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"Anti-black racism" as a slavery's afterlife?

Sub-Saharan African migrants in the marginalized neighbourhoods of Rabat

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Abstract: In the aftermath of the 2011 revolutions and protests across North Africa and the Middle East, Morocco has witnessed unprecedented public debates on "anti-black racism" (in French, *le racisme anti-Noir*) against sub-Saharan Africans and its connections with the history of slavery. By including in the discussion the voices of sub-Saharan African migrants living in marginalized neighbourhoods of Rabat, this paper complicates any linear causality between historical slavery and current racism. It shows how the history of slavery interweaves with colonial racial legacies and hegemonic whiteness, contemporary EurAfrican border regimes and labour exploitation, which all push vulnerable migrants further onto the margins of society. Highlighting the racialized dimensions of the transcontinental management of migration and the ways blackness is racialized through border(ing), this paper conceives of racism in Morocco as a multi-faceted and historically situated phenomenon that requires careful contextualization along multiple histories and lines of difference.

Keywords: anti-black racism, racialization, border regimes, post-slavery, colonialism

Introduction[1]

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolutions and protests across North Africa and the Middle East, the growing public and media attention given to racial discrimination against black people[2] has opened up unprecedented debates on racism and its connections with the history of racialized slavery (Bahri 2014; Mrad Dali 2015; Menin 2016, 2020; King 2021; Sadai 2021). Unlike West Africa and the Sahara-Sahel, where slave descendants' activism has gained public visibility since the 1980s, a "culture of silence" in the Middle East and North Africa (El Hamel 2002, 2013a: 3; Chebel 2007) has long prevented public discussions on the questions of racism, slavery, and colour-based discrimination beyond academia.

In the past decade, novel political practices and subjectivities have emerged from local anti-racist campaigns and civic activism. Specifically, in Morocco, scholarly, activist, and journalistic attention to so-called "anti-black racism" (in French, *le racisme anti-noirs*) has primarily addressed the situation of the sub-Saharan African migrants, locally termed in French *les Africains* or *les Subsahariens*. Only recently have online discussions and demonstrations begun to raise public awareness of racial discrimination against black Moroccans (King 2020). In these discussions, racial discrimination and violence against black African migrants are often understood as being rooted in the country's centuries-old history of racialized slavery.

In critical dialogue with societal, media, and academic debates, I examine in this paper the question of "anti-black racism" against black migrants by reflecting critically on whether current racial attitudes can be conceptualized productively as slavery's afterlife[3]. My reflections draw on interviews and conversations with Moroccan human rights activists and ordinary people, Western and Central African members of associations, "in-transit" migrants,

1. This paper fully develops, both ethnographically and theoretically, an argument first presented in "The racialisation of marginality", 22 July 2016, Open Democracy (available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/racialisation-of-marginality-sub-saharan-migrants-stuck-in-morocco/). I am particularly indebted to the two anonymous reviewers of *Anuac* for their generous engagement with the paper.
2. This heterogeneous category includes sub-Saharan African migrants, slave-descendants, black maghrebians, and Haratin. Haratin is a debated term and is generally translated as "freed blacks" or "free blacks" (Wright 2007 : 12); El Hamel (2013 : 109-113) defines them as descendants of an agriculturalist population originally living in the fringes of the desert.
3. The term "slavery's afterlife" was coined by Saadia Hartman (2006) to refer to the ways in which the lives of contemporary black Americans are haunted by the slavery of the past.

students and professionals collected in 2014[4], and with previous fieldwork carried out on several occasions in Morocco between 2008 and 2013. My analysis weaves together interviews, francophone Moroccan journal articles and magazines, discussions around human rights on online platforms, and NGOs reports. Specifically, I concentrate on the narratives of three sub-Saharan African migrants: Sadibou, Yakana, and Theodoro. Unlike Theodoro, who migrated to Morocco lawfully to build his life there, Sadibou and Yakana belong to the so-called "in-transit" migrant population. After leaving their countries to reach Europe, their "transit" in Morocco has become an indefinitely prolonged stay. Despite the "radically new" immigration and integration policy initiated by the Moroccan government in 2014, their narratives were punctuated by overlapping forms of institutional and everyday violence such as police raids, displacement and deportation, labour exploitation, and racism.

