Racialization in Exile: Allal al-Fassi's Racial Positionalities in Gabon

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Allal al-Fassi (January 10, 1910 – May 13, 1974) was one the most influential movers and shakers in contemporary Moroccan history. Not only was he a co-founder of Moroccan nationalism, but his political action and prolific writings shaped a unique vision of Moroccanness. From his controversial positions regarding the historic Morocco, which pitted the country against all its neighbors (and continues to do so to this day), to his anti-Israelite rants in 1967 and his persecution of the Bahais (see Boum in this issue),[1] and even his conceptualization of Morocco as an Arab-Islamic country, al-Fassi leaves no one indifferent to his impactful, multidimensional legacy. Despite this, the bulk of his work has yet to be read critically by scholars beyond its current partisan and hagiographic uses, coupled with Amazigh activists' misgivings about his (mis)conception of North African identity.[2] The mushrooming scholarship on race and racism in Tamazgha has mostly avoided addressing al-Fassi's and his ilk's complex legacy. This has led to conclusions that beg for more nuance, namely in light of urgent critical reading of the rich literary body written in Arabic from Tamazgha in conjunction with fieldwork. As an ʻalim, al-Fassi's racial positions and positionalities were grounded in his erudition and unflinching Islam-centric view of the world. This Islamic perspective shaped al-Fassi's navigation of racial, religious, and linguistic difference. While Islam's colorblind injunctions superseded race in his dealings with Muslims,

[1] Even this early, al-Fassi evinced this anti-Israelite sentiment in writing that the French were manipulating his mail in "a dishonest Israelite way." (65) Related to Jews, al-Fassi records an important event that needs more historical research. An entry under January 27, 1939, which coincides with WWII, he writes: "I heard that the General Governor of Equatorial Africa will return here in a few days accompanied by two thousand German Jews who were exiled in France and that it was decided that these two thousand Jews will live here divided into four groups. Five hundred in each of the four colonies. I am not sure if they are coming here with their own money or whether France will loan it to them and give them the land to settle it instead of these wretched poor blacks who know nothing about the meaning of life." (122) Al-Fassi provides no more details about this information and whether the Jews were brought to Gabon or not.

[2] An example can be found in Muḥammad Budhān, "al-Nazʻa al-amāzīghuffūbiyya: Nash'atuhā wa taṭawwuruhā 2/2," *Ahewar*, https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=420260.

every other difference, including the color-based one, was amplified if the interlocutor was not Muslim themself.

This article draws on his memoir, entitled *Fī manfā al-ghābūn* 1937-1946 (*My Exile in Gabon 1937-1946*, 2004; al-Fassi, 2004), which he authored during the period when the French Protectorate (1912-1956) forced him to spend time in Gabon (1937-1941) and the Congo (1941-1946). I argue that al-Fassi's chronicling of racially-charged situations allows us to conceptualize a multipositional racialization, whereby I mean that any situation of racialization implicates both the self and others in ways that require attention to a multiplicity of positionalities, particularly those that one individual can occupy in the same situation. Al-Fassi's struggle with his positionality in exile reveals how he was an object, a witness, and a subject of racialization at the same time. On the one hand, al-Fassi's memoirs are replete with statements, reactions, and complaints in which he explicitly attributes his mistreatment by colonial administrators to French racism. On the other hand, he records the myriad forms in which the colonial system discriminated against what he calls *al-sūd* (the blacks), both sub-Saharan Africans and other blacks from the African diaspora. Complicating this further, al-Fassi's own observations about black people are steeped in evolutionary theory and preconceived ideas about blackness. Accordingly, I conceptualize how a "narrative of being racialized," a "narrative of witnessing racialization," and a "narrative of racializing" coexist in his exile narrative, allowing us to develop a "multipositional racialization" reading methodology.

In its broader implications, this article seeks to produce a direly needed conceptual language for the study of race in Tamazgha by referring to an underused written source that reflects the ethos of the author's era and its racial prejudices. Moreover, this method would illuminate the racial ideologies of a section of Moroccan citizenship represented by al-Fassi. Written literature, particularly memoirs of influential figures such as al-Fassi (who forged national identities in the region), contain important reflections that further challenge the white-vs-black binary that has been used to think about race in the region (Salime, forthcoming). Ethnographic work certainly helps collect and interpret data about the present moment. However, reading literature writ large, particularly in local languages, will shed light on the many blind spots of works that continue to cast Islam as a racializing force and depict racism a silenced topic and which do so without heeding the multiple positions that racializing/deracializing actors inhabit simultaneously (Aïdi, 2022).

Al-Fassi emerged as a leader in the 1930s during the struggle against France's "Berber policy." Broadly defined, French "Berber policy" aimed to advance colonial interests by (re)inventing and sustaining racial difference between Imazighen (called Berbers) and Arabs in Tamazgha. Articulated in racial terms, the policy distinguished between the "*race arabe*" (Arab race) and the "*race berbère*" (Berber race). It culminated with the publication of what came to be known as the Berber Dahir,[3] which Moroccan nationalists interpreted as an onslaught on Islam and Arabic language. The fight against this decree was foundational for the future development of Arab-Islamic, Salafi-infused nationalism in Morocco,[4] which emerged in opposition to French colonialism's gestures toward Amazigh customary law. In turn, it created its own brand of post-colonial racism against Imazighen.

