

Herstory: Racialization and Mediation in Colonial Morocco

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This essay¹ is both a testimony and a record of unwritten stories. It is a travel back in time that I am undertaking by activating the work of memory, or rather fragments of it. Most of my memories of Khnata bint el Bukhari, the woman for whom I devote this incomplete biography, come from second-hand, fragmented, and contradictory anecdotes and testimonies that were most certainly shaped, and even distorted, by my own traumatic and deep connection to her exile. I weave her story with that of her friend Hajja Guessoussa, a former slave who lived in Fes up to the mid 1970s, to show some of the social mediations that displacement, and blackness enabled in colonial Morocco. I sketched these two biographies to discuss the varied meaning of blackness and the symbolic spaces it enabled and forged.

Khnata, my grandmother, migrated from Tafilelt, in the Southeast of Morocco to the Northern city of Fes, where I lived in her company for the first years of my childhood; a presence I lost when I was ten years old. Tafilelt, where she was born on an unknown date, was one of the first and last bastions of Moroccan resistance to the French armed conquest, which started at the beginning of the twentieth century and ended by the mid of 1930s. By 1934 most parts of this vast oasis fell to the stronghold of the French artillery, otherwise named, the ‘pacification campaign.’

Consequently, an unprecedented movement of outmigration took place whereby dispossessed, hungry population started to migrate to the North, notably to the city of Fes. Old ties between both places made Fes a destination of choice for migrants from Tafilelt. Both places were linked as key commercial poles of trans-Saharan trade, between the 8th to the 14th century, and hence shared commercial and ethnic ties. Less than three hundred miles separate old

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Sijilmasa/Rissani in the South from Fes in the North, but the chains of the Middle and High Atlas Mountains formed the true physical barrier for a smooth circulation, notably for a woman traveling with toddlers in the 1930s Morocco.

These old commercial ties between the two regions were expanded by a large military expedition in the 17th century when Sultan Moulay Rachid, the founder of the ruling Alaoui Dynasty, enlisted Filala, the inhabitants of Tafilalet, in a campaign to subject Fes to his authority. Many of them stayed and assembled in their own quarter, named Qasbat Filala. As a result of these old ties, Fes, the very Moorish, imperial city, became a favored destination for entire families from the Moroccan South, who were mostly black.

I do not have a full account of Khnata’s itinerary from Rissani to Fes. Only pieces that my memory patched together while listening to family members telling and retelling herstory of displacement. Equipped with memory and small narratives, this biography, which is a travel back in time, allows me to revisit the gendered mediations that Khnata’s origin and life story enabled as well as the hidden acts of kindness, compassion, women’s solidarities, and agency, that were part of displaced women’s journey and life trajectory. In the conclusion of my article, I weave Khnata’s biography with that of her friend Hajja Guessoussa to show the social mediation that their skin completion and social status enabled in the imperial city of Fes. I collect herstory from fragments that family members and their friends inscribed in my memory as a child, and which I kept revisiting as an adult. Significant doubts and hesitation run across this essay that I am not writing like a sociologist or historian, seeking to argue and prove, but as a woman who has been haunted by several family members’ stories of displacement and exile during colonial times. But the sociologist and feminist scholar in me are also eager to use herstory as a point of juncture for revisiting some of the larger racialized, classed, and gendered dynamics in Morocco between the 1930s and 1960s. Khnata’s displacement stands for all the women pushed away from their villages, mountains, and oases in colonial Morocco and forced to go on unfamiliar roads, seeking refuge in cities. By weaving herstory with that of Hajja Guessoussa, I am attending to the colonial violence and the losses it engendered, but also to the hidden acts of kindness, and generosity that made these journeys possible. How were women able to rebuild new lives according to familiar and unfamiliar codifications of genealogies, place, bodies, and labor?

Khnata was a widow from Rissani, the old capital of the Tafilelt oasis. Rissani contains the ruins of Sijilmasa, the old prosperous trans-Saharan trading center with historical ties with the commercial city of Fes some 400 kilometers north. Rissani is however best known as the site where the shrine of the 17th-century symbolic founder of the ruling Alawi dynasty, Moulay Ali Echarif rests. It was also the destination of Sultan Moulay Rachid, his son, 1666’s military expedition to overthrow the Saadien dynasty. Old signs of military conquest, fortresses, old zaouias and shrines still bear signs of this past and feed the collective memory of Rissani and its 350 qsours, or fortified villages.