By including in the discussion the voices of sub-Saharan African migrants in marginalized neighbourhoods of Rabat, this paper seeks to move beyond any linear causality between historical slavery and current racism. Thinking of anti-black racism in terms of slavery's afterlife enables us to historicize current racial dynamics by inscribing them into a longer history of the racialization of black Africans. Slavery, indeed, was a central institution in Morocco (Ennaji 1999), and its slave market remained one of the largest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Wright 2002). Slavery was never officially abolished during the French Protectorate or after Morocco's independence, but disappeared gradually following independence (Botte 2010: 145-186; Goodman 2012). As Maha Marouan (2016: 271) has argued, Moroccans' "incomplete forgetting" of slavery refracts in a "lack of race consciousness" and a "frantic distancing from blackness". However, imposing a linear causality between past and present prevents us from interrogating *how* the history of slavery interweaves with colonial racial legacies and hegemonic whiteness, labour exploitation and the lived effects of EurAfrican border regimes. My argument is that none of these processes alone explains the complexity of anti-black racism in Morocco, but their interplay creates historically specific dynamics of racialization and dehumanization of black African migrants.

In what follows, I situate my interlocutors' narratives against the backdrop of violent transcontinental border enforcement and shifting migration poli-

4. Interviews for this paper were collected between October and November 2014 within the frame of the ERC project *Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: A Historical Anthropology* under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC Grant agreement n° 313737. All names of people in this paper are anonymized.

cies in Morocco. Then, I trace the contours of the local debates on the "racial issue" and the way slavery is invoked to explain the present dynamics. The voices of Sadibou, Yakana, and Theodoro provide fresh insights into current explorations of racial dynamics in post-slavery Moroccan society. Compared with the rich literature on the historical intersections of slavery and race[5], few sociological and anthropological studies have addressed the issues of racial discrimination in contemporary North African and Middle Eastern societies[6]. By drawing attention to how post-slavery issues have interwoven with colonial racial legacies and transcontinental migration management, this paper also contributes to emerging scholarship on the racialized and racial dimensions of EurAfrican border regimes (e.g. Gross-Wyrtzen 2019; Perl 2020; Gazzotti 2021; Gross-Wyrtzen, El Yacoubi 2022).

From "transit" to forced immobility

I met Sadibou, Yakana, Theodoro, and the other migrants who do not appear in this paper thanks to the help of Beauty. An "in-transit" migrant woman in her late 20s, Beauty left Cameroon to reach Europe, but after having survived miraculously during a hazardous border crossing by boat she has searched for ways of making a life in Morocco. We met during a meeting held at the *Association Marocain des Droits Humains*, where human rights and anti-racist activists from various organizations based in Rabat gathered to discuss shared strategies to counter institutional violence and raise public awareness about racism and discrimination against sub-Saharan African migrants. Beauty was a member of the *Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc*, established in response to the Ceuta and Melilla events in 2005[7] to defend migrants' rights across nationality, ethnicity, and religious belonging. Beauty introduced me to her web of social relations and helped me think through the highly complex question of anti-black racism in Morocco by sharing her experiences and thoughts.

5. See, for example, Lewis 1990; Hunwick and Troutt Powell 2002; Aouad Badoual 2004; Toledano 2007; Walz and Cuno 2010; El Hamel 2013; McDougall, E. A. 2015.
6. See for example, Benachir 2001, 2005; Poussel 2012; Khiat 2015. Before 2013, the question of "anti-black racism" was occasionally mentioned in relation to sub-Saharan African migrants en route to Europe (for example, Peraldi 2011: 49ff; Timéra 2011: 154), but, especially in the past few years, it has been addressed more squarely (e.g. El Miri 2018; Menin 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen 2023).
7. Migrants en route to Europe shelter in the forests surrounding Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish enclaves in Moroccan territory, to cross over to Europe. In 2005, brutal repression of migrants' attempts at mass border crossing by the Spanish Civil Guard and the Moroccan Gendarmerie caused the deaths of some migrants and countless injured.

My interlocutors were predominantly West African men in their 20s and early 30s with rural or lower class urban backgrounds. Like Beauty, they aspired to reach Europe in search of "adventure", a recurrent expression that evokes ideas of the risk and unpredictability of their journeys, along with the possibility of changing their futures (Bredeloup 2008; Timéra 2009; Bachelet 2019). Some of them experienced arbitrary arrest and deportation at the border with Algeria; others sheltered in the forests surrounding the northern cities of Morocco, awaiting the right time to cross over to Europe, but were relocated forcibly to Rabat by state authorities. Migrants' forced immobility (Stock 2019) reflects the relatively recent shifts in a centuries-old history of commercial[8], religious[9], and cultural exchanges between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa that generated multiple mobilities across West Africa and the Sahara (McDougall, Scheele 2012). In the 1990s, trans-Saharan migration to and through Morocco grew following political and economic developments, wars, and humanitarian crises within Africa. Libya's break with the "Pan-African open-door policy" during the 2000s, which had attracted labour migration in previous decades, and then the fall of Gaddafi's regime in 2011 have, to an extent, redirected these migrants to Morocco (for example, Jeandesboz, Pallister-Wilkins 2014: 127-128).

