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The Body of the Condemned: Memory and Resistance in Abdellatif Laâbi's Carceral Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The Years of Lead represent one of the darkest periods in Moroccan postcolonial history. This era, however, has generated a rich corpus of carceral literature that gained prominence in the 1990s due to the relatively open political climate that tolerated dissenting voices and allowed the revisiting of the nation's troubled past. Abdellatif Laâbi's carceral poetry, while part of this broader corpus, stands apart for its immediacy and distinctive corporeal poetics. Through close readings of his key carceral texts, particularly "Tu parles ou on te tue," "Soleils aux arrêts," *L'arbre de fer fleurit*, and "Lettres à mes amis d'outre-mer," this article examines how Laâbi deploys the body as a dual site of memory and resistance, drawing on Fanon's concept of the "colonized body" and Foucault's notion of the "carceral archipelago." The article argues that Laâbi's carceral poetry constructs a new political imagination, positioning the imprisoned body along two interconnected axes: as a living archive that preserves Morocco's collective memory and contests official historiography, and as a locus of resistance where solidarity, agency, and secular mysticism enable transcendence. This dual articulation of embodied memory and resistance moves beyond pursuing vindictive justice to forge a reconciliatory vision, at once rooted in the past while projecting new horizons toward future democratic possibilities.

KEYWORDS

Carceral
Laâbi
Poetry
Corporeal Poetics
Body
Collective Memory
Resistance

Introduction

Morocco's Years of Lead continue to mark the nation's collective memory. Alongside the documented cases of systematic persecution and forced disappearances exists a literary archive that resists historical erasure. The Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi stands among the most prominent voices who emerged from this period of state violence. His writings constitute not retrospective testimonies composed after release, but rather a literature produced under the material constraints of imprisonment itself, marked by the immediacy of corporeal duress and aesthetic defiance. His carceral poetry epitomizes what could be termed "corporeal poetics," a mode of literary production wherein the imprisoned body functions simultaneously as the surface of state violence and as an agent of creative defiance, historical witnessing, and political subjectivity.

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While Laâbi's carceral corpus has garnered significant critical attention for its place within his broader lit

erary trajectory, poetic representations of imprisonment have received comparatively less scholarly focus. Notable studies include Andy Stafford's "Poésie dans les prisons du roi-Dialectique du solaire dans l'œuvre carcérale d'Abdellatif Laâbi" (2021) and Camille Lotz's "La ville carcérale ou le tombeau de la mémoire: étude des premiers recueils d'Abdellatif Laâbi et Tahar Djaout (1960-1980)," both of which explore memory, civic consciousness, and metaphorical representations of carcerality. The corporeal dimension of his work remains, however, relatively underexplored, with two noteworthy exceptions: Victor Reinking's "Reading the Body Politic in the Prison Writings of Abdellatif Laâbi" (2016) and Anna Cavness's "Inscriptions of the Sovereign Body in Abdellatif Laâbi" (2013). While these studies valuably attend to the materiality of violence in Laâbi's work, they tend to treat the body as descriptive content rather than as an analytical framework, missing how his corporeal poetics systematically interrogates the disciplinary mechanisms undergirding state violence.

A critical lacuna persists: How does Laâbi's carceral poetry deploy the body strategically to interrogate not merely the material conditions of imprisonment but the deeper disciplinary logic seeking to produce submissive subjects with docile bodies? While scholars have examined what happened to imprisoned bodies, less attention has been paid to how Laâbi's poetics theorizes the body itself as a site where power relations are both imposed and contested. This distinction proves crucial insofar as it shifts perspective from documenting carceral violence to grasping poetry's potential to uncover the underlying systems that engender such violence. This article thus highlights both the materiality of the prison experience and the embedded disciplinary apparatus operative in Laâbi's carceral poetry through sustained textual analysis.

Through close readings of four key carceral texts—"Tu parles ou on te tue," "Soleils aux arrêts," *L'arbre de fer fleurit*, and "Lettres à mes amis d'outre-mer"—this article contends that Laâbi's carceral poetry constitutes a distinctive corporeal poetics operating along two interconnected axes. First, it positions the condemned body as a living archive that preserves Morocco's collective memory, bearing witness to atrocities the state sought to obliterate during the Years of Lead and contesting official historiography. Second, it reimagines the body as a locus of resistance where solidarity and agency enable transcendence of spatial restrictions and physical violence without forsaking corporeal materiality. This dialectical articulation of embodied memory and resistance moves beyond vindictive justice toward a reconciliatory vision rooted in past accountability while gesturing toward future democratic possibilities.