The eldest of three brothers and one sister, Khnata lived in qsar Laqsiba before her move to qsar Mzguida. Her father owned an antique store in Souq Rissani, the biggest market in the region, and like most of his family members and neighbors in qsar Laqsiba, he owned palm trees and kept a livestock that survived his death, but not the passing of time. A grandson is still holding on to the store, but land no longer yields crops, and though still standing the palm trees have barely survived drought, disease, migrating caregivers, and state neglect.

I did not witness these changing times as a child in the early 1970s. I rejoiced on the moving sandy hills and enjoyed listening to women’s chatting at the communal well, inside of lqsar. Lqsiba was a village shared by several of Khnata’s family members, including her own brothers and their extended families, her aunts, nephews, and nieces. I delightfully moved from one home to the other, played with the rabbits that women traditionally kept on the roofs and learned how to make a few items with folded palm leaves that women crafted in the long summer afternoons. I learned how to love this place through these people’s eyes, but not through my grandmother’s who was no longer with us.

The gender dynamics were fascinating, and the division of labor was very strict both in and outside of the qṣūr (plural of qṣar). It was understood that the eldest women, mothers, and mothers-in-law, had tremendous power over the youngest and were a source of authority with the men as well. Younger women rarely left the fortified village, and if they did, they were accompanied with the eldest. Even as a child I became intrigued by the world where everything seemed to be fixed and no mistake authorized. As an outsider, I could enjoy the freedom of movement in ways that were not possible in Fes the city of my birth, and thus, I looked forward to every trip to Tafilelt, until I started to challenge my aunt Habiba’s unshakeable conviction about Tafilelt being the

ultimate vacation destination. My current research on land rights reconciled me with these memories though not with these places that now feel lifeless. The passing of time and the elderly, the outmigration of the youngest, the vanishing rurality, and dried up palm trees and land are also obvious signs of irreversible changes that impacted the place and the feeling of loss that these places return to me during my visits.

Complicating her Blackness

Most of Khnata’s family members were of a dark skin completion, something they considered to denote belonging and geographic origin, rather than racial difference. Thus, I am hesitant to call Khnata a black woman, a label I adopted in contact with White feminist epistemological categories, as a scholar from the racialized global south. I am also hesitant to impose black, as a racial identifier for Khnata, and for understanding the social dynamics in Morocco in terms that appropriate North American categories, and the black experience in America. This hesitation is complicated by own experience of being a black woman in Morocco, a positionality that colored some of the spaces I inhabited or passed by, but never my sense of belonging. To most my family members, blackness is geography, not race, a geography they proudly claimed. Thus, in this incomplete biography of Khnata I want to suspend the debate about ‘race-as racism’ in Morocco while being aware of the currency it has lately gained both in scholarly work and activist circles.

Anti-black racism rose into global consciousness with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the U.S. For scholars of the Middle East, however, the BLM reignited broad academic debates, notably after the infamous death of George Floyd in Minnesota at the hands of the police, which was attributed to a phone call made by an employee working in a store owned by a man originally from the Middle East, in Minneapolis, in May 2020. The raging protests that rocked cities across the globe were followed by scholarly engagement in the U.S with issues of race and racism in the Middle East and its diasporas. Black Iranian, Turkish, and Arabic-speaking North Africans vocalized their experiences of being black in white-passing societies. In North Africa, the images aired by CNN in 2017 of one of the underground slave auctions for Sub-Saharan migrants in Libya brought the traumatizing memories of slavery in the region and its everyday symbolic and material trace.