Since the 1990s, the establishment of transcontinental border regimes and the "illegalization" (De Genova 2002; Willen 2007; Menjívar, Kanstroom 2014) of labour migration towards Europe have rendered Morocco an alternative destination for migrants and a site for emerging cosmopolitanism (Bensaâd 2009; Peraldi 2011; Alioua 2020). At the same time, Morocco is also, increasingly, a country of enforced immobility for the migrant population. Following the "Schengenization" of the Spanish-African border and EU pressure on North African states to collaborate in joint border control, European frontiers have been dislocated, externalized, and militarized on the Moroccan territories, based on bilateral agreements. One "inward" effect of border enforcement and homeland security on Moroccan national immigration policies has been the Migration Act (Law No. 02–03), enacted in the aftermath of the ter-

8. The trans-Saharan trade, including the slave trade, dates back to the 8th century and was consolidated further by the Islamization imposed on these territories by the Almoravid dynasty (1040-1147).
9. For example, pilgrimage from Senegal and elsewhere in West Africa to the shrines of founder Ahmad al-Tidjani of Tijaniyya, the Sufi brotherhood in Fes (see Lanza 2011; Berriane 2015).

rorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003, which restricted the criteria for entry and residence in the country.

Far from being a neutral process, border(ing) involves dynamics of filtering and classification of human beings. Alongside the production of legal status, it creates a deportable and exploitable labour force (De Genova 2002). Border(ing) also defines the subjects' socioeconomic and class positions (Kearney 2004: 133), and establishes racialized hierarchies between "desirable" and "undesirable" migrants. As an emerging scholarship shows, race and racialized histories are constitutive, albeit understudied, dimensions of EurAfrican border regimes, bordering, and unauthorized migration (Gross-Wyrtzen 2022; Gross-Wyrtzen, El Yacoubi 2022; Perl 2020). Scholars have traced how constructions of whiteness and blackness produce differential regimes of illegality (Gazzotti 2021) and how territorializations of racial domination are shaped through bordering and control over human mobility (Gross-Wyrtzen, Vázquez López 2023).

Morocco's position as a key actor in the transnational control of mobility radically changed the ways "in-transit" migration was debated; in the media and the press, it was presented as a "national public problem" (Natter 2014: 19), and migrants were stigmatized and criminalized[10]. Concurrently, new social actors have emerged: in addition to international NGOs, Moroccan human rights organizations have mobilized to provide material and legal support to sub-Saharan African migrants and to denounce state abuses. Migrants themselves have established associations[11] to defend their rights and demand social inclusion (Üstübici 2016; Bachelet 2018). The emergence of a securitarian-humanitarian dispositive (Peraldi 2011: 13) has also affected the racial dynamics between Moroccans and African migrants. In addition to violent border control and the abuses perpetrated by Moroccan police and border agents on the border zones, an escalation of anti-black attitudes and conflicts between Moroccans and black migrants since 2013[12] has brought the "racial issues" to the

10. In 2012, for instance, the Francophone magazine *MarocHebdo* published a special issue entitled "The Black Peril (*Le peril noir*)" (N. 998, 2-8 November 2012), which featured migrants through a prism of stereotypes—drug dealers, thieves, prostitutes, and HIV diseases.
11. See for instance, *Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc*, *Collectif des Communautés Subsahariennes du Maroc*, and more recently, *Association Lumière sur l'Emigration Clandestine au Maroc*.
12. In August 2013, Alexis Toussaint, a Congolese professor on a visit to Tangier, was arbitrarily arrested by police during a raid and died "falling out" of the police van. Fifteen days later, Ismail Faye, a young Senegalese, was stabbed by a Moroccan in the "Kamra" railway station in Rabat seemingly because he refused to move from his (assigned) seat next to a Moroccan woman on a bus travelling to Fes. In August 2014, a Senegalese citizen was slain by a Moroccan in Boukhalef (a neighbourhood in Tangier; see Crétois 2014).

forefront. In the context of growing social tensions, King Mohammed VI announced in 2013 a new immigration policy, which included a campaign aimed at regularizing undocumented migrants between January and December 2014 (*Opération exceptionelle de regularisation 2014*). The Moroccan government's turn toward integration and social inclusion did not stop institutional abuses of migrants along the borders, police raids, arbitrary arrests, and deportation to Oujda, the town bordering the Algerian desert (GADEM 2012). The internal dispersal of migrants across Morocco by Moroccan police has become part of a state-led border control strategy (El Arabi 2021; Gazzotti, Hagan 2021). Local and international organizations defending migrants' rights have denounced their forced displacement from the border towns of northern Morocco to the coastal cities of Rabat and Casablanca, and other towns in the south. Soon after the second regularization campaign in 2017 (*Deuxiéme phase d'intégration des personnes en situations irrégulière 2016-17*), in the summer of 2018, another escalation of arrests of migrants took place in Rabat and Casablanca – including those with residency papers, and refugees and asylum seekers – followed by forced displacement elsewhere in Morocco (GADEM 2018).