The founding of both *Ḥizb al-istiqlāl* (Istiqlal Party) and *Kutlat al-ʻamal al-waṭanī* (Nationalist Action Bloc) in response to French "*Berbérisme*" explains the scathing criticism that al-Fassi's legacy has received from Amazigh activists. By virtue of his place in Moroccan history, al-Fassi's contributions to national independence are well known. Lucette Valensi has described how different actors in postcolonial Morocco draw on memory and ritualization to shape collective memory and write history, and the Istiqlal was not alone in attempting to fashion a national memory that was anchored in its leaders' tireless work for independence (Valensi, 1990). The well-tried Istiqlal machine etched al-Fassi's story into Moroccan minds through its powerful commemorative practices. The party's strong press, boy scouts' associations, party meetings, and influential trade union activism were outlets for the dissemination of al-Fassi's thought and bolstered his establishment as a central figure in Moroccan contemporary history. His time in forced exile in Gabon and the Congo figures prominently amongst his sacrifices on behalf of the Moroccan nation. Yet, commemoration and hagiography are the domain of selective amnesia. One such forgotten aspect of al-Fassi's legacy is how he conceptualized, reacted to, and embodied

[3] This royal decree, which was published on May 16th, 1930, established two parallel justice systems in the country. The system based on customary law was designed for Amazigh whereas the other one was based on Shariah law, which to be applied to Arab areas. Although the law reflected a social reality at the time, Moroccan nationalists used as an opportunity to unite Moroccans against French colonialism as an attack against Islam. This misrepresentation of the Berber Dahir would later be used to fight any demands for Amazigh people's linguistic and cultural rights as a residue of this infamous decree.

[4] Unlike the contemporary understanding of *salafiyya* as jihadist, violent movements, the *salafiyya* I am referring to here is one that is that grounded in novel readings of the Islamic tenets to better accommodate the needs of Muslim societies. Modern *salafiyya* sought to reform tradition and use *ijtihad* (informed opinion) to keep Muslim societies abreast of developments in the West.

racial difference in exile. Such an analysis would help tease out its consequences for Moroccan nationalism's attitudes towards race and racism, and it would shed necessary light on current discussions of these issues, particularly in Morocco.

An Erudite, "White," Male Victim of Racialization

Even before his exile, al-Fassi understood that racism was fundamental to France's colonial enterprise in Morocco. Colonialist General Charles Noguès designation as a General Resident in 1936 meant for al-Fassi that France's policy in Morocco was dominated by "discrimination and racism" (Al-Fassi, 14). He reports his meeting with Noguès's chief of staff and comments on how he dismissed the Moroccan people's demands for freedom as if they were minors. He clearly renders this infantilization of Moroccan nationalists in conversations he reports in his memoirs. Further, al-Fassi took issue with how the reception organized for Noguès in Fes, specifically the fact that "all the inhabitants were forced to assemble and close their shops" (al-Fassi, 16-17). In addition to the exploitation of the inhabitants, al-Fassi denounces the General's likening of Moroccan nationalists to "small children and chicks who would like to fly but fall on the ground" (al-Fassi, 16-17). The book's introduction paints the portrait of a state in which Moroccans had no right to assert their subjectivity, since, in the mind of colonial administrators, they were underage minors who could not handle their own affairs. It is the author's involvement in this struggle against colonial discrimination that led to his October 25, 1937 arrest and subsequent deportation to Gabon (al-Fassi, 21). Even this early on, racial discrimination informed both al-Fassi's understanding of colonialism as well as his approach towards addressing it.

Al-Fassi's racial positionality does not take too long to discover in *Fī manfā al-ghābūn*. In a diary entry on January 3rd, 1938, written after the new year, al-Fassi reflects on the state of the village of "Anglé" after the celebrations:

> This morning, all the whites, both the residents and the wayfarers, who were present in the village departed, and I remained alone. Here I am now the only Muslim, the only Arab, the only Moroccan, the only white, and the only exiled [person] (al-Fassi, 34).

This series of "onlys" serves to represent his perception of this "*al-arḍ al-sawdā'*" (black land), a space conditioned by his forced exile to the region. Further, through this syntactical repetition, al-Fassi asserts his difference from both the French colonials and the local *al-ahālī* (autochthones). His complex identities encompass Islam, Arabness, whiteness, Moroccanness, and exilehood, and

when these are examined in light of his mistreatment by the French, one can see how this experience both exacerbated his feeling of being racialized and sharpened his reaction to racism throughout *Fī manfā al-ghābūn*. Hence, colonial racism impacted several of his identities, all of which were inherently incompatible with his oppressors and the local oppressed peoples. After all, al-Fassi was a political leader, an ‘alim, a teacher, an upper-class man, and a descendent of an Andalusian family. It was this compilation of identities that were subjected to the power of institutionalized racial discrimination in the colony. While colonial racism vis-à-vis *al-ahālī* (the autochthones) was color-based and articulated through a black-vs-white binary, his own racialization unsettles (rather than adheres to) this very binary by depicting the varied geometry of racialization under French colonialism.