This analysis draws upon two intersecting theoretical frameworks: Frantz Fanon's theorization of the colonized body and Michel Foucault's concept of the "carceral archipelago." Fanon's insights illuminate the troubling continuity between colonial corporeal subjugation and postcolonial state violence—what this article conceptualizes as the shift from "the body of the colonized" to "the body of the condemned." This transition exposes how Morocco's postcolonial state reproduced the disciplinary mechanisms it ostensibly overthrew, generating profound disillusionment among Laâbi's generation. Foucault's "carceral archipelago,"[1] read alongside Fanon's corporeal critique, illuminates the dual function of Laâbi's poetry: it documents the immediate materiality of eight-and-a-half years of detention while simultaneously exposing the systemic disciplinary mechanisms through which postcolonial state power operates. The convergence of these frameworks elucidates how Laâbi's corporeal poetics challenge not only physical confinement but also the "unbreakable system" itself (*La brûlure* 41).

The article proceeds through four sections. Following this introduction, the second section traces the biographical and historical context that defines Laâbi as a "carceral poet"—his

formative experiences, the *Souffles* years, his imprisonment during Morocco's Years of Lead, and his sustained engagement with confinement. The third section constructs a theoretical framework, elaborating on Fanon's and Foucault's concepts while situating Laâbi within, yet not reducible to, Moroccan traditions of prison literature, a categorization, while accurate, risks obscuring the destabilizing force of his poetics. The analytical core follows in sections four and five, examining how the body functions as an archive, a repository of memory, testimony, and alternative historiography, and a locus of resistance, generating solidarity, reclaiming agency, and ultimately gesturing toward transcendence. The conclusion reflects on Laâbi's enduring carceral legacy and examines how his corporeal poetics gains its contemporary relevance in a world marked by systemic violence. This study intervenes in postcolonial literary criticism, carceral studies, and Moroccan Francophone poetry by demonstrating how Laâbi's corporeal poetics carries testimonial weight and critical force. By refusing to separate memory from resistance and testimony from aesthetics, Laâbi's carceral poetry offers methodological insights for reading carceral literature beyond documentary paradigms. As states worldwide expand carceral systems to silence political dissent, detain migrants, and criminalize resistance, Laâbi's poetry speaks with particular urgency to our present moment, exposing what totalitarianism seeks to disavow. The imprisoned body, therefore, challenges state attempts at suppression and effacement, persisting as an irreducible site of dignity, imagination, and defiance.

Biographical and Historical Context: The Making of a Carceral Poet

What persecution sought to obliterate has, with time, been both commemorated and celebrated. Abdellatif Laâbi's life embodies this poetic justice. The radical vision that once landed him in a prison cell—first in Casablanca and then in Kenitra—would eventually bring him back to his home city, Fes, in 2019 to visit a primary school named in his honor, where students embodied the future he had fought for. This recognition not only signals the state's shifting attitudes toward its dissenting voices but also attests to his sustained presence within Moroccan public life. Born in 1942 during the French protectorate and World War II, Laâbi's childhood unfolded in the alleys of Fes, where he first encountered French at the Franco-Muslim school. He would later recount these formative years in his memoir Le fond de la jarre.[2] As a young man, Laâbi sought new avenues to broaden his experiences and his knowledge beyond the confines of his social entourage. He moved to Rabat, where a new era of his personal, academic, and activist career began. He continued his secondary school education at Moulay Idriss school, then enrolled at the Faculty of Letters at Mohammed V University. As a university student, Laâbi became an ardent reader of Fanon's works, particularly *Les damnés de la terre*, a text that resonated deeply with his personal history and Morocco's collective postcolonial history (*La brûlure* 31). The book marked an epiphanic moment in his intellectual consciousness, catalyzing a profound shift from a relatively simplistic worldview to a more nuanced understanding and way of thinking. In 1962, he became a French teacher at Al Laymoune high school in Rabat. The following year, Laâbi co-founded the Moroccan University Theatre, where he met Jocelyne, his future wife, whose family had emigrated to Morocco in the 1950s. The couple married in 1964.

Laâbi launched his career as a co-founder and chief editor of the French-language Moroccan journal *Souffles* (1966-72), where he published his early poems—namely "marasme" (1966) in the first issue, "mémoire-corps" (1966) in the third issue, "oeil juin 67" (1968) in the double issue of 10-11, "Mobilisation-tract" (1969) in the double issue of 13-14, "Nous sommes tous des réfugiés palestiniens" (1969) in the fifteenth issue, and "Les singes électroniques" (1969) in the double issue of 16-17. Initially serving as a venue for French-language experimental poetry, *Souffles* expanded its scope to include literary and cultural content, as well as visual art.