Before I discuss the intertwining of bordering and racial violence in my interlocutors' lives, let me first introduce how a debate on race and racism has emerged in Morocco.

Debating le racisme anti-Noirs

The African migrants, activists, and students I met considered "anti-black racism" a sensitive issue. Despite their different legal and social situations and class backgrounds, they all shared the experience of being discriminated against, mistreated, and physically attacked because of their being racialized as black Africans. They reported they were named *'abd*, literally meaning "slave" but also used to indicate a black person, or *'azzi*. This term, originally used in relation to the Bambara, a particular sub-Saharan ethnic group (Ilahiane 2006: 67), has been (mis)used over time generically for "sub-Saharan black/slave"[13]. Generally, my Moroccan interlocutors translated *'azzi* as "nigger" or "black," overlaid with a derogatory meaning. The semantic connection between blackness, slavery, and social inferiority (Aouad-Badoual 2004: 337-338) is still present in popular imaginations, not only in relation to slave descendants and Haratin[14], but also to people who come from regions

13. Ann McDougall, personal communication, July 2016.
14. See footnote n. 2.

that served historically as slave reservoirs for slave markets in Morocco, as in North Africa more broadly[15].

Besides verbal insults, my interlocutors have experienced various degrees of racist violence, from having stones thrown at them or being spat upon while walking in the street to physical attacks. Relations between African migrants and Moroccans, however, were not limited to conflicts and confrontations. Since the very beginning, migrant and Moroccan activists have come together to denounce racist acts by organizing sit-ins, public events, and press releases. In 2014, the *Papiers pour tous* collective launched the national campaign "My name is not a nigger" (in Moroccan Arabic: *Ma smitish ʿazzi*), and then an NGO in Casablanca organized the local campaign *I am Moroccan, I am African*, aiming to overcome divisions between Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans, and emphasize that they shared their belonging to the African continent. These media events are just two examples of attempts by local associations to stop conflicts and raise public awareness about racism in the rapidly changing Moroccan society. In 2016, a network of associations launched the international campaign *Neither serfs nor negro: Stop, that's enough* (in Arabic, *Ma oussif, ma ʿazzi: Baraka wa yezzi*) in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania to break the silence around racism[16]. Unlike in Mauritania, where slave movements date back to the 1970s, in North Africa more widely race and slavery have not been the trigger of social mobilization until recently. In post-revolution Tunisia, a lively debate on racial discrimination against the local black population has raised awareness about the racial legacies of the country's slavery past (Mrad Dali 2015; Scaglioni 2020, 2021). In Morocco, the campaign focused on racial discrimination against *les Subsahariens*.

In public discussions, the history of slavery is often invoked to explain anti-black racism against black Africans. Such understanding of current racism as being rooted in the country's slave past has been influenced by the publication of El Hamel's *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (2013). El Hamel (2013: 10) argues that the forced conscription of *Haratin* into Sultan Moulay Ismail's 17th-century black army – the Abid El Bukhari – to establish the hegemony of the ʿAlawite dynasty (1660-present) contributed to

15. Scholars have reported similar dynamics against blacks in Libya (Morone 2015) and against black African refugees in Tunisia (see Scaglioni 2017).
16. Rebecca Chaouch, « Ni esclave, ni nègre » : coup d'envoi de la première campagne transmaghrébine contre le racisme, *Jeune Afrique*, 24 March 2016, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/313144/politique/ni-esclave-ni-negre-coup-denvoi-de-la-premiere-campagne-transmaghrebine-contre-le-racisme/

