imagining them if need be. Even if they are not in conformity with reality or totally apocryphal, what does it matter? The main thing is to give yourself a substitute past [*un passé de substitution*] and to convince yourself that it is ours. To settle our broken body there and let it rest there, finally. Let it die there, evaporate, rise up to the sky in wisps of soot and ink, rid our souls of the marks from the irons of slavery, like a dog ridding itself of fleas. In a formidable jump.”)

Dada's “*nous*” in this passage evidently refers to herself and Yasmine, but it arguably also encompasses a broader collective: that of all the enslaved women, named and unnamed, whose paths we have crossed over the course of Dada's narrative and whose stories she has integrated into her own.

The extended metaphor Dada offers us here is one of strenuous, though no longer solitary, nocturnal *digging*: mining the depths of memory, excavating the past. Remembering and narrating the past—the “before-slavery”—is like digging a hole in darkness, Dada suggests. But Dada's metaphors are mixed, and her imagery, perhaps intentionally, obscures even as it reveals. Is it like digging a grave (*creuser une tombe*) or unearthing precious stones (*des pierres précieuses*), such as those after which so many enslaved women, including Dada herself, were

(re)named? Or perhaps it is more like planting a tree, so that something new might take root and grow.

The unearthed story is a “site of memory,” to return to Morrison, but also a site of restitution and restoration: a means of accessing the complete self, the “*égo intégral*”, before it was fractured by enslavement. Crucially, Dada’s invocation of digging as both memorial and narrative project is also an occasion for regeneration and reinvention. Things are “named” in order to be “recreated”; if need be, they are “imagined.” “Even if they are not in conformity with reality or totally apocryphal, what does it matter?”

In Dada’s nocturnal digging, we find both a model for Fassi Fihri’s literary excavation of the slave past, which simultaneously draws on and reimagines a real Dada’s life-story, and, ultimately, a powerful model for how the legacy of slavery in Morocco might be engaged in more personal, speculative, and imaginative modes.

According to Fassi Fihri, however, her novel is not merely inspired by Dada but comes directly “from the source.” It does not rely on archives, but rather is itself an oral archive:

Je n’ai consulté aucune archive. Mon roman a coulé de source, si je puis dire. Plusieurs femmes vendues et achetées—c’était courant à l’époque—ont vécu avec nous, comme des parentes à part entière. J’ai donc puisé directement à la source.

(I did not consult any archive. My novel flowed from the source, so to speak. Several women, sold and purchased—it was common at the time—lived with us, like relatives in their own right. So I tapped directly into the source.) (Interview with author, March 2023)

The documentary nature and evidentiary status of *Dada l’Yakout*—the fact that the novel is at least on some level the dense transcript of authentic oral texts—changes our relationship to the novel *as fiction* and to the genre of the neo-slave narrative as (purely) imaginative undertaking. At the very least, it should underscore the value of the novel as a rich “other-archive” that supplements an existing scriptural archive that provides little in the way of access to the first-hand experiences of the enslaved.

In its confessional form and subversion of textual genre in favor of orality, *Dada l’Yakout* presents itself as a compelling example of “imaginary testimony” (El Guabli 2022). Closer examination and attention to the text’s genesis and its own narrative modes reveals how *Dada l’Yakout* draws on, and to an extent blurs, a distinction between oral testimony and literary fiction. Scholars such as Naïma Hachad (2019; 2021), Jill Jarvis (2021), and Brahim El Guabli (2023) have all pointed to the ways in which postcolonial Maghrebi literary production and/as testimonial writings provide counternarratives to histories of exclusion, colonization, and state violence. Such texts clear space and find form for justice claims that otherwise would not be heard, a project in which *Dada l’Yakout* equally can be seen to participate.¹¹

This is not to say that we should elevate the literary text—whose exact conditions of production remain shadowy at best—to the status of straightforward transcript or archival document, nor to say that Fassi Fihri is engaging in “history,” per se. Rather, it is to point to the way that, in the context of Moroccan slavery, and given the incomplete nature of colonial archives, the sources available to us necessarily exist on a continuum between oral and scriptural accounts and between “fiction” and “history.” Indeed, while the stories of enslaved women under the Protectorate have receded from view in histories of resistance and abolition in the Francosphere, those stories are, somewhat paradoxically, best “documented” in recent works of fiction.

Acknowledgments. Archival research and fieldwork for this article were supported by a fellowship from the American Institute of Maghrib Studies (AIMS) and the Tangier American Legation for Moroccan Studies (TALIM).