The primary question one faces is how to define the nature of al-Fassi's whiteness, namely in terms of how it related French whiteness in the abstract to his conception of race. While *Fi manfā al-ghābūn* is laden with references to *al-sūd* (the blacks) and *al-bīyḍ* (the whites), al-Fassi's whiteness should not be confounded with the colonizers' whiteness. To be sure, he at no point even attempts to underline any similarities between his racial identity that of the French colonizers. He also distinguishes himself from the Caribbean *hajīn* (the mulatto), to whom he refers as the result of interracial relationships between whites and blacks.

Throughout the text, he often directly associates the *hajīn* with the Caribbean. Al-Fassi was then neither French-white, nor mulatto-white, nor black, but instead he considered himself to be North-African white. As such, he fit none of the racial categories that were prevalent in the colony, meaning blackness, whiteness, and mulattoness. In separating himself, al-Fassi already complicates the racial categories by asserting his difference based on whiteness, which is distinguished from both European and local populations in the colony. This distinction is monumental, since it draws attention to the different scales of whiteness and blackness that exist in North Africa and which are at work in al-Fassi's rationalization of his racial status.

Hence, while race for al-Fassi had fixed markers that were based on color features, and these aspects did distinguish a person in contrast to another, they nevertheless hold other slippery dimensions that reveal how whiteness and blackness did not have fixed meanings when Islam, geography, or class were at play. Hence, the distinction between blacks and whites in the colony is compounded by Frenchness and autochthony or lack thereof. *Al-bīyḍ* refers strictly to the

French-white, and *al-sūd* (the blacks) as the *ahālī* (autochthones), but al-Fassi was *abyad* (a white man) amongst all of them. He does not include himself in the plural of whites (*al-bīyḍ*), but rather uses the singular *abyaḍ* to set himself apart from the rest of the colonial racial binaries.

By not treating him like a white person, the colonial system denied al-Fassi his self-defined whiteness and further anchored his difference within its shades of gray. Although al-Fassi rationalizes his mistreatment through the lens of racism, he does not attribute it to his color difference like he does when he depicts the relationship between *al-bīyḍ* and *al-sūd* as one based on an explicit racial divide. In this regard, his status as a political exile might explain how he understood discrimination. This could take various forms, including discrimination in the allocation of housing, disrespect of his social status, deprivation of education and access to resources, and constant surveillance. Whiteness carried significant weight in the decisions about who got inhabitable houses in the compound. Additionally, French administrators were disrespectful toward him by addressing him using the casual pronoun "tu" instead of the more formal "vous." Even a new governor addressed him informally, pushing al-Fassi to explain this behavior by "these people's religious fanaticism" (al-Fassi, 108). The series of actions he classifies under discrimination included depriving him of books, slowing down his mail, and denying him the right to learn the French language, which they construed he would use as a propaganda tool in favor of independence when he left custody (al-Fassi, 87). On a local level, disabling al-Fassi's ability to communicate in French would foil any effort to spread his nationalist ideas among the "blacks" in Gabon (al-Fassi, 87).

Al-Fassi's narrative of being racialized does not dwell on color-based racism as much as it dwells on grievances that were motivated by his sophisticated understanding of discrimination. Unlike most of the people in the colony, French colonists included, he was highly educated and could rationalize what was happening around him in more abstract terms. While his whiteness put him on par with the French, his scientific knowledge and erudition placed him above everyone else in the colony. Depicting the differential power between him and what he called the "French masters" in the colony, al-Fassi asserts that "none of the employees in Mouila holds a baccalaureate, but they all have the greatest diplomas in the ability to persecute and misprision the honorable" (al-Fassi, 109). Racialization in the form of stripping him of his social and intellectual prestige, which he earned by virtue of his long years of training and activism, hit him harder than any lamentation of his mistreatment as a white person. It is no wonder, then, that he talks about

his "intellectual persecution" (al-Fassi, 102) from a nation that considered itself the "God of the universe" (al-Fassi, 75). Therefore, al-Fassi expands the meaning of racism to include denial of basic rights to education, decent lodging, and personal dignity in whatever manner it is defined.

Unlike the other colonized people whose voices are rarely reported in *Fī manfā al-ghābūn*, al-Fassi's narrative of being racialized portrays a proactive thinker who endeavors to undermine racism and the life-complicating discriminatory practices that ensue from it. He conveys his grasp of the French colonial system's intent to humiliate him, which only affirms his deep-seated belief in himself as a white descendent of a great civilization, something he believes would protect himself from debasement and dehumanization. To show the crude nature of French colonial racism, al-Fassi ventures into comparative racism to place his treatment by the French and the British treatment of Gandhi into conversation. British colonial racism, in his opinion, "respected [people's] emotions a lot" (al-Fassi, 109). Here, "emotions" might refer to social status, particularly if understood in line with his deep concern with "dignity and honor" (al-Fassi, 109). This prevented him from asking the French governor of West Africa for any material favors when he paid him a visit.

Al-Fassi's comparative and critical approach to French racism in the colony had a demystifying function, principally because he sought to contradict France's representations of itself as a civilized country. He sarcastically comments on "the degree of barbarism of these people who supposedly came to civilize us," accusing them of "ignorance of the most basic social manners" (al-Fassi, 109). Al-Fassi's knowledge and sense of decorum allowed him to both measure up to the French and question the tenets of their purported civilization, basing his critique on their racist behavior in the small colonies where he lived in Gabon.