the ideological foundation of a society divided by colour. Before El Hamel, other Moroccan scholars had discussed the topics of race, colour, and slavery in Morocco (e.g. Ennaji 1999; Benachir 2001, 2005). Although *Black Morocco* has been critiqued (Aidi 2023), its popularization in Moroccan independent press and platforms has helped to shape an unprecedented public debate on racism and the legacies of racialized slavery.[17] These topics were the focus of the November 2013 edition of the francophone and Arab-speaking Moroccan history magazine *Zamane*, entitled *Pourquoi nous sommes racists* (Why we are racist, 2013, n. 36). The issue included an interview with El Hamel, in which he argues, "The recent sub-Saharan migration has shown the extent to which racist attitudes are deeply rooted in Moroccan culture" (2013b: 62). This argument has also gained prominence among scholars and activists. More recently, in an interview published in *Le Courrier de l'Atlas* (2018), Mehdi Alioua, a Moroccan sociologist and the founder of the anti-racist association *Groupe Antiraciste de Défense et d'accompagnement des Etrangers et Migrants*, connects the persistence of anti-black racism to the legacies of Morocco's slave past. He states, "Today, anti-black racism has taken a new turn with the immigration of sub-Saharan people [...] This creates tensions, anxieties and therefore xenophobia that *reinforces* anti-black racism" (Alioua 2018, my translation, emphasis added). In these examples, racism is interpreted as a long-standing phenomenon rooted in the history of racialized slavery, which has been recently *revived* and *reinforced* by the increasingly visible presence of African migrants in Morocco.

A linear connection between the past and the present also informs Moroccans' reflections on their own identity and the imagination of North Africa as a "white space" (Menin 2016). This geopolitical imagination, however, is not only connected with the enslavement of black people from *Bilad as-Sudan* ("the land of the blacks"), but also with the colonial ideological division between *Afrique Blanche* and *Afrique Noire*, in tandem with the experience of colonial racism (Hannoum 2019; Perl 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen 2023) and postcolonial dynamics. Nation-state building in independent Morocco, indeed, centred

17. El Hamel also made this argument in a recent debate with the Tunisian activist Maha Abdelhamid, and the scholars Ali Bensaâd and Chouki El Hamel. Latifa Madani (2023), Maghreb, quelles origines au racisme anti-Noirs ? *L'Humanité*, (19 May 2023). He claims: "La migration subsaharienne récente a montré à quel point les attitudes racistes sont profondément enracinées dans la culture marocaine", available online at https://www.humanite.fr/en-debat/racisme/maghreb-quelles-origines-au-racisme-anti-noirs-795485 (last accessed in July 2024).

on Arab and Muslim identity as a response to colonialism, while erasing blackness and other internal differences. By naturalizing the Sahara desert as a racialized boundary, these mainstream narratives have contributed to the social construction of blackness as non-indigenous to North Africa and of whiteness as social currency and aspiration (Tayeb 2021). Moroccans' detachment from Africa also emerges in the use of the Arabic term *afriqiy* (literally "African") to designate sub-Saharan Africans but not Moroccans. In the past two decades, the emergence of EurAfrican border regimes delegating migration management to Morocco has further reshaped these dynamics by constructing black migrants as "the Other" *par excellence*.

While a linear connection between historical slavery and current racism offers a powerful narrative to give visibility to the difficult situation of sub-Saharan African migrants, it risks obscuring the complexity of blackness in Morocco. As we will see, Sadibou, Yakana, and Theodoro invoked Morocco's slave past to describe their predicaments. Far from equating themselves with past slaves, they used the powerful language of slavery to describe the dehumanizing effects of racialization, violent border control, and highly exploitative labour relationships. Therefore, if we are to understand the complexity of anti-black racism against African migrants, we need to include all these dimensions into our analysis. Let me begin with the words of Sadibou, a young man from Guinea Conakry.

Welcome to hell

Taqaddum is one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Rabat, reputed to be dangerous among both Moroccans and migrants. Beauty asked a male activist of the *Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc* to accompany us because she did not feel safe there. When we approached a group of young migrants from Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Cameroon, and Senegal, gathered under the decommissioned water tank that marks the entrance of Taqaddum, I introduced myself as an Italian researcher. "Welcome to hell," said a young man from Mali. "Yes! This is hell!" added another young man complaining about their difficult life conditions. One by one, they exposed the scars on their arms and faces resulting from fights with the Moroccan gangs in the neighbourhood. Among these youths, Sadibou, a puny and gentle young man aged 22 originally from Guinea Conakry, agreed to share his experience and to guide us in Taqaddum. That afternoon, I also interviewed two Nigerian women, but Beauty and her friend were so scared they refused to return.

Sadibou entered Morocco with a visa from Algeria in 2011, and since then he has remained trapped in the country, describing it as "the hell". Firstly, he lived in migrants' makeshift encampments in the forests surrounding Nador (Northern Morocco) awaiting the right time to cross over to Europe. In these camps, he lived under the threats of raids by Moroccan border agents who often destroyed migrants' improvised shelters, looted or burned their goods, and deported them. A few months before we met, he was beaten by the police during a raid and forcibly relocated to Rabat.