In the biography I sketch here of Khnata, I am not transferring this debate to the realities of the 1930s Moroccan south. The multifaceted connections that racialized bodies forged during the colonial struggle and the deep social transformations and irreversible movement of people speak to the contingencies of racial identifications and labeling in colonial and postcolonial Morocco. In addition, one must also recall the different realities that blackness evoked and the range of social positions its bearers occupied in Tafilalt in the 1930s. Blackness encompassed (formerly) enslaved peasantry, known as Haratin, black skinned-Amazighs, black Arab landowners, *Shorfas*, whose family tree goes back to prophet Mohamed, ‘*Alims*, religious scholars, and Sufis, mystic guides (Boum, 2021). Blackness could be a common denominator to all these social categories, differentiated by ethnic belonging, property-owning, and the prestige of knowledge and lineage. Consequently, blackness had shifting meanings complicating any conventional understanding of racial categories as linked to lower social status, or of blackness as tied to the legacy of slavery as the predominant frameworks make it seem (El Hamel, 2012).

For instance, up to the 1970s, in the black slave-owning city of Fes, ethnicity and rural/urban divide stood as important demarcating lines for marriage alliances and kinship, while black and light-skinned Fāsīs entered marriages and other types of neighborly and business arrangements. In this city, dark-skinned people from Tafilelt passed for Shorfa, to gain respect in a place where that kind of genealogy was taken very seriously. Hence, the boundaries of racialization, enslavement, and prestige can be mind-boggling in the case of dark-skinned people from Tafilelt, because of their historical and sometimes even ethnic proximity with the Royal family, the Alaoui dynasty. Hence blackness was enmeshed with other markers including ethnicity, class, kinship, genealogy, and the prestige of knowledge (Boum, 2021).

Destination

Migrants from Tafilelt, identifiable by their darker complexion (though not all of them), their clothing, and most importantly, by their Arabic dialect, and uncompromising personalities chose Fes as a major destination. In the 1960s and 1970s, Fes had a specific lexicon-- still in circulation-- to denote dark-skinned people as “Sahrawi”; a signifier pointing to the racialized geography of a lighter skinned-north, and darker-skinned south. But more derogatory terms were in use, including *hartani*, a direct reference to slavery, and *drāwi*, referring to the vast *dar ‘a* region in the Southeast. *Drāwi* is a term that can be used interchangeably with Sahraoui or black. All

these labels pointed to location, but also to the mental geography of racism, which was clearly expressed by labels like ‘*Abd*, and *khādem*, used to designate enslaved men and women but could be extended to denote all dark-skinned people. ‘*Azzi* and ‘*Azziya*, equivalent of the N-word, are probably most common in regular conversations about dark-skinned people whether Moroccans or not. In all these formulations the social imaginary of race was constructed around a dark southern provenance, though nuanced by all the variables I introduced earlier (El Guabli, 2021).

This complex codification of class, genealogy, and distinction in Bourdieu’s sense was written all over the cartography of Fes, a city turned inwards but open outward on its rural peripheries (Mezine 1986). The city’s ‘original’ inhabitants lived in the medina, which became the ‘old city’ after the French built their own ‘modern city’ outside the impenetrable ramparts of the medina. Fes’s original population lived sheltered behind high and thick walls, and gated quarters that closed at night, a practice kept by the French to subject the resistant city to colonial power.

Fes extends in a valley fed by multiple water springs and rivers that overlook the Middle Atlas Mountains, south, and the Rif Mountains North. Private gardens in its outskirts, fruit trees in homes, and arable land owned by Fasi families, granted the city its relative food security, before the 1944 food crisis driven by the French participation in World War II. Despite these close ties of the city with its most immediate countryside, Amazigh and Arabic-speaking neighboring populations rarely resided within the ramparts of the Medina. Rather, migrants from specific places, had their own quarters, sometimes carrying the name of their place of origin, like Qasbat Chrarda, Qasbat Chraga, and so on. Newcomers like Filala, had their own Qasba, Qasbat Filala, a 13th century military fortress that Sultan Rachid, turned into a settlement for Filala, who joined his military expedition to Fes. Qasbat Filala is located close to the 13th century Royal Palace of Fes Djdid, where the Jewish quarter was also located. The proximity of the palace and the centrality of blackness to the Alawi dynasty’s protocol of ruling (El Hamel, 2012) attracted hundreds of Filala to Fes Jdid, a neighborhood still carrying both its black and Jewish identity.

These perfectly ethnicized, and racialized geographies did not mean that people did not intermingle in markets, pilgrimage to saints, cemeteries, mosques, artisans’ workshops, and nationalist circles of resistance. In fact, it was easy for migrant women to penetrate Fāsī homes to perform multiple types of tasks for their survival.