The journal also fostered a politics of bilingualism and translation before the creation of Anfas, its Arabic-language companion, in 1971. Laâbi's work in *Souffles* gradually shifted beyond the cultural field into political activism, a transition that led to the banning of the journal and his arrest in 1972. He remained eight and a half years behind bars before his release on the 18th of July,1980, following an international campaign led by his wife, Jocelyne, and relentless pressure from European intellectuals and leftist organizations. This phase was marked by the publication of important poetic texts, namely *L'arbre de fer fleurit* (1974), *Histoire des sept crucifiés de l'espoir* (1980), and *Sous le bâillon, le poème* (1981).

Although prison imposed a rupture with the outside world, it also offered Laâbi an opportunity to reflect on his ideological, political, and literary orientations. This paradoxical nature of confinement was captured in a letter he sent to Jocelyne on November 22nd, 1975:

> Tout ce que j'ai pu lire dans les livres ou voir à l'écran, tout ce que j'ai pu imaginer auparavant diffère beaucoup de l'expérience concrète elle-même. Il y manquait une dimension qui se trouve être justement la plus saillante. C'est cette interminable confrontation avec soi-même, ce monologue exceptionnel qui donne une matérialité particulière au corps, à la pensée, cette émergence à l'intérieur de soi comme d'un nouvel espace, d'un creuset où passé, présent et avenir entrent en collision provoquant des éclatements sourds, un flot d'images, un chœur de rumeurs, des cascades de mouvements. (*Chroniques* 84)
>
> [Everything I was able to read in books or see on screen, everything I was able to imagine beforehand, differs greatly from the concrete experience itself. There was a missing dimension that is the most salient one. It is this interminable confrontation with the self, this exceptional monologue that gives a particular materiality to the body, to the thought, this emergence within oneself as of a new space, of a crucible where past, present, and future collide, provoking muffled bursts, a flood of images, a choir of rumours, cascades of movements.][3]

Despite the harsh conditions of his detention, prison became a unique theatre of observation where Laâbi restored his intimacy with the self and delved into the mystery of the human. The physical barriers of the cell did not prevent the Moroccan poet from exploring his inner world; in fact, he took advantage of the ample amount of time he had in prison to engage in a fearless encounter with the self. This was a phase of productive reflections that questioned all the restraints that could bind his ideas, his writings, and, most intimately, his body. This particularly embodied carceral experience, rooted in the specific historical moment of the Years of Lead, necessitated a theoretical framework capable of grasping not only the materiality of confinement but also its generative possibilities for poetic resistance.

Theoretical and Critical Framework: Body, Memory, and Resistance

Situated at the intersection of philosophical, moral, religious, and aesthetic approaches, the body persists as a multifarious object that does not abide by fixed meanings, becoming radically indeterminate at the very moment we attempt to define it (Gil 86). Its presence across disciplines and its production of diverse arrays of meanings necessitate a nuanced grasp of its complex networks. Isaac Bazié argues that the body operates within a dual framework in literary representations: as a self-contained sign unaffected by external semantic determination and as a metaphor for cultural and social contexts, generating multiple interpretations through its

referential dimensions (15). Laâbi's French-language texts employ corporeal poetics as an essential paradigm to apprehend his postcolonial vision. His texts, often symbolic, do not suffice to present the body as a physical or personal entity of the individual. Rather, the body serves as a metaphor that conveys thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about cultural and political conditions at local and global scales.

Laâbi's postcolonial poetry carries the hallmarks of a stigmatized body, signaling a crisis in negotiating both the colonial legacy and the post-colonial challenges. Colonial discourse constructs the colonized body as an eroticized, inferior Other. Its metaphoric articulation operates through the exclusive lens of Western categorizations of normality vs. abnormality and centrality vs. marginality. In response, Laâbi's corporeal poetics defy these binary categorizations, offering alternative responses that underscore cultural difference and imagined alterity. Drawing on Fanon's conception of the body politic, an influence evident from his formative university years, Laâbi finds particular inspiration in two foundational texts: *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les damnés de la terre*. In the first book, Fanon exposes the destructive violence inflicted by "white masks" on "black skins," especially in chapter five entitled "L'expérience vécue du Noir," where racialized representations of the black *malédiction corporelle* [corporeal curse] trigger disaffecting and disturbing bodily responses.[4] In the second book, Fanon uses the body to epitomize the anti-colonial struggles of Algerian people, resonating with the broader transcolonial struggles across the Maghreb and Africa.[5] Building upon Fanon's corporeal framework, Laâbi deploys the body as a dual terrain, interrogating both the colonial enterprise and the unfulfilled promises of the postcolonial state. His poetry from the *Souffles* era enacts textual violence, merging hallucinatory images with visceral language and echoing, in manifest ways, the Fanonian concept of redemptive violence. The body thus operates as a fundamental hermeneutic vector and generative force that drives his poetic imagination. Within this framework, the colonized body becomes a cultural signifier and a metonymic marker of difference—a body in constant search of its being and its raison d'être.