Following Sadibou along the narrow lanes and up and down steep steps, we left behind the noisy and crowded daily fruits and vegetables market and eventually arrived at the bottom of Taqaddum, close to a landfill. Sadibou entered the front door of a dilapidated house, leading us to the apartment he shared with other migrants. Organized around a central open-pit room, from which some natural light penetrates, as is typical of traditional Moroccan architecture, the apartment comprised three extremely poorly furnished rooms and toilet facilities. On the dirty walls of the house, traces of handwriting testified to the passage of previous migrant dwellers. The room Sadibou shared with two other boys cost 650 dirhams (about € 6), a sizable sum considering the bad condition of the apartment.

Housing was a major problem for my interlocutors because, they said, Moroccans refused to rent their houses to them or demanded higher rents. Sadibou felt constantly exposed to potential physical attacks in Taqaddum. "You do not feel safe in this neighbourhood," Sadibou repeated. He reported frequent fights between migrant and Moroccan gangs, but also among the migrants' gangs that control the territory, which he referred to as nationality-based "clans". Sadibou and the other migrants in Taqaddum described their Moroccan aggressors as *clochards* and drug addicts. In general, these migrants felt rejected by the local population because of their skin colour and origin. Sadibou made it clear that some Moroccan neighbours empathized with migrants, offering them couscous after the Friday prayer and giving them alms. In general, he said, "There is racism. Moroccans do not want the blacks! They treat the blacks like beasts [*des animaux*]. There is no respect for us as human beings! They continue to consider Africans as slaves [*des esclaves*]".

By claiming that Moroccans *continue* to consider the Africans as slaves, Sadibou evoked the past when West Africa was a reservoir of black slaves for Morocco's slave market. Crucially, he also used the language of slavery to discuss the exploitative and exhausting jobs available to black migrants trapped

in Morocco. Like his companions, Sadibou struggled to meet his basic needs. Early in the morning, migrants would gather under the disused water tank to be recruited by Moroccan bosses for underpaid jobs on construction sites, which Sadibou defined as "hard work", "dirty work", "slaves' jobs", and "forced labour". When I asked Sadibou what he meant by "slave labour" or "forced labour", he explained that he was compelled to accept physically exhausting jobs to survive, despite their being detrimental to his health. He was not forced into these exploitative labour relationships – in this sense, it was not *forced* labour – but felt he had no alternatives. "If you don't accept such jobs, you are forced to go and live in the street, where you can be killed. You have no choice".

Sadibou's point deserves attention because it raises the fundamental question of the degree of agency enjoyed by vulnerable migrants under conditions of border enforcement and racial violence. Sadibou felt he could not return to Guinea because his family financed his journey, and he was morally indebted to them. He wished to provide for his mother and younger siblings, and eventually get married, but he could not save money in his current economic situation. Being stuck fed his despair. Sadibou said, "Some people in the neighbourhood went crazy or started taking drugs to forget their difficulties. You know? I play football. This helps me to endure and pass a good time."

Although the agency of migrants like Sadibou is constrained by many factors, in Taqaddum, as in other low-income neighbourhoods, networks of solidarity and conviviality among migrants, especially but not limited to people of the same nationality or ethnic group, enabled them to endure difficult situations. These networks provide essential support in conditions of vulnerability and potentially constitute a space of political action. Sébastien Bechelet (2016) points to migrants' liminality and complex agency in Douar Hajja, a poor, marginalized neighbourhood next to Taqaddum, by tracing how sub-Saharan African migrants organize collective houses, open businesses, and set up political organizations. Similarly, in Taqaddum, a group of migrants established the *Association lumière sur l'émigration clandestine au Maroc* to defend migrants' rights. Moreover, Caritas Maroc and other organizations supplied basic goods such as food, clothing, and medicines.

Sadibou turned to Caritas for help during a difficult time, but he thought that neither humanitarianism nor charity could solve migrants' problems. "I don't want help, I want a *decent* job!" He thought only a *decent* job would enable him to get out of marginality. Above all, Sadibou dreamt of reaching

Europe, at any costs. He said he had relatives in various European countries but did not dare to reveal his situation because he was too proud. He also confessed, "They would not believe me". When I tried to explain the hard conditions of undocumented migrants in Europe, he replied, "Here, we are forced to live on the margins of society. If I have to die, I want to die in Europe". I did not dare to tell Sadibou that in Southern Italy, like in other parts of Europe, African and other migrants working in the agricultural sector are subjected to abuses and highly exploitative working conditions, demonstrating how chains of marginality and exploitation are racialized and reproduced across EurAfrican borders (see also Perl 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen, Vázquez López 2023).

Next, I continue to discuss the intertwining of border(ing) and racism with the narrative of Yakana and his neighbour Theodoro, two young men whom I met in the low-income neighbourhood *J3*.