The civilizational racism (if we may qualify it as such) is highly conspicuous in al-Fassi's narrative of being racialized, and for him it was only another facet of struggle between Islam and Catholicism. As I have already said, the message underlying al-Fassi's discussion of race is that he should not have been discriminated against by virtue of his whiteness and social status. Since neither social status nor whiteness spared him French racism, he finds an explanation of the discrimination directed at him in his Islamic faith. Put bluntly, in al-Fassi's eyes, Islam was the reason he was targeted. Hence, he refers to his French interlocutors as Catholics and underlines the role religion played in their active enmity towards him. For example, he refers to General

Noguès as a Jesuit, all without explaining the meaning of associating such a religious term with the general's blatant racism against Moroccans. As a result, his dislocation from Morocco, the "land of Islam," to "a village where there are no Muslims" was part of this racist plot against Islam (al-Fassi, 47). This early conceptualization of colonial Islamophobia is clearly stated in his writing that "the real motif is the hatred that is deeply seated in their heart against Islam and Muslims" (al-Fassi, 60). In reality, al-Fassi sees an even bigger picture of systemic racism against Muslims in the colonies, particularly in depicting the colonial administration's acts as targeting "Muslims […] because they are Muslims and not because they can do anything against France" (al-Fassi, 60). Therefore, Muslims were framed and surveilled for nothing other than being Muslim. Specifically, because of Islam's liberatory potential, the colonial system was scared of its possible inspiration of a nationalist movement that could shake off colonialism.

Al-Fassi's narrative of being racialized focuses on the special surveillance, curtailed movement, and limited access to rights that he considered crucial for his intellectual and personal comfort. The colonial discrimination's routinization of administrative hurdles, uneven authority, disempowerment, and codification of relationships were facilitated on a daily basis in the colony. This captured al-Fassi's attention, and it allowed him to make a theoretical foray into the innerworkings of this racist, Manichean system, something that Frantz Fanon would later articulate. However, rather than simply describing how the system worked, al-Fassi extrapolated from his own situation and that of others in order to infuse his own racialization with a sense of civilizational dimension, one that placed colonialism's Catholic-informed hatred of Islam at the heart of its racism and discrimination. Since al-Fassi considered himself an embodiment of Islamic values, the colonial racism directed at him was in fact targeting Islam as a whole.

As a result, al-Fassi occupied a position apart within the pyramidal and stratified colonial order. Generally speaking, whites occupied the top of the hierarchy followed by people of color who were naturalized French citizens,[5] thereby relegating the West Africans to the lowest echelon.[6]

[5] This hierarchy is seen in access to goods for instance. The French always have the first choice when it comes to vegetables and meat. Al-Fassi records how he was informed that "there was a land that was full of the best kinds of vegetables but it was reserved for the white employees only, and the workers have no share in it" (160).
[6] Throughout the text, al-Fassi uses *al-bīyḍ* (the whites) to refer to the while colons, *al-sūd* (the blacks) to refer to the West Africans and the locals in the colony, and the *hajīn* (the mulattos) to refer to people from mixed marriages, particularly from the West Indies.

The next section of this article probes al-Fassi's position as a witness to French colonial racialization of West Africans and other diasporic Africans.

al-Fassi as a Witness to Racialization

The French colonial Empire served as a larger context for al-Fassi experiences of systemic racism. Being exiled in a French colony put al-Fassi in contact with different subjects of the empire, itself a locus of transnational mobility for other Africans, Asians, and West Indians. At the time, these peoples were evolving within the structures of the colonial system. In addition to fending for himself to defend his own rights against the restrictions of a discriminatory system, al-Fassi was able to witness the commission of myriad racial prejudices against Africans in the area in which he was exiled.

As a witness to racism in the colony, al-Fassi records the different ways in which the binary white-vs-black functioned in daily contact between the two racial groups. His scholarly and critical distance from both the colonizers and the colonized in Gabon facilitated his perception and depiction of racial discrimination and all the privileges it bestowed on French-whites at the expense of the *al-ahālī al-sūd* (the black autochthones), whose asymmetric level of power translated into exclusion and differential access to resources. Al-Fassi's choice of *al-ahāli*, which is the Arabic translation of the France *indigènes*, to describe Africans will be addressed in the next section, but it is important to emphasize that he, in the meantime, depicts a world in which the racial structure allowed French-whites to extract labor, sex, and services from the local population. Seeing this multilayered extractive and exploitative system in its daily operations outraged al-Fassi and caused him great pain.

Sexual exploitation is one aspect of this colonial racialization. Possibly because he was deprived any contact with his wife (who remained in Fes), sex and sexuality figure prominently in his book, particularly in his critical assessment of the whites' sexual domination over the colonized (al-Fassi, 88). Extraction of sexual services was part of a dehumanizing system which kept "barefooted and naked [Africans], entirely enslaved to the whites who ruled over them in whatever manner they wanted" (al-Fassi, 66). He likens the status of *al-sūd* (the blacks) under the colonial rule to slavery (al-Fassi, 67). Black women were exploited for sex, and al-Fassi did not miss any opportunity to highlight how scandalous that was. For instance, he describes how he found a black mistress in his interpreter's house, adding that the interpreter took her as a girlfriend (al-Fassi, 46).