Yet, this search was interrupted by a bitter historical irony: the postcolonial state reproduced the very colonial apparatus of corporeal subjugation it had previously condemned. The reconfiguration from the colonized body to the condemned body thus marks more than a temporal shift; it represents a critical recalibration dictated by the imperatives of the Years of Lead. Laâbi's incarceration exposes a troubling continuity: power had merely changed oppressors while maintaining the same architecture of domination. This shift imposed a new corporeal reality that refuses to reduce the body to a mere victim of violence, reimagining it instead as an active agent that produces creative resistance, collective memory, and transcendent solidarity. Laâbi's corporeal poetics are best understood through the dialectical lens of what Bergman-Rosamond et al. label as the "forces of ruination and renewal" (13). In the preface of Laâbi's book *Rue du Retour*,[6] Breyten Breytenbach—a South African poet who was also a political prisoner (1975-1982), overlapping significantly with Laâbi's own incarceration—asserts that the carceral writings of the Moroccan poet are descriptions of an ordeal that torments and purifies the body, illuminating life while converting it into transcendent lightness (iii). Breytenbach's remark aligns with Laâbi's poetic works, reflecting a profound understanding of the inherent dynamics of crisis that inform his corporeal poetics: questioning what is taken for granted, underlining the duality of destruction and reconstruction, and perceiving crisis as an illuminating experience and a transformative period that opens new avenues of saying and seeing. It is as if the South African poet were reading these lines from Laâbi's poem *L'arbre de fer fleurit*:

puisque la poésie

pour se purifier
pour se soumettre à l'ordalie
doit passer par les cimes de tes yeux
puisque mon souffle
rebondit d'une autre poitrine?
J'écris
et ma main vient de loin
pour imprimer sur la rouille de mes barreaux
les paroles illuminées du poème (276-85)

[since poetry
to purify itself
to submit to the ordeal
must pass through the peaks of your eyes
since my breath returns
from another breast?
I write
and my hand comes from afar
to etch upon my rusted bars
the luminous words of the poem]

The corporeal elements—the eyes, the breast, and the hand—are fundamental constituents through which the underlying forces of crisis are embraced, and the power of verse is revealed.

A terminological clarification is necessary at this point. The terms "prison" and "carceral" are used strategically in the article to demonstrate the different manifestations of imprisonment and resistance. "Prison" designates the concrete temporal and spatial experience, while the term "carceral," following Foucault's concept of "carceral archipelago," refers to the mechanisms governing the state's disciplinary apparatus. As Foucault argues, "the carceral archipelago assures, in the depths of the social body, the formation of delinquency on the basis of subtle illegalities" (*Discipline and Punish* 301), extending prison logic beyond physical walls to structure social relations and political subjectivity. Framed this way, Laâbi's carceral poetry enacts a double movement: it both records the prison material conditions and critiques the embedded structures that inform its "unbreakable system" (*La brûlure* 41). His intervention thus resists both the physical confinement and the carceral logic that strives to produce compliant subjects with docile bodies.

The Body as Archive: Collective Memory and Historical Witness

Laâbi's carceral poetry emerges from a rich tradition of Moroccan prison literature, including Tahar Ben Jelloun, Aziz Binebine, Rachida Yacoubi, Ahmed Marzouki, Abdelhak Serhane, Saïda Menebhi, and Fatna El Bouih. Yet it distinguishes itself through a distinctive corporeal poetics: rather than producing testimony about the imprisoned body, Laâbi's poetry inscribes memory onto the irreducible materiality of the body itself, collapsing the distinction between testimony and the body that produces it. The body transforms into an archive that preserves collective memory, functioning simultaneously as a site of memory and resistance.

Whether recounted in direct testimony or mediated through literary works, Moroccan prison writings fashion a distinct corpus that engages in "memory revisiting" (Orlando 275), offering new perspectives on the construction of negated memories systematically manipulated by

official historiographic accounts. Laâbi's reconstruction of this *mémoire refoulée* [repressed memory] moves from "my body" to "our bodies," insisting that, under severe conditions of violence and dispossession, individual bodily sufferings cannot be separated from collective bodily memory. The body as archive thus goes beyond the limitations of single, isolated testimony to forge communal memory and collective historiography. The shift from individual to collective memory manifests vividly in Laâbi's rendering of his fellow detainees' suffering. When Laâbi portrays the corporeal and psychological pains that Serfaty's sister, Évelyne, endured at the hands of her merciless torturers, he establishes solid sites of shared corporeal experiences. In doing so, his corporeal poetics do not speak for her but speak with her. In a poignant poem entitled "Tu parles ou on te tue," the speaker bears witness to her tragic death, rejecting any attempt to bury her memories along with her body:

> de tous ceux qui ont cru
> qu'avec le temps
> ton petit cadavre
> n'obstruerait plus l'horizon de leurs forfaits
> de tous ceux
> proches ou lointains
> qui oseraient t'oublier (35-41)
>
> [of all those who thought
> your little body
> would cease to bulk up the list of their crimes
> of all those
> near or far
> who would dare to forget you][7]

In this torment, the body stands as a key means of structuring commemoration against past historical cover-ups. By placing the body on the discursive site of collective memory, an alternative space of Moroccan history is jointly recounted, contesting the state's single narratives. Contrary to all attempts that aim at infusing a systematic memory suppression among detainees, the speaker defiantly announces: "Mes morts / sont trop vivants en moi" (49-50) [My dead / are too alive within me]. As such, the poet is placed as a guardian of memory, generating a collective voice for the new generation that did not live in that historical era and for those who lived it but could not speak about it. By expanding Laâbi's personal experience to include his fellow prisoners, the body becomes a living archive that exposes the embedded structure of violence and narrates untold stories of prisoners who lived through and resisted it, leading to the construction of a collective memory that remedies how the nation recollects its past.

Laâbi's poetry played a vital role in capturing the complex nuances of the Years of Lead. Marked by their immediacy, his poems were among the first texts that offered an alternative voice to the state's dominant discourse. After his release from prison in 1980, Laâbi's mind was beset by daunting corporeal questions: What does it mean for a body to be free after eight and a half years behind bars? What can he offer to Moroccan people as a poet whose corporeal festering wounds are still unhealed? Laâbi's Rue du Retour opens with an epigraphic poem in which the body fluctuates between remembering and forgetting, moving forward and looking back, and hoping and fearing. The overall narrative begins with the experience of liberation but repeatedly returns to the re-enactment of the most tragic moments of imprisonment—the body is remembered in its solitude and in collective solidarity. These recurring corporeal flashbacks

attest to the sustained presence of the condemned body even after its release. In this sense, the body becomes the archive inscribed with the lingering effects of carceral trauma. The released body thus serves as a living reminder that collective memory cannot be separated from its condemned body and its scars.

Laâbi's texts testify to the brutalities he endured in prison, yet they eschew personal vindictiveness or any exclusive desire to settle old scores with his former persecutors. Instead, Laâbi opens new horizons for a new Morocco, documenting and ruminating on this dark period of the nation's postcolonial history. The resurrection of eclipsed memories and the restoration of historical knowledge to the realms of public fora, therefore, give these recollections a performative dimension: the capacity to reconstruct the past, question the present, and shape the future. This reconciliatory vision anticipated, though only partially, the state's tendency to reconcile with its past, which would materialize decades later. In 2004, King Mohammed VI established the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC) to investigate human rights violations committed during the Years of Lead and to rehabilitate their victims. The official attempts to negotiate this transition, however, functioned within political tactics that did not strike a balance between the damages suffered by the victims and the circumscribed justice offered by the state. Despite the restraints and challenges of this institutional experience, Morocco remains a rare case in North Africa and the Arab World where the silence of the archives has not only been broken but critically revisited. The ERC remains a powerful symbol of the opportunities and challenges surrounding the transition from traumatic pasts toward redemptive possibilities for the future. In this light, the commission serves as both a site where competing politics of memory are negotiated and an index of the ongoing tension between official historiography and alternative carceral testimonies. Laâbi's texts thus embody both a multi-voiced Moroccan narrative of witness and a narrative of reconciliation, preserving traces of memory while moving forward to construct a more democratic Morocco based on liberty, justice, and dignity.

These sites of memory provide a healing experience that enables the poet to restore hope, which seems to be the only viable way to overcome violence and emerge from the carceral experience feeling totally free. As Laâbi confirms, memory operates within the body itself: "Quand ma mémoire devient houleuse s'agite et que ses flots viennent se fracasser contre les rivages de mes yeux" (*Chronique* 136) [When my memory grows turbulent and stirs, and its waves come crashing against the shores of my eyes]. By inscribing collective memory onto the body, Laâbi transforms it into a site of social and political critique that contests both official human rights discourse and sanctioned historiography. His poetry hence constructs a political imagination that transgresses power relations and establishes spaces for dissenting voices. In doing so, Laâbi's verse exalts a higher vision of the self while bearing witness to the victory of pen over sword and retention over amnesia.