"The blacks are like slaves in Morocco"

"I left Cameroon to change my life, to search for a better future. Cameroon is not easy… but Morocco should have been just a country of transit", said Yakana, a young Cameroonian aged 29. Yakana lived with four Cameroonian flatmates on the ground floor of a two-storey house in *J3*, a low-income neighbourhood of Rabat where many young migrants find relatively affordable rented houses. Unlike Sadibou's poorly furnished rented room in Taqaddum, Yakana's home was simple but decently furnished: he had a computer, and the internet connection enabled him to stay in touch via Facebook with friends who had made it to Europe and posted pictures of themselves in their new land.

"I left without a destination country. My goal was just to reach Europe", Yakana said, keeping open to a range of possibilities, "Spain, France, England… I will see". After entering Morocco via Oujda, Yakana stayed on the outskirts of the Northern cities of Tangier and Nador, hoping to cross over to Europe. He lived in and out of the migrants' makeshift camps in the forest of Gourugou, where his living and health conditions were extremely precarious, for almost two years. Eventually, he moved to Rabat to save money to arrange his crossing to Europe. In Rabat, however, Yakana and his flatmates experienced insecurity because of the inflicted condition of "deportability" (De Genova 2002). "During the night, the police enter into our homes to deport us to Oujda, in the desert. If you ask them if you can take your trousers, they say "No". Once

you are sent there, you don't have the means to return to Rabat, so you walk for kilometres before finding water and food. You suffer."

Despite his precarious life, Yakana hoped to reach Europe one day. "I haven't had luck so far. I will try again… If God wills…" This pragmatic openness to contingency in undocumented West African migrants' journey towards Europe reveals an "ethos of adventure" that entails determination, the ability to wriggle out of difficult situations, and a certain degree of good luck (Bredeloup 2008, Timera 2009; Bechelet 2019). However, the precarious and underpaid jobs available to migrants made it hard for Yakana to save money to cross over to Europe. He said, "You see? I've got to rely on the financial help of my relatives. They send me money occasionally through *Western Union*". Yakana worked at the fruit market as a stevedore from 4 am to noon. "I carry a crate of potatoes for 1 dirham; Moroccans are paid 2 dirhams for lighter crates of vegetables", he paused. "We [the blacks] carry the heaviest crates and get paid half of Moroccans." Yakana earned between 70 and 80 dirhams per day (about € 6.5-7.5), from which he had to find his rent and all other expenses. Before this, he had worked on construction sites, which, he said, was even worse. "In the construction yards, you cannot have a rest. If you rest for a while, Moroccans come and tell you, "Go work, my friend". Even if he is not your master, he feels entitled to monitor you," he said to emphasize the uneven relationship between locals and foreigners. "I mean, they lack respect for black Africans as equal human beings. They want to cut our wings", said Yakana to express his experience of humiliation and subjugation at work, marked by racist attitudes towards African migrants.

Yakana denounced the racial abuses that black Africans endured in everyday interactions with Moroccans. "My (Moroccan) neighbours complain whenever I sit by the front door. They accuse me of looking into their home. When the kids play football in the street, they intentionally hit me with the football. They insult me. If the parents do not intervene, this means they approve of such behaviour. There is racism." Yakana paused and sighed: "On the bus, they avoid sitting next to the blacks. You see them holding their nose to mean we smell. There is too much racism". He explained that muggings, thefts, and racist assaults are daily occurrences in *J3*, as Moroccan gangs steal money and possessions, or injure migrants just for fun. "For example," he went on, "last week, my neighbour Theodoro was attacked during the day at the market. All the people were looking at him. Nobody intervened. They did so not to rob him but because he's black." In Yakana's view, the sense of inferiority some

Moroccans impose on black Africans, together with their sense of impunity, legitimizes both everyday forms of racial harassment and institutional violence against them.

When I met Yakana's neighbour, Theodoro, he was still recovering. Theodoro was originally from Guinea Conakry. Aged 22, he arrived in Morocco lawfully in February 2012 on an aeroplane and then slipped into "illegality" by overstaying his three-month Visa. Unlike "in-transit" migrants, Theodoro migrated to build his life in Morocco, hoping to find better working opportunities, but then he encountered a different reality. He said, "We are, here, today like slaves. The blacks are like slaves in Morocco. I had never seen it before". He stressed that such attitude resulted in racial harassment and discrimination at work regardless of a person's legal status. Then he said that a gang of Moroccans assaulted him brutally when he refused to hand over his mobile phone: "I've been hit with a baseball bat. I fell to the ground losing my consciousness. Until now, I've suffered. I regret every single day to be here. Given the current circumstances, I would prefer to go home because the situation is not good here, with the problem of racism and the aggression, I'm tired". When I asked him whether his aggressors were criminals, drug addicts or homeless people, he replied by saying:

> These people are not bandits; even their parents are like that. Even if you do not argue with them, they come to harass and attack you, even their moms and dads. They are against the blacks. When you walk into the market, they spit on you; what is this? […] Although Moroccans see their children hurting a black African, everyone looks, but they do nothing, they don't say a word. The kids spit on the blacks, what is this? There is too much racism here. They do not like blacks.

