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A *CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* OPEN BOOK

LOSING GROUND: Black Empire and Affective Infrastructure in Urban Ethiopia

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The new Addis Ababa has a distinct color palette and aesthetic. The color is gray, and the material is glass. Gray paint and glass-walled stalls saturate the latest commercial buildings and malls. Most of the newly refurbished retail spaces in the malls in the districts of Arat Kilo and Piassa are still empty, awaiting tenants who can afford the rent. To walk through the city center in July 2024 was to see Addis Ababa as a landscape of ongoing construction sites—high-rise buildings going up, freshly planted young palm trees lining new boulevards, new red bicycle lanes waiting for cyclists, and streetlights in the shape of lotus flowers illuminating the city. For many people I spoke to, there was an echo of Dubai in these infrastructural aspirations and aesthetics. Simultaneously, the streets teemed with temporarily employed laborers. Construction crews worked into the evening, the sound of sledgehammers and bulldozers reshaping the landscape amid freshly cleared debris and the ruins of demolished houses.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the government's urban renewal project—reissued in 2019 under a new name, the "Corridor Development Project"—has taken on urban planning as both an instrument and a

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site for planning a future with a highly prescriptive and linear vision.[1] In multiple speeches, the prime minister has regularly legitimized urban renewal projects by invoking the figure of children, the next generation, and the idea of "Ethiopia." Under the state's banner of *lmat* (ልማት; development/prosperity in Amharic), Addis Ababa—a city with an estimated population of 5.7 million—was still undergoing this rapid and long renewal in 2024.

The capital has become a primary site of infrastructural megaprojects. There has been a preoccupation with creating urban green spaces and attracting foreign investment, the latter predominantly in the form of Chinese state loans and the presence of Chinese construction companies (Getachew 2024a, 2024b). Everyone seems to agree that what was at stake was not only the future, but seemingly the past as well (Borenstein 2025; Marzagora 2017). Historically, Addis Ababa has served as a signifier and stage for the nation to rehearse the political ideologies of its rulers (Mohamed 2021; Terrefe 2020; Gulema 2013; Zeleke 2010). Yet urban residents have given Abiy the nickname "the mayor of Addis" for his focus on the city and fixation on preserving his political legitimacy. Both for Abiy and for many residents in Addis Ababa, the capital is both an extension and enclosure.

In this essay, I describe how young residents in a vanishing urban district in Addis Ababa made a T-shirt to mark the destruction of their neighborhood by city officials and their own erasure from the city center. Instead of answering the state's depictions of such young people as a menace ("an uncontrollable mass") or as a potential resource ("children of the future"), I explore how residents of Arat Kilo, a neighborhood in the city center, inhabited an imaginary that conflates the materiality and immateriality of erasure. This imaginary is situated neither fully in formal politics nor in the form of a mass public or crowd. Instead it inhabits the foreclosure of their urban district aesthetically and with the resonances of displaced bodies and their futures. That is, the object of a particular T-shirt, its circulations, and the processes and networks involved in its making emerge as affective infrastructures of a black empire yet to come. While the grey paint saturating the city's aesthetic points to linear futures of progress and modernity, and is part of these affective infrastructures, it also encapsulates the long histories and futures of dispossession and black cosmopolitanism. The T-shirt operates against and within this backdrop of global urban transformation in Ethiopia.

I propose to think of affective infrastructures as a means to capture the feelings, texture, material, and semiotics of imperial landscapes and backgrounds that suffused the T-shirt and the subject-positions of young residents in a space of urban foreclosure. In doing so, one of this article's main ethnographic depictions

centers around a religious event from 2016 in Arat Kilo. Young residents of this vanishing neighborhood prepared for an annual feast holiday, which coincided with the eve of a state of emergency.