Time and again al-Fassi reminds his readers of the commodification of black women, including underage girls. Even worse, however, was the fact that these women were used to advance colonial designs, like when the Inspector of the Colonies urged al-Fassi to "take one of them [women], despite their blackness, [as a girlfriend] as you see Europeans, who live here with their families, are doing" (al-Fassi, 85). The women were exploited for their sexuality and were left with the children when the French-whites left the colony to return to France. He adduces the case of the mixed-race daughter of a French civil servant who returned to France and left her in the village with her black mother (al-Fassi, 155). What al-Fassi records is a transformation of women's reproductive ability due to the introduction of European medicine, particularly through the proliferation of contraceptives and anti-STD products (al-Fassi, 155).

Free or unjustly remunerated labor is the other manner in which racialization manifests itself in the colony across al-Fassi's testimonial account. Targeting France's civilizing mission, al-Fassi makes the sweeping conclusion that this country, unlike its propagandic image, built no civilization in its one-hundred-and-twenty-year presence in Gabon (al-Fassi, 66).[7] It rather established an extractive system that took advantage of local people who were forced to work as guards, envoys, manual labor, and errand boys.

Colonial authority converged with extractive capitalism, as he cogently illustrates in his anti-capitalist description of the gold mining company named Patika whose workers were paid two francs for twelve-hour workdays (al-Fassi, 121). The exploitative, racialized work conditions combined with undrinkable water, malnutrition, and "overcrowding and other illnesses" caused the death of many of the workers (al-Fassi, 121). This pernicious extraction of Africans' labor for free spared none of the *ahāli*, both adults and children. Seeing a group of women at work, al-Fassi could not suppress his indignation at how "the poor autochthones [were obliged] to serve the whites and tire themselves for it [service], and I was deeply hurt by this scene and particularly the scene of women, including one who was nursing [a baby], doing manly work" (al-Fassi, 42). The labor extracted from the autochthones, whether it was in the form of dance, entertainment, or sex, was codified through the pyramidical colonial order, something that al-Fassi denounces throughout his book.

[7] It is important to underline the fact that this statement reflects al-Fassi's bias against Black Africans' understanding of civilization by projecting his outsider view onto their way of life.

The colonial system was so entrenched in color-based racialization that nonwhiteness superseded one's French citizenship. Indeed, even among French colonizers, French-whiteness prevailed over black-West-Indian-Frenchness. In his account, al-Fassi focuses on the story of Bīkī, a black Martinican who served as director of the sole school in the village. Described as "a sympathetic, black Martinican man," Bīkī went above and beyond in his effort to promote children's and adults' education, succeeding in training and graduating the first ever five primary school certificate holders in the village after over a century of French colonization (al-Fassi, 127). While we cannot draw an explicit connection between his work and Césaire's *Negritude* (particularly because we have no way to access his own thinking),[8] Bīkī, as a diasporic African, had much sympathy for the locals. This sympathy was manifested in his endeavor to give children a strong intellectual and physical education, all in spite of the opposition he faced from the whites who saw the elevation of black children through education as a threat to their domination (al-Fassi, 127).

Neither his French citizenship nor his position shielded Bīkī from the discrimination of his white co-citizens. Their overt racism was manifested in their refusal of his relationship with a white woman. In al-Fassi's testimony, "the [white] Europeans here did not like that a white woman was in a relationship with a black man even if he was French among the autochthones" (al-Fassi, 128). A French woman could have a relationship with a black man in France, but not amongst the natives, in fear that they could develop ideas about measuring up to white people. In al-Fassi's words, the relationship between Bīkī and the white women caused the colons "pain" and they were "not happy that a white woman had a relationship with a black man even he is French, particularly among the autochthonous *al-sūd* (the blacks; al-Fassi, 128)." After all, the colonial tropes of domination that were inscribed into sexuality did not need much explanation, for al-Fassi goes to record the paradox between the rejection of a "black man's commission of fornication with a white woman while all the whites commit fornication with black women at all times" (al-Fassi, 129). This discussion of racialization and sexuality in the colony reveals that it was an affront to colonial supremacy to see a French woman share a bed with a black man, undoing the unidirectional authority that allowed only white men to engage in such actions with black women.

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[8] Since we do not know much about Bīkī and his readings at the time, it is important to mention that Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* was published in 1939, which was two years after al-Fassi's exile to Gabon.

A black man sleeping with a white woman emasculated whiteness and its privileges, and French colonials did everything they could to separate Bīkī from his girlfriend. Hence, when the couple had a mundane fight, his white girlfriend was briskly whisked away to France, leaving him alone in the colony. The haste in which the separation happened was interpreted by al-Fassi as a direct result of the white establishment's encouragement, adding that "none of the French visited [Bīkī] to entertain him" after his loss (al-Fassi, 128). Even other mulattos (*hajīn*) shunned Bīkī for fear of retaliation (al-Fassi, 129). Analyzing this relationship in its context of asymmetrical distribution of power, al-Fassi expresses his bewilderment at the French colonists' jealousy of a "black man having intercourse with a white woman while all the whites are having sex with the blacks all the time" (al-Fassi, 129). Hence, the very power associated with white bodies in the colony required their inaccessibility to natives while the opposite was entirely normalized. When read in light of recent theoretical developments, al-Fassi could be said to have engaged in an early articulation of intersectionality in the colonial context *avant l'heure*.