The Resisting Body: Solidarity, Agency, and Transcendence

The modalities of corporeal memory and resistance operate through dialectical praxis: the body remembers through resistance, and resists through remembering. In this way, memory becomes an act of resistance precisely when the disciplinary apparatus demands forgetting. Laâbi's poetic investment in Morocco's carceral past establishes a new historical consciousness that questions the state mechanisms of selective memories. In addition to his dual commitment—an ethical duty to ensure the veracity of the recounted events and a poetic duty to maintain the aesthetic tone of his verse—Laâbi's poetry functions as a site of contestation, seeking to breach not only prison walls but also what he depicts as an ostensibly inviolable system of control (*La*

brûlure 41). His survival within the extreme and abusive conditions of detention was partly due to a solid *esprit de groupe* among detainees. Laâbi realized that his resistance could not have been concretized without a collective spirit of solidarity. This explains his tendency to inhabit his comrades' bodies in some of his carceral poetic texts. In "Tu parles on te tue," for example, the speaker voices his support for Évelyne and reiterates that he will not abandon either her or his fellow inmates: "Je ne peux pas abandonner mes morts" (43) [I cannot abandon my dead]; "je ne veux pas abandonner mes morts" (46) [I do not want to abandon my dead]; "je ne peux pas t'abandonner" (160) [I cannot leave you]. Laâbi understood that his stay could be prolonged. Consequently, he used all the means at his disposal to strengthen bonds with his fellow prisoners. In this sense, Laâbi's carceral experience was a "self-discovery through knowing the other … realisation of one-ness and none-ness, and thus (nonetheless) of our shared brotherhood" (Breytenbach iv). The dialectical movement of "one-ness" and "none-ness" allows suffering bodies to recognize their mutual vulnerability, thereby forging strong ties of "shared brotherhood." Through this practice, Laâbi fosters a sense of community that challenges the very tenets upon which the purportedly impenetrable system is built.

Laâbi's corporeal poetics gives form to this solidarity by attending to the bodily suffering of his fellow inmates, as his portrait of Evelyne demonstrates: Evelyne / un corps minuscule hâve et ride / d'enfant empêché de grandir (63-66) [Evelyne / a tiny body gaunt and lined / of a child forbidden to grow]. This refrain is followed by detailed descriptions of Evelyne's systematic physical tortures at the hands of her pitiless tormentors. Her reaction to these cruelties attests to her dogged spirit in the face of unforeseen calamities:

> –On parle toujours
> –On finit par parler
> Impossible qu'on ne parle pas
> Tu n'avais pas parlé Evelyne
> et tes tortionnaires terrorisés
> sont devenus fous (153-58)
>
> [–They always talk
> – They all talk in the end
> –Impossible not to talk /
> You did not talk Évelyne
> and it terrorized your torturers
> and drove them mad].

Despite long sessions of torture, lasting hours and days, Evelyne holds to her silence against all pressure, even after being threatened with killing: "tu parles ou on te tue" (1) [Talk or be killed]. Although the vibrant dynamism of Laâbi's poems resides in language, the ruthlessness of corporeal violence at times surpasses the capacity of words to convey thoughts and feelings. In *Rue de Retour*, Laâbi describes how "the pain which pounds through his body has reached such a pitch that it evades all possibility of understanding or intuition" (40). Evelyne's speechlessness enacts what Catherine Coquio describes as "suspension du langage" (339) [suspension of language]—the breakdown of signification before traumatic experiences, unveiling a profound crisis of language. This crisis is born of recurring doses of humiliation, deprivation, and brutality—amplified by the collapse of spatial and temporal boundaries, which ultimately suffocate life itself.

This asphyxiation narrows the field of language and causes inmates to lose the ability to give full expression to their thoughts. The recurrence of the word "parler" suggests a redundancy

through expressive repetition, which emphasizes the preponderance of the unspeakable. When language fails, the screams of the body become the most appropriate way to communicate the unspeakable. The carceral-poet transforms this experience of pain into a different form of counter-violence: a heightened form of awareness that elevates suffering into an act of agency. Therefore, the failing verbalization of the experience is compensated by Evelyne's corporeal language, powered by a ubiquitous sense of solidarity among her fellow prisoners who endure similar physical and psychological wounds. Evelyne's refusal to look away from the instrument torturing her body enacts defiant corporeal agency. Her protesting body engages in active practice of resistance, contesting the idea that equates the tormented body with impotence. It also challenges the capacity of the carceral disciplinary system to transform prisoners of conscience into docile bodies. The body, therefore, elevates Evelyne to the realm of the divine, transcending the physical barriers of the walls and hence echoing Laâbi's universalizing corporeal vision.