I describe how these residents—informal laborers of ethnically mixed backgrounds—engaged a linguistic, imperial critique of the government's plan to demolish the neighborhood. They created a T-shirt that generated fear and panic among police officers and government representatives, who in turn arrested some of the residents and reframed them, as well as their surroundings, as threats against Addis Ababa. These T-shirts became notorious, not least because of ESAT (Ethiopian Satellite Television), a diaspora opposition TV channel based in Washington, D.C., widely circulated images of the T-shirts to question the popular legitimacy of the previous government, and yet this then led to the identification of several residents.

What happened to the neighborhood that in 2016 designed a T-shirt capturing its disappearance? By 2020, the neighborhood no longer existed; a park had entirely replaced it. In layering these two moments in time—a time when the neighborhood existed and a time when it did not—I am not presenting a before-and-after account of infrastructural development or urban renewal. Rather, I locate objects such as the T-shirt as actions and sites invested with futurity in the face of erasure.

MAPPING ETHIOPIA'S FRIENDSHIP PARK AND THE T-SHIRT

The mass demolitions and the building of green spaces in Addis Ababa have been uneven, speedy, and often unbureaucratic. In most cases (especially until 2019), demolition has occurred without the authorities consulting residents or without offering alternative housing options. However, these plans for urban renewal were not new. In 2005, the city administration claimed that 80 percent of the city was a "slum" (Amongne 2005) and pledged to renew the city for the benefit of the urban poor and the aspiring middle-income class. Consequently, in 2006, Addis Ababa's city government developed and started to implement an integrated housing development program to ensure that newly built condominium houses would cater to middle- and low-income families (Yeshitela 2019, 103). Another study concluded that 70 to 80 percent of all houses in the city center were beyond repair and echoed the need for urgent replacement (UN-HABITAT 2008). In urban Ethiopia, but more broadly in the cities of the Global South, the ideology of disposability slipped beyond the slums and expanded to suddenly include their inhabitants (Davis 2004; Diouf 2003; Dubale 2024).

As house evictions in Arat Kilo progressed between 2015 and 2017 under the rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a multiethnic coalition of parties, there were rumors that government buildings, parking lots, commercial buildings, and a riverside project would replace the homes. In 2020, under a new Prosperity Party government, Sheger Park's Friendship Square (known as Friendship Park)—the largest green park in the city today—fully replaced the neighborhood. Yet the park's entrance fee (which as of 2024 was 130 birr, about $1.79 USD) was prohibitive for many of its former residents. The park's main entrance faces Africa's first "luxury collection" hotel, the Sheraton. The hotel itself was built in 1998, a project that involved the forceful displacement of hundreds of residents (UN-HABITAT 2008, 13).

Friendship Park is part of the government's Beautifying Sheger Riverside project and was built to increase the quality of life, reduce the effects of climate change, create jobs, make the city greener and cleaner, and attract tourism. Abiy Ahmed, who has served as prime minister since 2018, has described Friendship Park as a project oriented toward a future in which Addis Ababa will be a cosmopolitan, global, and sustainable city (Terrefe 2020). But while the creation of the park, significantly financed by Chinese capital, moved this part of the city away from poverty and slums and toward an imagined middle class, tourism, and prosperity more broadly, it also embraced a market economy model and the liberalization of the national political economy (which state-owned businesses and federal planning had largely defined).

Walking north in 2024 from the Sheraton on Churchill Road, one came across the Adwa 00KM Museum, opened in 2024, and a statue of Menelik II commemorating the 1896 Battle of Adwa, a glorious and defining episode in the country's history, in which Ethiopian troops triumphed over Italian forces. Yet the "Victory of Adwa" site encompassing the new museum and surrounding shopping malls, part of the corridor project, also entailed a historically extensive dispossession, on top of the current displacement of over ten thousand residents (Mengesha 2024). The erasure of these black communities occurred amid the resonances and shadows of this emergent black imperialism and infrastructure in Ethiopia. This new geography pointedly oriented the city toward black imperialism and modern forms of racial capital from the Chinese Belt and Road initiative—"empire persists via state invitations" (Kimari and Ernstson 2020, 829)—and away from what was deemed disposable urban spaces ("slums" and "slum dwellers").