Al-Fassi's meticulous testimony about the systematic imbrication of sex, gender, class, race, and racism in the colony reveals their incremental effects on the colonized and other diasporic black Africans. The dichotomy of black-vs-white created a structure in which the natives' sexuality, labor, and resources were all extractable for the benefit of the French-white colonizers. Whiteness was a powerful marker of Frenchness, and in recording this reality, al-Fassi conveyed his indignation and sought to debunk the colonial myths regarding its ideals of the civilizing mission. Nevertheless, al-Fassi's criticism of racism in the colony should not mean that he was immune to racializing others based on their skin color, religion, behavior, education, and class, among other aspects. Al-Fassi clearly inhabited his different (and at times contradictory) racial positionalities, and the next section of this article will discuss his own racializing narrative about black Africans whom he lumped indiscriminately under the category *al-sūd* (the blacks).

A Nationalist's Racializing Attitudes

Sophisticated and poignant as it is, al-Fassi's rendering of structural racism practiced against Africans does not absolve him of any critical examination of his own racial prejudice against black Africans. The conceptualization of the different racial positionalities one occupies resides exactly in interrogating how one navigates each position and the fact that being racialized, being a racializer, and witnessing racialization are not mutually exclusive. The same individual

can check all these boxes, which indicates the complexity of racial positions. Thus, a deft deployment of a racial-positionality methodology will shield scholarship against hasty judgements, particularly those that highlight denunciations of the racism of others while overlooking sneakier racializing ideologies that undergird that person's work or their own attitudes.

The multifacetedness of this methodology leaves no blind spots unchecked in the study of how the same person can hold several conflicting positions vis-à-vis assumed or projected racial difference while being the object of racism at the same time. Probing al-Fassi's racializing position towards people from Africa and the Caribbean opens up a space for a critical approach that does not stop at merely appreciating his pain under the yoke of colonial racism, looking only towards his explicitly conveyed accounts of sexual and economic exploitation of the populations of Gabon and surrounding areas. Analyzing racial positionality requires going one step further to examine how, in the same breath, al-Fassi's comments contain troubling prejudices that betray a deep-seated association of blackness with regression and primitivism, a view that harkens back to Charles Darwin and Arthur de Gobineau's works about evolution and the hierarchies of races (Darwin, 1883; Gobineau, 1853).

Al-Fassi provided an overgeneralized categorization of all Africans (excluding himself) in the colony under the category *al-sūd* (the blacks), and this is the first racial prejudice that al-Fassi commits throughout the book. It is true that, as was already indicated, he opposes *al-sūd* to *al-bīyḍ*, which can be taken as a mere reflection of the colonial division between the *blancs* and *noirs* in the colony. Nonetheless, his acceptance and deployment of such language reveals his own incorporation of these categories as a basis for distinction between these two populations. Al-Fassi chose blackness as a collective identifying marker for Africans, erasing their tribal, linguistic, religious, and social differences. At no point does he stop to acknowledge the rich and productive differences that exist between black Gabonese in the colony as he does, for instance, when he asserts his own different identities. The end result of this choice is his perception of a transtemporal and transcontextual *al-sūd*, which associates blackness with exploitation, poverty, disempowerment, ignorance, and lack of civilization. The *al-sūd* (the blacks), therefore, live in a state of nature, attuned to the *fiṭra* or "innate human nature" (al-Fassi, 38).

There is a difference between describing one's color and the use of that color to create a devastating and immutable image of a "black race" that transcends time and place. This image

becomes all the more powerful when the author has a high scholarly, moral, political, and social authority. By referring to everyone as *al-sūd*, al-Fassi concocts the image that they are all the same everywhere, thereby producing this assumption as a sort of "truth". Admittedly, the temporality and location of his analyses were marked by colonialism, but what stays with the reader is the counterfactual existence of a generic class of *al-sūd*, which definitely came home to roost in Morocco.

Al-Fassi's racializing attitudes also appear even in his critique of the failure of French colonialism to change the lives of the Africans in the colony. A modernist Salafi, who believed in the need to elevate Muslim societies so as to stay abreast of the developed world, al-Fassi deployed his understanding of civilization to judge the state of a different society through the lens of his understanding of modernization. Accordingly, he deconstructs the mismatch between the colonial state's ideals and its concrete achievements after one hundred and twenty years of direct colonization in West Africa. In particular, he takes to task the lack of any significant improvement in people's daily life. However, this critique is also segue into revealing his unconscious prejudice when he describes *al-sūd* as continuing to "live in complete primitivism," something that (in his eyes) only prolongs their enslavement (*musta'badīn*) by the French (al-Fassi, 66). In similar terms, al-Fassi refers to the "primitive human beings of this land" and describes the autochthones as being still "in the stage of barbarism and ignorance," blaming France, which ruled over them, for not "guiding them and training them to live a [proper] human life as such" (al-Fassi, 67).