The Departure

Khnata decided to flee Tafilet after the big famine that hit the region in 1936 and 1937, and after losing two children, including one to the famine. Khnata was married away from her Rissani home to a wealthy landowner in Qsar Mezguida, on the road to the famous dunes of Merzouga. Her in-laws were Arabic-speaking members of the q̄sar, which they shared with Ait Atta Amazigh and Sherifian families. There is no confirmed date of the age in which she was wedded to Abdellah, the oldest son of the landowner, Abdelmalek. However, what was established in the Tafilelt region was that pre-teens were already promised to families as daughters-in-law for a marriage that should be consummated when the female child reached puberty. Then, Khnata’s marriage might have taken place sometime in the early 1920s.

The architecture of the q̄sūr, as ramparts, the consecrated norms of gendered division of space, amplified by colonial violence, impeded younger married women from leaving their homes or working in the fields, a task that devolved on men among the Arabic-speaking populations of Tafilelt. Hence Khnata’s transition from her family’s home to her new home must have been the only significant trip she undertook, as a pre-teen. As a young bride, Khnata would not have been able to venture outside of the gate of her bridal home, unless accompanied by an older woman, as her guardian. Those public appearances were also most likely limited to the inner circles of the Qsar and concerned mostly family obligations and ceremonies.

By the time Khnata had her first children, the French were already gaining more territories through military operations and civil warfare, which included demolishing the complex and ancestral water canal system, bombing weekly markets, and bulldozing crops, according to the oral stories I have collected. And according to Khnata’s remaining son, to fully disarm the population, the French ordered every family to deliver their ammunitions in numbers that exceeded the number of rifles owned by the adult men of the household. To comply with the French regulations, some families started to deliver arms they purchased to meet their quota. Khnata’s father-in-law, Abdelmalek, mortgaged part of his land to his Amazigh neighbors. Under these conditions of war, debt, and a looming famine, Khnata’s husband decided to leave Tafilelt in search of work in the neighboring Algerian south. A few months later, she received the devastating news that her husband never made it to his destination.

Khnata became a widow and a mother of six children whom she started to lose to the famine. The death of her father-in-law doubled her loss, notably when she and her children became

obligated to be under and accept the authority of her brother-in-law, an authority who was secretly despised and rejected. Patriarchal protection worked as long as her father-in-law was alive, after his death she also lost the remaining estate, appropriated by her in-laws.

I have little information about how she organized her departure, or how old she was when she decided to leave. She had already lost three children: one daughter to the famous famine, another one to her long trip to Fes, and a blind son fell in a well and died before her departure. She left with four children, in footsteps of other family members who preceded her to this city and whom she hoped to find. Once her trip was planned, she sought help from a member of her family and from an Amazigh close friend of her deceased husband. The two men sheltered her at dawn until she became outside of the reach of her in-laws. One, or both men accompanied her to Risani from which her journey and self-exile were to start. Her first memory of cash in hand must be when that cousin handed her some money after selling his coat, *Selham*, to support her trip.

I imagine her leaving through the obscure labyrinths of Qsar Mezguida, a place I could not bear on my regular childhood visits to my deceased grandfather’s deteriorating house and the scrutinizing looks of other children whose language escaped me. I found Qsar Mezguida suffocating on many levels. First, I could not leave the rampart on my own nor could I play with other kids outside, as a girl. Second, I was constantly lost in its labyrinths, and the place just filled me with a sense of uneasiness and loss. And probably without any knowledge of the acts of kindness and generosity that had accompanied Khnata’s departure from Mezguida, I would not have borne even the short visits my aunt insisted on making to ‘our’ grandfather’s crumbling home.

However, acts of generosity and kindness must have been the only hope Khnata was cultivating while thinking about the uncertainty of her long journey. Her itinerary was made of sandy pathways, unpaved rocky roads, mountains and rivers, friendly and less friendly inhabitants, and nomadic groups, a path where Amazigh was the dominant language, a language she and her children did not speak. But as the norms of patriarchal protection wanted it, her crossing of these unknown territories was almost paved by people who hosted her, as *dīft Allah*, Guest of God. They provided her with a guide, *zittāt* to escort her through the problematic geographies and unbreakable ethnic boundaries of the High and Middle Atlas Mountains, those harshly separating and deeply linking Tafilelt to Fes and Meknes. Her late son, Abderahman, who passed away in 2010, recalled their river crossing for days, generating what he called a lifetime injury to his back.