A frequently neglected aspect in the scholarship on Addis Ababa is how the city's establishment in the 1880s required mass displacement and dispossession, which was tied to the idea of Ethiopia as a black empire. The Adwa 00KM

Museum and the statue of Menelik II are entangled with a contested past in public discourse—not only in Ethiopia but also globally—that glorifies Ethiopia as the home of the black empire and Addis Ababa as its proper black capital.

REVISITING INFRASTRUCTURES OF BLACKNESS AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The literature on infrastructure in the Global South from the last two decades has fundamentally enriched our understanding of infrastructure as sociality and of how both visible and invisible infrastructures shape the spatial and temporal logic of African cities (Boeck and Plissart 2004; Simone 2004a; Elyachar 2010; Larkin 2008; 2013). Rather than viewing the city as a mere extension of the state or understanding African cities through the lens of "policy-oriented research on developmental challenges" or simply as an absence of development (Pieterse 2010, 205), scholars such as Edgar Pieterse have shifted their attention to exploring urban processes and "cityness" in Africa more broadly (Pieterse and Parnell 2014). This has resulted in a scholarship that pays attention to how urban residents in the Global South navigate and experience access to infrastructure, public goods, and belonging and, conversely, how (incomplete) infrastructures impose attachments, aesthetics, and the promise of a just future (Caldeira 2000; Amin and Thrift 2002; Nuttal and Mbembe 2008; Larkin 2013; Anand 2017; Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Di Nunzio 2019; Mains 2019; Degani 2022; Guma 2022; Gastrow 2024; Mercer 2024).[2] Infrastructures as material and affect are not only emergent from the site of factory floors, the division of labor, or public goods; they also gain force through circulation and across heterogeneous activities. AbdouMaliq Simone's concept of "People as Infrastructure" has reframed our understanding of infrastructure, shifting our focus to the capabilities of residents to respond to and maneuver through urban life. Simone has described the often provisional, heterogeneous activities that enable urban residents to collaborate, navigate, reside, and make transactions work as the capacity to generate social compositions, framing this process and ability as "people as infrastructure" (2004b, 410; see also Landau and Freemantle 2010 on "tactical cosmopolitanism").

How do these risky collaborations, albeit provisional and heterogeneous, take place? How do histories allow residents and migrants to maneuver and come together? I want to extend these social compositions (see Simone 2004b) to understand risky collaborations, collective work, as well as the emergence and circulation of shared histories among urban heterogenous dwellers. I suggest affective infrastructures to capture how semiotic ideologies, its historicity, and

modalities of recognition and circulation mediate our understanding of affect and infrastructure. I expand on the work on affective infrastructures that foregrounds materiality (Knox 2017) and history (Street 2012) through the lens of semiotics and the force of circulation (of texts, ideas, rubble).[3] This framework moves beyond the binary opposition of material and immaterial matter that saturates our thinking on infrastructure. In short, I ask the following question: What if we framed blackness as affective infrastructures, particularly through the lens of circulation?

In Ethiopia, these dynamics are inseparable from histories of imperial expansion that created Addis Ababa itself as well as contemporary forms of capital and infrastructural investment hailing from the United Arab Emirates and China. From the eighteenth century onward, Ethiopia often held the greatest potential in the search for a promised land. "Ethiopia" became "a generic reference to the Black continent of Africa," its champions (hailing from the Afro-Atlantic tradition to southern African religious to African nationalistic movements) espousing what became known as Ethiopianism (Metaferia 1995, 301; Nurhussein 2019). For example, Marcus Garvey, known for his "Back-to-Africa" campaign in the 1920s—although he died before he could set foot on Africa—identified Ethiopia as a plausible capital for a future black empire or, as he often described it, a "big Black republic" (quoted in Cronon 1955, 66). Likewise, Rastafarians, perhaps the most well-known group who regard Ethiopia as their ancestral homeland, see Ethiopia as their Zion, the land of the black messiah (MacLeod 2014). Across a global diaspora of African descent, the Battle of Adwa has become a defining moment for black liberation, black emancipation, and decolonization. Of course, this reflected an ideal vision of decolonization one that emerged as an utter refusal of European colonization from the outset, in which one was never colonized.