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Notes

1. In *None Like Us*, Stephen Best glosses this body of scholarship under the rubric of “the recovery imperative,” the origins of which he locates in Arthur Schomburg’s suggestively titled essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925), which I have cited as an epigraph. Best considers this essay as having inaugurated “a century-long attempt to recover archival traces of black life” that gains particular momentum with the advent of New Historicism and Americanist Black Studies (2018, 11).
2. Laura Murphy (2007) has addressed these critical claims of “amnesia” with respect to slavery in West African literature.
3. Few studies dedicated to literary representations of Moroccan slavery exist. Mohammed Aït Rami’s chapter “Les Dadas marocaines” (Aït Rami 2021), which contains a brief analysis of Binebine’s and Fassi Fihri’s novels in the context of a survey of twentieth-century representations of the dada, and El Guabli’s important essay on *Dada l’Yakout* and/as testimony (El Guabli 2022), are important exceptions.
4. El Hamel (2013, 5) argues that, despite the differences between domestic slavery in the Maghreb and chattel slavery in the Americas, “the situation in Morocco was similar to the trans-Atlantic diaspora with zones of cultural exchange, borrowing, mixing, and creolization as well as violation, violence, enslavement and racially segregated zones.” There remains much to be gained from comparative work that would examine slavery and postslavery literatures and literacies along these lines. Such would align with the suggestion of historian Fatima Harrak (2018, 280) who, in her study of military slavery in seventeenth-century Morocco, recognizes the need to question Atlantic slavery as the prevailing paradigm and “universal language for discussion of slavery around the world.”
5. The term “Dada” finds analogues in the histories of slavery in Brazil (*Mãe Preta*) and in the United States (*Mammy*). Both terms—*dada* and *tata*—share the same Latin root, *tata* “father” (Mateo Dieste 2020, 438, fn. 5). The terms seem to have been a designation invented by the children whom these women cared for. Both are still used today to refer to an older female relative, such as a grandmother or aunt—not necessarily of sub-Saharan African origin—who takes care of the children in many middle and upper-class Moroccan families. For an analysis of the black(ened) women and servitude in the Brazilian context, see Sônia Roncador (2014).
6. Prior to *Dada l’Yakout*, Fassi Fihri had published the novel *Le ressac* (1990), which tells the story of a young girl named Soraya in Fès during the second half of the twentieth century, following the dissolution of the French Protectorate.

7. Lapanne-Joinville, “Note sur l’esclavage au Maroc” (November 3, 1950); Archives du Maroc, E 3195/1669n.
8. As Édouard Michaux-Bellaire, the director of the Sociological sector of the Affaires indigènes bureau, writes in 1928, French anti-slavery legislation was merely a “façade” intended to assuage the abolitionist sensibilities of a European public: “it remains understood that this trade will continue to be exercised clandestinely [*non ouvertement*]. There is the feeling that the natives [*indigènes*] have realized that the ban is only a façade intended to satisfy European public opinion”; Édouard Michaux-Bellaire, “Note sur le commerce des esclaves” (October 20, 1928), pp. 1–2, emphasis in original; Archives du Maroc, F 155.
9. Lapanne-Joinville’s 1950 report, for instance, includes a description of the Moroccan Dada and her status within the many households under the Protectorate: “The majority ... are old *nègresses* remaining in the homes of their masters, by whom they have had one or more children, now relegated to domestic tasks (cleaning—cooking—etc...). They often appear as *femmes de confiance* in the family home, where they exercise unquestionable authority, both over the management of the home and over the wives and sons of the master for whom they are the ‘mentor’; finally, they play an important role in the education of the young children of the household. They are their ‘Dada’. These women are truly part of the family where they live as *au pairs*, their only compensation outside of food and shelter consisting in their clothing on the occasion of religious and family holidays” (13).
10. *Yakout* or *Yaqut*—meaning “precious stone” or “ruby” in Arabic—was a common name given to enslaved women and women of slave origin. It is the name of “*l’esclave favorite*” (186) in Aline Réveillaud de Lens’s “roman marocain” *Derrière les vieux murs en ruines* (1922). It reflects the practice of giving enslaved women “special names related to blessings or beauty” (Mateo Dieste 2021, 177) that “also alluded to the material value of slave women as precious and profitable property” (Marouan 2016, 269).
11. *Testimonio* includes a variety of textual forms, including “autobiography, auto-biographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella-testimonio, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic’ literature” (Beverly 2004, 31). Following George Yúdice’s now canonical definition of *testimonio* as “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of the situation” (1996, 44), we might recast *Dada l’Yakout* but as partaking directly of the genres of eye-witness testimony and oral history.

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Cite this article: Calhoun, D. D. 2025. "'A Kind of Literary Archeology': Excavating Morocco's Slave Past under the Protectorate (1912–1956)." *African Studies Review* 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.239>