After months of crossing the family reached their destination, probably on a bus or a truck for the last part of the trip. None of Khnata’s remaining children was old enough during that trip to provide details. Upon arrival she sat in the street, surrounded by three children, including one she was going to lose in Fes to an undiagnosed disease.

I do not want to delve into her feelings at that particular moment. Was she waiting for someone? Did she have an address, a name? Or was she waiting for another miracle? What was she thinking about? A prayer might have been on her lips since all the accounts I received about her sketched a portrait of a pious woman with a strong faith. She never missed a prayer, including the long prayers at night. I experienced her in the late 1960s as a calm, but very anxious woman, but revered by those around her. She rarely spoke, hardly ever smiled, but would say a silent prayer, and suffered from asthma, probably because of all the losses she endured.

When she arrived in Fes, Khnata was most certainly dressed in her black *yzar*, a long and wide unsewn cloth, wrapping her whole body, which indicated her origins from Tafilelt. A passerby noticed her. A sharif, Mr Alaoui, originally from Tafilelt, but whose fairly well-to-do family had been established in the city for a long time. He recognized Khnata’s origin from her *yzar* and was probably touched by her manifest desperation. After exchanging a few sentences with her and knowing she had no precise address, except the name of a family member who undertook that same itinerary to Fes before her, the man invited her to walk with him to his house. Acts of generosity of this kind were not uncommon in colonial Morocco where dispossession, displacement, and colonial violence in the countryside set in motion a significant movement of migration to cities and acts of generosity and solidarity among people collectively and undistinguishably engaging in the resistance movement.

Mr. Alaoui’s family lived in a residential neighborhood adjacent to Bab Boujloud, the main gate to Fes from Tafilelt. He was married and had a grown-up educated daughter who developed a close relationship with the newcomers. Khnata and her daughter stayed in the home while Mr. Alaoui took Khnata’s two sons to artisan’s workshops for training. Eager to learn how to read and write, Khanat’s youngest son, my father Abderrahman, started to receive some literacy courses from the daughter of Mr. Alaoui of whom he kept fond memories.

Khnata’s entry through the ramparts of the old medina of Fes was unique. The Moorish city was the place of birth of one of Morocco’s most influential urban, commercial, and intellectual

classes. Its population, both Jewish and Muslim, had a strong sense of belonging to a prolific Andalusian past and took pride in their Arab, sharifian or simply Andalusian ancestry. Hence, the feeling of otherness loomed over the new and old comers and was experienced by many of us in contact with the Fāsī who claimed these privileged genealogies and backgrounds.

Khnata’s meeting with Mr. Alaoui took her directly to the heart of residential Fes medina. She did not go through neighborhoods where newcomers lived. She was immediately immersed into the social fabric and cultural norms of a city, she had to decode. After the departure of Mr. Alaoui to Casablanca, where the Fāsī bourgeoisie was moving, Khnata settled in a rental room in a middle-class neighborhood, where she lived with an extended family composed of a couple and their three married sons. Khnata had accepted to fetch water from the well on the first floor to the three upper levels that composed the house as part of her rental arrangement. She spent several months taking the staircase up and down responding to several family members’ needs, before her hardship raised the concerns of Zineb, one of the sisters-in-law. Zineb took her secretly aside and suggested she should find an easier path for survival. She gave Khnata used clothes, embroidered linen, and provided her with family names and addresses. Khnata would tour these families to sell these items and collect others that she would propose to her potential buyers. Zineb mentored Khnata about pricing, quality, class differentiation, and filiation. She gave her the prices for the items she sought to sell and taught her how to make a profit. Khnata could broker a new situation in the house, and was able to leave behind the water shore for her new job.