This glorification by the African diaspora has also long created a problematic double bind, as it overlooks Ethiopia's own history of violent territorial expansion (Jalata 2008). Adwa elevated Menelik II, then King of Shoa and the strategic leader of the battle, to the emperor of Ethiopia. Under his rule, the empire expanded from then northern Ethiopia to the west, southwest, south and southeast of contemporary Ethiopia. Within an Ethiopian geopolitical landscape, Addis Ababa emerged as a new, permanent imperial capital in the "South" (Pankhurst 1961; Garretson 2000). Famously, Menelik II dispatched his troops from Addis Ababa (where a statue was erected in 1930 in its memory) and marched to Adwa.[4] In many ways, early Addis Ababa was a frontier city. Most of

the city's early settlements were organized in *säfärs* (ሠፈር; camps) (see Zewde 1987). More importantly, this new capital, named "Addis Ababa" (which means "New Flower") in 1886, was never exactly new, nor was the land on which it was built previously uninhabited. The empire forcefully relocated the people who lived there, mostly ethnic Oromo pastoralists (Benti 2002). The city had a previous name in Afan Oromo (a language spoken by ethnic Oromo): Finfinne (abundance of hot water springs "hora finfinnee" in Afan Oromo), referring to its prior and pastoral histories (Fayisa 2020).[5] Adwa turned preoccupied Addis Ababa into the city of *yätqur säw* (የጥቁር ሰው; the black man)—a reference to Menelik II—and, moreover, the home of black empire and imperialism. Cosmopolitanism and the understanding that Addis Ababa would extend itself into a black empire led to mass displacement and shaped the city's infrastructure and affective landscape. The 2024 Adwa memorial and the statue represent this entangled, sedimentary history. Blackness as affective infrastructure is multiple in its imaginaries and co-constituted through its circulation between the black Atlantic and East African spaces and socialities that are specific to, and privilege, global corridors. Yet, it also remains tethered to local Indigenous histories. The site of the new Adwa Museum and the statue marked the boundaries and extensions of a historized semiotic landscape configured through megaprojects of infrastructure financed and implemented by the Chinese government and construction companies.

In contemporary urban Ethiopia, there are multiple invocations of a political imaginary of black empire currently aided by UAE and Chinese foreign investment. Such historical invocations underlie and suffuse the city's contemporary urban infrastructure, not only for the government but also for its residents facing displacement (often without a proper alternative). In the following section, I ethnographically trace how these asymmetrical positions—of government employees mobilizing imperial debris and invitations and urban residents inhabiting a space that is becoming uninhabitable—occupy similar political and urban imaginaries, using imperial vocabulary to reinhabit a deeply contested aesthetic and physical infrastructural space.

THE T-SHIRT

Until the demolishing of the neighborhood, residents in Arat Kilo celebrated each year the annual Christian Orthodox feast day of *mäsqäl* (የመስቀል በዓል), which commemorates the finding of the True Cross. *Mäsqäl* is mostly observed by Orthodox Christians in Eritrea and Ethiopia (መስከረም 11; *mäskäräm*

11; September 27 in the Gregorian calendar for 2016) right after the Ethiopian New Year celebrations (መስከረም 1; September 11 in the Gregorian calendar for 2016). The religious holiday refers to a revelation experience by Greek saint and empress Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, during her stay in Jerusalem. In this revelation, an angel appeared and told her that the smoke of a burning bonfire would lead her to the True Cross. The origins of this feast holiday are multiple and unclear; some say its roots extend to the pre-Christian period, others see it emerging from agrarian society, noting that it is tethered to the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the dry harvest season (see Ullendorff 1968).