As his words show, Theodoro identified a specific racial dimension in the aggression and the inhuman treatment directed at black Africans. Believing the possibility of crossing over to Europe was very remote, he applied for regularization under the 2014 measure, although the restrictive criteria prevented him from proving his stay in Morocco was legal. In any case, he was not convinced that having a residence permit would improve his life in Morocco.

Conclusion

The voices of Sadibou, Yakana, and Theodoro provide fresh insights into ongoing discussions of "anti-black racism" in contemporary Morocco and North Africa more broadly. As we have seen, both academic and societal engagement with racial violence against sub-Saharan African migrants has opened up un-

precedented debates about colour prejudice in Morocco by raising fundamental questions on the legacies left by the history of slavery. Although racial violence against sub-Saharan African migrants remains a pressing issue, the veil of racial oblivion is beginning to lift. This shift in the collective consciousness can be attributed to several factors, including anti-racism activism, the rise of new forms of cosmopolitanism and recognition (Alioua 2020), along with the recent inclusion of sub-Saharan migrants and black characters in Moroccan literature (El Guabli 2021).

I have argued that, although the centuries-old history of slavery in Morocco continues to affect people's lives and imaginations in many ways, we can complicate the parallel between past and present racisms by including the voices of sub-Saharan African migrants in the discussion. The language of slavery, indeed, provides an evocative and emotionally charged narrative by which to draw attention to their predicaments. However, invoking slavery as an explanation for current racism risks obscuring, rather than elucidating, the complex intertwining of multiple racialized histories that produces "blackness" as social inferiority, out-of-placeness, and exploitable labour force (Gross-Wyrtzen 2023). These histories are shaped by enslavement, but also by colonialism, Morocco's nation building, and the violent border enforcement that positions different categories of black people according to ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, etc. Thus, rather than conceptualizing current anti-black racism simply as slavery's afterlife, I have traced how post-slavery issues intertwine with colonial and postcolonial racial legacies, and transcontinental migration management. My interlocutors' voices reveal long-standing racial prejudice and worldviews but also reflect the racialization of Africans – their being racialized as blacks – under contemporary EurAfrican border regimes. Theodoro's insistence on systematic anti-black racism and violence for its own sake powerfully frames blackness as social inferiority and out-of-placeness. In evoking slavery, however, my interlocutors are not just reflecting on a painful past, especially for African people of slave ancestry. On the contrary, the language and the imagination of slavery metaphorically connect past and present in denouncing the experiences of labour exploitation and dehumanization that the most vulnerable sub-Saharan African migrants suffer as racialized "Others". I suggest that what is at stake in their lived experiences of racism are the inhuman treatments, exploitative labour relationships, and stigmatization that reflect contemporary dynamics. Racism emerges in their narratives as a historically situated form of dehumanization whose multifarious mani-

festations dispossess them of their being-human-ness: not only exploited, but also treated like sub-humans, "slaves", or animals, as they put it.

As I have tried to show, migrants' everyday lives in marginalized neighbourhoods in Rabat were shaped by overlapping forms of violence that combined to push them further onto the margins of society. Despite Morocco's turn to the regularization and integration of migrants in the past decade, sub-Saharan African migrants have continued to be subjected to the threat of arbitrary arrest, depredation, abuse, racial violence and state-enforced dislocation and deportation. Concurrently, poverty, exploitation, and the impossibility of finding a "decent job" regardless of their qualifications and legal status sharpened conditions of vulnerability and social marginalization. There is a powerful resonation between, on the one hand, Sadibou's thoughts on what he defined as "forced labour" and Yakana's reflections on the dehumanization of migrants, and, on the other hand, what happens across the Mediterranean Sea and in the US under transcontinental bordering and white supremacy (Gross-Wyrtzen, Vázquez López 2023). Offering situated insights into the social mechanisms that produce the racialization of blackness through border(ing), the stories of Sadibou, Yakana, and Theodoro invite us to understand racism in Morocco as a multi-faceted and historically situated phenomenon that requires careful contextualization along multiple histories and lines of difference.

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