Mediating Taste

Khnata’s freedom of movement was only enabled by her outsider’s status, as a migrant working woman, not bound by rules of respectability that kept wealthy, and middle-class Fāsī women mostly indoors (Mernissi 1991). The gendered division of space in her city of adoption was not much different from those she left behind in Tafilelt. In Fes, rules of secrecy and privacy worked to regulate both men’s and women’s behavior, though with greater intensity and order for women. These rules translated into the architecture of the house, in which a front and a backdoor, *kharaja*, usually opened to a marginal street in a different neighborhood authorizing more privacy in peoples’ movement in and out of their homes without facing the gaze of their immediate

neighbors. Enslaved and migrant women were the means through which Fasi women forged ties with the outside world.

Khnata’s activity was not simply about trading items. It was also about exchanging taste and enabling women to engage in economic activity, either for some financial independence or for purely economic reasons, to face the difficult colonial conditions. Precious fabrics like silk, linen, cotton from West Africa, and hand-embroidered items, as well as dresses incrustated with golden thread, that Fāsī women took pride in bringing home as brides, were to circulate in a way that kept their original owner as well as the buyer anonymous. There were personal items like garments that women wore a few times and were ready to exchange for something else or to let go for cash. Highly codified, these exchanges had to be mapped out on a path that does not reveal their origin or final destination. Hence this recycling of taste and circulation of class values were bounded up by a strict genealogical code in which garments were to circulate outside of the particular lineage from which they had originated. There were also the high-end and low-end items that Khnata needed to select in different showings to different women, this time based not on lineage, but on the class background, marital status, and age of her clients.

Though khnata became well-known as *dellāla*, a salesperson/sales mediator, her visits needed to remain private, and different showing times needed to be set in order to preserve privacy in extended families, where relatives and sisters-in-law shared the same home. She needed to develop a taste for fabrics and match them with women’s status and wealth, which required her immersion in *al-qa’ida*, something I would translate into the *unbreakable*, normative ways of doing, saying, and being. Selling and buying were not a matter of routine transactions but were acts embedded in the social norms of an interlinked Fāsī society in which families were related through webs of marriage alliances, kinship, knowledge, and business. Trust and privacy were key notably in situations where the woman is trying to back her husband’s crumbling revenue sometimes without his knowledge.

Some of Khnata’s wealthy clients, who became her lifetime friends, were black or mixed-race Fāsī. The Fāsī merchant class embraced blackness as part of its own social fabric, and not only through the history of the city as an important slave-trading center. The most well-off Fāsī men did conceive of children with in-house slaves, but some did marry far away from home in Senegal and Cote d’Ivoire and brought their black wives and children with them to Fes. Blackness

was almost a dominant feature among judges, governors, and state officials, themselves slave-owning, until Morocco’s independence. Thus, racial identity did not have a uniform sense, nor was blackness necessarily identified with otherness, and the experience of slavery or exclusion. For all these categories class, gender, and social status were determining factors, not skin color. Thus, the cartography of racial identities in the city of Fes was enmeshed in overlapping symbolic, ethnic, and material orders.

I remember Khnata folding clothes and pressing with her hands, or with a stone to iron them. I believe I only witnessed the degradation of her activity, after most of her wealthy Fāsī clients left Fes for Casablanca after their post-independence flight to the new industrial city. Instead of a satchel, she only had *rezma*, a cloth that she tied around carefully folded and well-cared for clothes. Though I lived in Khnata’s company for nine years before her death, I do not recall having been to one of her showings, and I do not believe she would want me there. My schooling was a major source of satisfaction to her to such an extent that she waited at the school gate to get immediate news after every major exam at my elementary school. That said, I did go to visit her with my aunt Habiba, who carried the *rezma* for her mother to and from the women’s market towards the end of her life. Khnata took a spot in the woman’s part of the market in Baba Sagma, outside of the Blue Gate, Bab Boujloud. Her clients were then recruited mostly from that neighborhood’s working-class inhabitants, most of whom were also migrants from Tafilet, or impoverished people from the city. I visited her several times until her asthma got worse and she could no longer take the one-hour climb of the hill separating her home from Boujloud, where the market was situated.