Al-Fassi clearly believed that some races were more developed than others. He also believed in a type of social evolution, underlined by his call for France to civilize the black natives. His acceptance of *al-sūd*''s primitivism leads him to contrast French achievements in Gabon to the situation they inherited in North Africa. This comparison almost justifies French colonial intervention in Gabon while denying any need for colonialism in North Africa. On one hand, he concedes that "in this land [Gabon], the colonizer can be proud of his work [since it] has moved the people from one stage to another" (al-Fassi, 66). On the other, he asserts that North Africa owed nothing to France. Not only does it have "advanced and dynamic people," but also Europeans themselves "would not have surpassed it in the last century if it were not for [its] lack of material might" (al-Fassi, 66). It is all too clear here that al-Fassi believed that the people of North Africa belonged to an advanced race. This evolutionary thinking, al-Fassi tells us, is the result of a "deep reflection and faithful study of the nature of colonialism and the psychology of its practitioners"

(al-Fassi, 67). By this estimation, race is a determining factor in the existence of civilization and lack thereof, which further complicates al-Fassi's positions on colonial racial ideology. To be clear, al-Fassi did not mind colonialism if it were to civilize what he perceived as inferior races, like the *al-sūd* in Gabon.

These observations are further bolstered by al-Fassi's advancement of a culturalist explanation for the domination of Africans in the colony. Without saying much about local traditions and their cosmologies, al-Fassi simply attributes "the enslavement in which [the blacks] live now" to their lack of an ideology of liberation. Erasing histories of resistance, which clearly indicate African ideals of freedom, al-Fassi blames the victims of colonialism and offers Islam as a solution to "illuminate the minds of these autochthones" and help them "feel the meaning of freedom that Islam implants in the souls" (al-Fassi, 67).

Indeed, al-Fassi does engage critically with colonialism's exploitative nature throughout his account, but here he draws on cultural and racial terms to attribute the situation of the subjected to their culture's lack of any enshrinement of freedom. It is now established that culturalist explanations for complex phenomena open up space for racialization, for any talk about culture often attributes collective characteristics to a given group for the purpose of explaining mutually shared phenomena of human existence. *Mutatis mutandis*, this logic is not so different from the fallacious attributions of terrorism to Muslim cultures in the current context.

Similarly, al-Fassi describes a time when he attended an exhibit of local products. He writes that "one of the most beautiful things that were exhibited were half-body statues sculpted in stone and wood, and which had a pure *zinjī* (negro) quality" (al-Fassi, 95). A few pages later, he discusses a list of demands that the local population presented to the French governor of the colonies, which included a demand to end the whites' mistreatment of the blacks. Al-Fassi specifically appreciates the beauty of the products and elaborates on the Gabonese's demand to end the use of the "word negro, which [the French] lavished on the autochthones at every opportunity" (al-Fassi, 156). Therefore, al-Fassi could be said to have believed that a black culture

tacitly allowed French colonialism to be entrenched, all without heeding his own observations that this very same culture voiced articulations of revolt and the rejection of colonialism.[9]

Beyond culture and politics, al-Fassi's attitudes towards blackness are fraught with color-based prejudice. At one point, he records a conversation he had about black women with his interpreter, Massa, during which he urged al-Fassi to have a black girlfriend. Massa speaks from the experience of engaging local women sexually whereas al-Fassi only shares what he had heard from Moroccan merchants who married black women from Senegal and the Sudan. To distance himself from his interpreter, al-Fassi insists that his "taste considers whiteness a fundamental condition for a woman's beauty" before venturing into the unexpected territory of commenting on anatomical differences of female genitalia between white and black women (al-Fassi, 88). We now know that the fetishization of black women is immersed in racist thinking about exoticized bodies. This exoticization is furthered in al-Fassi's observation that "black women have an unparalleled sexual drive, and I heard that their intercourse lasts for forty minutes or longer" (al-Fassi, 155). Although he rejects blackness as beauty, al-Fassi still fetishizes black female bodies, reproducing his friends' mythical knowledge of black women's sexuality. This prejudice was probably the reason he comments that "the blacks here have no understanding of the meaning of love" (al-Fassi, 96).

Al-Fassi's racializing narrative has even broader implications if we take into consideration the fact that he keeps referring to his exile as "*hādhihi al-arḍ al-sawdā*" (this black land) throughout the book. Although the expression is open to multiple interpretations, the recurrence of the phrase indicates a state of mind in which everything is associated with blackness, and this casts blackness as an inherently bad condition. Both the land and its people are described as black, and blackness becomes synonymous with all the ails that al-Fassi experienced in his exile. Nevertheless, this negative blackness was only matched by positive blackness when a black person in question is Muslim and speaks Arabic. This last section will discuss how al-Fassi's racializing attitude was recalibrated when he encountered Muslims, further complicating his racial positions.

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[9] Al-Fassi does, however, draw attention to the fact that the primary school in the village where he was detained graduated its first group of graduates from primary school in one hundred years since French presence in Gabon. See 123.