This shift of corporeal resistance toward transcendence culminates in Laâbi's meditation on the body's agency within confinement. In "Soleils aux arrêts," the speaker fancies liberating the bodies of political prisoners:

> Un homme est en prison
> Il n'attend pas
> il n'a pas de temps à perdre
> Il se fait peintre et poète et musicien
> Il invite le papillon des mots
> à la transe qui fait pousser des racines
> Il réfute le sobriquet des couleurs
> pour que le blanc de la toile
> libère ses démons tapis
> Il ravive le cri du silence
> pour orchestrer la symphonie du don
> Délivré du corps (187-98)
>
> [A man is in prison
> He does not wait
> He has no time to waste
> He makes himself a painter a painter and a poet and a musician
> He summons the butterfly of words
> to a trance that deepens into roots
> He refuses the facile names of colors
> so the canvas's whiteness might
> release its hidden demons
> He awakens the cry of silence
> to orchestrate the symphony of the giving
> Delivered from the body]

This poem, dedicated to the Moroccan political prisoner Abraham Serfaty and to the South African leader Nelson Mandela, reveals the poet's profound understanding of the universality of the corporeal mystical experience. The phrase "'Délivré du corps" presents a striking paradox: how can a poetics, deeply rooted in corporeality, advocate for the deliverance from the body? This contradiction paves the way for readers to grasp Laâbi's transcendental insight:

though the body learns, stretches, and suffers mutilation, it resists creatively to perform its agency—the poet becomes painter and musician. Through these creative transformations, the body transcends material constraints without denying corporeal reality; it transcends prison walls while remaining grounded in bodily experience. This tension pervades Laâbi's carceral texts as a dialectical movement alert to the materiality of the body and yet profoundly invested in corporeal transcendence. Central to this transcendence is the collective dimension of suffering and resistance. The poem depicts prison as a collective experience, conveying the suffering of other inmates and grieving for their pain and loss while drawing hope and power from their shared struggle.

This dual nature of corporeal transcendence—transcending without departing—requires consideration of its inner workings. The limited mobility within the bars compels the poet to reconsider the imperfections of the body and its fears, ultimately seeking new ways to rise above its apparent limitations. The search for corporeal agency finds its solace in "secular mysticism" (Reinking 151). Undeniably, the poet sometimes invokes religious figures such as Al Hallaj and Jesus Christ. Yet, his primary anchor of creative energy comes from his attachment to the universal values of liberty and justice. Despite the physical and psychological violence of incarceration, Laâbi manages to cope with its harsh circumstances, emerging as a wiser and more forgiving human being who holds no grudges against his tormentors. In choosing this reconciliatory path, Laâbi does not evade the agonies of the imprisoned subjects, nor does he negate the disgraces of the perpetrators. His carceral poetry strikes a balance between the stark tenor of his messages and the lyrical moments of his poems, highlighting the brutal immediacy of the carceral experience while providing a testing ground for radical thought and creative boundless ferocity. Laâbi's poetic reflections on the carceral experience do not deviate from the bitter realities of these contexts. Yet they do not present these realities within the exclusive parameters of raw, brutalized experiences. The amalgamation of the real and unreal becomes a necessity to convey the severity of carceral endurances, which reality alone cannot capture.

This transcendent vision translates into a collective solidarity that connects Laâbi not only with his fellow prisoners but also with his family and friends beyond the walls. His poem "Lettres à mes amis d'outre-mer" exemplifies this, as the speaker transmits messages of hope and resistance to his friends:

Je ne suis plus seul
L'épreuve m'a ouvert
à la voie des rencontres
Mon corps a appris
à se tendre et à se ramasser
comme une plaque chauffée au rouge
pour supporter les mutilations
et résister
transformer la douleur, l'humiliation
en leurs justes contraires (120-29)

[I am no longer alone
This ordeal has opened me
to the path of encounters
my body has learned
to tense and gather itself
like a plate of iron heated to red
to endure mutilations

and resist
to transform pain and humiliation
into their precise opposites].

Laâbi's carceral poetry embodies unwavering human resilience in the face of unexpected adversities. It creates windows of hope out of extreme conditions by defying the disciplinary agendas of repressive apparatus, which aims at instilling despair among prisoners of conscience. The resisting body, consequently, subverts the agendas of the state apparatus by exposing the limits of the carceral system and twisting the dehumanizing conditions of the cell "into their precise opposites." The articulation of inflicted corporeal pain transfigures ostensible powerlessness into an act of agency and strength. The poet seeks to undergo a corporeal transcendence, conveying the splendor and value of human tenacity, undeterred by all attempts at demoralization and dehumanization. The transcendental bearings take different forms of agency, including the visionary who has the potential to grasp the present and explore the future, the artist who can craft his own arms, and the firm believer who has his divine values that bolster his strength in times of crisis. By embracing this transcendental spirit in his carceral poetry, Laâbi animates numerous verse meditations that connect him with people, both within and beyond prison walls: "Mon peuple marche / et j'existe / rebelle" (*Chronique* 146) [My people are on the march / and I exist / rebel]. Written from Kénitra prison, *Chronique de la citadelle d'exil* establishes links between the self and the outside world, speaking with others, for others, and about others. The poet forcefully articulates his broader, collective project of liberation, planting seeds of hope at the very center of the citadel, initially dedicated to slowing death.