Mediating Norms

In that market, next to Khnata sat her close friend, Hajja Guessoussa, a formerly enslaved person who preferred her independence over staying with her former owners. Many former slaves stayed with the families that had owned them before their manumission for various reasons, including aging, lack of reasonable options, and the depth of the ties they developed with women and children in the families. Hajja Guessoussa chose to leave even as she continued to carry the name of her owners, the Guessouss family. She even performed Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which only well-off people could afford in the 1960s. Hajja Guessoussa was a close friend to Khnata and survived her death by several years, which is the reason why I got to know more about

her life. Hajja Guessoussa was almost the same age as Khnata, and both looked quite similar in their physical features. And though they came from different universes, they were both the product of disrupted personal histories and dislocation. Curiously enough, through these histories, enslaved women, like Hajja Guessoussa, could become the repositories of an impressive capital that I will now identify.

Beside her market activity, Hajja Guessoussa was also *nggāfa*, a bride dresser, an essential function in the Fāsī society (Salime, 1994). Already in his *Description of Africa*, Hassan el Ouazane, the 16th century Northern Moroccan captured, known as Leo Africanus, noted the presence of these women in the city of Fes. The practice had predated the colonial era during which colonial writer Roger Letourneau wrote his doctoral thesis *La vie quotidienne à Fes en 1900* (1965), and devoted one chapter to the *ngaffāt*, these formerly enslaved people who dressed the bride. Though written in the 1940s, Roger Letourneau used the year 1900 in his title, suggesting that nothing had changed in Fes since 1900. He spoke about the *neggafāt* with little admiration, clearly imposing his colonial racial lens.

Neggafāt were freed, but their masters charged them with the task of promoting their wealth and image through their activity as *nggafāt*. The latter managed an impressive capital made of expensive garments, gold, fine stones, and heavy jewelry, including golden belts and crowns encrusted with precious stones, necessary for dressing the bride during the seven-day marriage ceremonies. The *neggafāt* were an organized profession, working in groups of four; each group carried the name of the master who entrusted them with his capital. They did more than dress the bride by handling the symbolic capital related to the ceremonies and their most open and secrete rituals. Accountable to their host family for perfectly presenting the bride, they had also to represent with no-fault their master by making good use of his capital, both material and symbolic/reputation and status. Le Tourneau (1956) described them as both feared and despised because of all the secrets they kept and the codes they mastered and controlled. Consulted on marriage issues by other women who sought their opinion about a potential son or daughter-in-law, they were entrusted with many family secrets that they could keep or risk disclosing. One of the most delicate missions they undertook was to supervise the first intimate contact between the bride and groom during their wedding night. Because of the hierarchies and division of labor their professional organization required, the *neggafāt* did not take on this task but appointed the woman, *guellasa*, the nuptial assistant who would be the bride companion, for a few nights. She would

assist young and presumably inexperienced couples during their first sexual encounter according to the norms of soft behavior, on the one hand, and obedience on the other. After giving all the necessary instructions, the woman stayed at the entrance, close enough to intervene and far enough to provide intimacy. She broke the news about the bride’s virginity and could even keep the secret in connivance with the groom. After all, it was just about a few drops that she discreetly showed to the mother of the groom who broke the news around her, before taking that same proof to the mother of the bride early that morning, for another big ceremony in which *guellasa* was awarded generous gifts in cash. Even as a girl’s virginity was her male relatives’ honor, this world of unbreakable patriarchal order was organized by mothers or female relatives and supervised by black women.

After the independence of Morocco, these roles shifted to other women who owned the capital to pursue the profession of *neggafa* independently. The *guellasa*’s role also vanished during the 1970s, after a new generation of men and women started to escape social control by inventing their modes of engagement and making the intimacy of the couple strictly private.

Conclusion

Even if Khnata and Hajja Guessoussa’s blackness did not point to the same racialized positionality, they served as mediators for the movement of other women, their economic activity, and their tastes in perfect mastery of gendered norms of respectability and honor of secrecy. I sketched these two biographies to discuss the varied meaning of blackness and the symbolic spaces it enabled and forged. Khnata’s story illustrates a gendered organization of space and labor and women’s interracial solidarities. Her friend Hajja Guessoussa was one of the many former enslaved women who lived in Fes after the independence and whose stories were lost to time and forgetting. Some had names; others were called *dada*, or *khadem*, when they lived with the children and grandchildren of their former owners, even as they were aging and performing no tasks.

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