Islam as a Deracializing Force

The French empire allowed al-Fassi to meet several Muslims from Senegal, Dahomey (current day Benin), French Sudan (Mali), and Chad. These are encounters in which his negative attitudes toward blackness entirely disappear. As a scholar, al-Fassi probably saw these people as an extension of the imaginary Islamic *ummah* that was bound by Islamic faith. Moreover, al-Fassi did not speak French well enough to communicate with the natives, and meeting people who spoke Arabic allowed him to have meaningful conversations. This positive disposition vis-à-vis black Muslims is easily noticeable in his happiness about these meetings as well as the absence of any negative comments about the people. These Muslims gave another face to the colony, and al-Fassi's encounters with them elicited a nuanced position concerning blackness.

Al-Fassi's first encounter was with Moulim Adial, a "black sheikh" with whom he conversed in Arabic. Moulim was from Chad and lived in Pouy, where he started a mosque for the twenty Muslims who lived there. Al-Fassi writes that he enjoyed his company because "he was the first Arabic-speaking Muslim" he met (al-Fassi, 33). This positive attitude is again reflected in his discussion of his encounter with Yusuf Suleyman, the Imam of Lambaréné, who also had a shop in the village. Al-Fassi's description of Yusuf stresses the fact that he was brown, Muslim, and sympathetic, but he did not know Arabic very well (al-Fassi, 39). Yusuf had read some of al-Fassi's "poems, and some of [his] writings" and informed him of his knowledge that "he was one of the major Moroccan 'ulama'" (al-Fassi, 39). Both Moulim and Yusuf were treated by al-Fassi as interlocutors. Their color is mentioned in passing, but they are not called *al-sūd*, which again complicates this term in this context.

The bond of Islam is particularly conspicuous as a deracializing force when Yusuf tells al-Fassi about the school they opened for Muslim children, in turn inviting him to meet the community. Al-Fassi responds that the "circumstances do not allow it," but he one day hopes to be "free in this land in order to meet our brothers" (al-Fassi, 40). This is the only context in which al-Fassi talks about brotherhood with other people outside Moroccan nationalists. Islam overrides color-based racial difference, and the larger community it creates is blind to any distinctions that might divide Muslims. As a good Muslim, al-Fassi effortlessly behaves in accordance with Islamic faith in his dealings with his African brethren.

These encounters, which continue throughout the first section of the book, have several notable traits. First, they are lengthy and provide many details about the people, including their names, countries of origin, and their occupations. For example, he writes about his encounter with Sharif Mahfoud, a Senegalese Muslim merchant in Mouila, who informed al-Fassi of the fact that he was one of two Muslims. In addition to himself, there is a Senegalese carpenter who is described as not walking the "correct" Islamic path. Second, al-Fassi's demeanor is usually quite happy when these encounters take place. For instance, he dutifully records a time when five Senegalese soldiers from the colonial army visit him in his home. He writes that two of them participated in the Rif War (1921-1926), which indicated that they knew Morocco well. In this case, al-Fassi does something that he rarely has done for anyone: serving them "cookies and urg[ing] them to stick to Islam" (al-Fassi, 45). This also marks the first time that he declares that he felt "the degree of Islamic bond more than ever before" (al-Fassi, 45). Racial difference is relegated to oblivion, and al-Fassi is more occupied with strengthening ties with other Muslims. Indeed, racial prejudice holds no place in his Islamic vision of the world.

Islam and Arabic together appear to serve as a transracial lingua franca that connects al-Fassi to the Muslims in the colony. Islam works as a deracializing force that prevents al-Fassi from commenting on other Muslims despite the difference in their skin color. The reader receives no sense of al-Fassi's complaints or criticism of black Muslims in the text. Although several of them worked for the colonial army and fought against his people in Morocco, their participation in the colonial wars do not elicit any racializing comments. Here again, we have to distinguish between the secular al-Fassi who drew on his worldly knowledge to critique colonialism and to reflect on race and al-Fassi the *'alim*, who had to serve as a role model for other Muslims. These positionalities show that the same man who racialized the autochthones in the colony is capable of maintaining an entirely racialization-free discourse about black Muslims during the same period and in the same territory.

Conclusion

This examination of al-Fassi's multidirectional racialization has demonstrated how this nationalist figure occupied three different (and near contradictory) positionalities: a victim of racism, a denouncer of racialization, and a proponent of a racialist discourse. These different positions did not cancel out each other, but they rather coexisted and informed each other within

the same text. Being an object of French racialization did not prevent al-Fassi from both denouncing French racialization of black Africans while producing his own racialist discourse about them at the same time. The article has shown that only an examination of the different positions one occupies can facilitate a better understanding of racialization at large. By using a multidirectional and critical approach of racialization in order to study al-Fassi's memoir, this article has drawn attention to the multiple levels at which racialization can happen and the maintain awareness of its sneakier aspects. Al-Fassi was a true denouncer of colonial racism *avant l'heure*, but a further investigation of his own positions about African blacks —which stem from his own white and privileged status—reveals his racialist tendencies. The two are not mutually exclusive, and scholarship should pay attention to the different positions of racialization.

Only a multipositional study of this concept can fully reveal the different racializing positions one inhabits. As is shown by al-Fassi's deracialized discourse about black Muslims, racial relations and racialist discourses are not unidirectional. Rather, they differ and acquire more complication the deeper one's awareness grows concerning the categories that constitute any given situation informed by racism. A situational analysis that pays attention to relationships, language, and shifting connections between these different elements is a crucial step toward a methodologically and discursively compelling analysis of racism in Tamazgha.

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