In times of uncertainty, the poet recalls his unrivalled gifts and secretive weapons to rebel against the spaciotemporal boundaries of confinement. Inspired by his transcendental individual and collective experiences, Laâbi grapples with the crisis of corporeal immobility, exposing carceral cruelties and negotiating collective resistance. His carceral poetics, therefore, combine the horrors of the cell with the radicalization of hopes, maintaining a profound attachment to life. The body, although mortified, tortured, and incarcerated, prioritizes a forward-looking perspective that advances human rights, justice, hope, and reconciliation. In taking this perspective, the body does not abandon its resistance; it only changes its strategies of resistance by abandoning itself temporarily to fuse with "a new body politic" (Reinking 148).

Conclusion

The body of the condemned reveals the limitations of the abusive carceral system and dislocates the dominant state order, making a powerful poetic statement through human resilience and creative resistance, often powered by a spirit of solidarity within and beyond the bars. The body becomes part of a collective mystical experience that lines up with Laâbi's unaffected spirit to confront, rather than escape, the forces of darkness. This transforms the body into a vehicle of testimony, bearing witness to physical dispossession and emotional displacement. Laâbi's poetic voice, which reckons with fences and freedom, articulates a relentless engagement in pursuit of justice and hope by writing poetry-as-resistance. His testimonies speak to those who have short memories and, consequently, counter state-sanctioned amnesia. Laâbi's voice remains indispensable in the recollection of corporeal torments, the reconstruction of the past, and the shaping of the present and the future, especially within a framework of competing historiographies. This practice of maintaining memory traces and disclosing artistic artilleries

serves to dispute state violence and its systematic policy of disremembering. This twofold capacity for testimony and resistance unveils the body's generative potential.

Thus conceived, the body of the condemned becomes a generative space that undertakes a double task: an archive that preserves Morocco's postcolonial collective memory against the "politics of amnesia" (Slyomovics 57) and a site for creative resistance that contests the mechanism of the carceral system through solidarity, agency, and transcendence. These two dimensions function dialectically to produce Laâbi's body-centred poetics. This poetic approach refuses to separate testimony from aesthetics, revealing how the violated body retains its generative power. His vision becomes clear as he constructs this historical consciousness that demands accountability while forging a reconciliatory path: a new Morocco unfolds—attentive to its past while moving steadily towards the future.

As prisons continue to multiply globally, detaining political activists, imprisoning asylum seekers, and silencing dissenting voices, they provide evidence of the ongoing violence wielded by state control mechanisms. In these and other contexts where zones of brutality and imprisonment continue to proliferate, Laâbi's carceral poetic legacy posits itself as a vivid reminder that under severe conditions of dehumanization, the imprisoned body stands as an irreducible site of human dignity, creative agency, and political imagination. This embodied resistance refuses to be manipulated, silenced, or annihilated; it survives to witness, preserve, and attest to the unyielding human capacity for resistance.

Laâbi's emphasis on collective and corporeal memory introduces a shared space where personal and political histories intersect, questioning the limitations of institutional initiatives such as the Equity and Reconciliation Commission. His poetry proposes instead a more authentic reconciliation reimagined through memory, solidarity, and transcendence—transforming traumatic pasts into a history that illuminates rather than haunts. Close examination of his corporeal poetics reveals how poetry can foster social healing without abandoning its critical vigilance. As Morocco continues to negotiate its past, a new generation of readers learn about the Years of Lead through Laâbi's poetry. The primary school that bears his name reflects this transformation from a persecuted dissident to a celebrated national figure—a transformation that maintains the body of the condemned in a vigilant position, acknowledging this state recognition while carrying its scars forward; an approach that fosters reconciliation while maintaining critical vigilance against new forms of violence and forgetting.

Laâbi's carceral poetry creates a space for memory to be preserved and resistance to be enacted, opening new possibilities for political and creative expression that transcend its historical moment to speak urgently to our present. This is perhaps the most enduring lesson of Laâbi's carceral corpus, emerging not from abstract theorization but from the lived reality he transformed into art: that resistance, anchored in bodily suffering yet channeled toward transcendent solidarity, can transform pain and humiliation "into their precise opposites," forging pathways from trauma toward reconciliation, from silence toward voice, and from destruction toward reconstruction.

Notes

1. The "carceral archipelago" concept appears in Part 4, Chapter 3, "The Carceral," pp. 297-308.
2. Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Fond de la jarre*, Gallimard, 2002.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
4. Frantz Fanon, "L'expérience vécue du Noir," *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 109-158.
5. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Maspero, 1961)

6. *Rue de Retour* is Jacqueline Kaye's English translation of Laâbi's original work, *Le chemin des ordalies*. The title page designates this work as a novel, the cover page labels it a récit, and its content is largely autobiographical, depicting his carceral experience.
7. Translated by Nicholson-Smith. See "Tu parles ou on te tue," In *Praise of Defeat*, 30.

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