Each year, the residents between their early twenties and thirties appointed one head organizer for the *mäsqäl* (መስቀል) celebration to plan the festivities and oversee the making of a T-shirt for the holiday. In 2016, the organizing committee consisted of Sahle, Haile, Rediet, and Nahom, with Dawit as their head (all young men except for Rediet).[6] Tamrat organized the previous feast holiday and while he was not directly involved in the 2016 preparations, he would still be part of the logistical planning and related conversations. I conducted fieldwork in this neighborhood from 2015 until it ceased to exist in 2019. In 2016, I often came to the neighborhood with my research assistant Iyasu, a high school teacher in Addis Ababa. His school had just reduced his teaching hours, and he had time to accompany me while he searched for new work opportunities and took night classes.

Three weeks before *mäsqäl*, my interlocutors began preparing for the coming annual feast. The festivities usually took place on the streets of their neighborhood. The year 2016 was special for everyone involved; for most residents, this was their last *mäsqäl* in Arat Kilo. The whole neighborhood (ሠፈር; *säfär*) looked different week to week. *Käbälle* officers (subdistrict officers) were sealing off houses for demolition, and construction of new buildings had already begun nearby. This year, the organizing committee decided to commemorate the feast day with a T-shirt that referenced the neighborhood's impending fate.

Dawit was fully aware that he would be the last person to organize *mäsqäl*. Born in the early 1980s, he grew up in this neighborhood. Dawit's parents migrated in their adolescence from the Gurage region, 150 miles southwest of Addis Ababa, to the city to find work.[7] When you asked Dawit where his home was, he would say that he was an Arat Kilo kid, holding four fingers sideways.[8] Dawit carried around a little notebook in which he kept track of the names of the people who wanted and paid for the T-shirts as well as other related expenses, such as renting large loudspeakers and buying firewood for the bonfire. He collected 80 birr ($3.78 USD in 2016) for each T-shirt as well as donations for the feast.

Usually, those who had more money or a job donated more, such as Tamrat's older brother, Abel, who used to live in the neighborhood and donated 200 birr.

Making the T-shirt required collectivity and creativity from the group. How does one make sense of a recurring event such as *mäsqäl* when faced with the foreclosure of one's neighborhood? Every day, the authorities sealed off or demolished houses, a new eviction order came in, and new rumors about plans for the neighborhood circulated. Despite this material and immaterial uncertainty, urban residents showed up as a collective to prepare for the upcoming holiday. A week before the celebration, some of the residents and the committee began to talk about the color for their annual *mäsqäl* T-shirts.

Each year, the organizing committee, with input from other residents, created a slogan and an iconographic image for the T-shirt, which residents would wear during the celebrations and share later social media. They still had not agreed on the text for the T-shirt. The committee members, residents such as Tamrat (who organized *mäsqäl* in the previous year), Bethlehem, Alemayehu, and my research assistant Iyasu, discussed possible verses from the Bible and their appropriateness for hours. They did not look them up in the Bible or on their smartphones but referred to verses from memory. The atmosphere was enchanting, and, in a way, they were demonstrating both their Bible literacy and their creativity, in the process illustrating the difference between material and immaterial faith and language (see Engelke 2007). The verse they would select needed to match their reality. They wanted a play on words. While searching for the ideal verse, they laughed about some of the suggestions and waited for the best idea to emerge. It was a competition. They quoted phrases such as "We keep silent for the will of God," "Judgment Day will come," and others referring to sheep, Jesus's betrayal, and Thomas the Apostle.

FATHER FORGIVE THEM

Sahle was wearing a "Battle of Adwa" T-shirt featuring the face of Menelik II, so they started to discuss integrating the bravery displayed at the Battle of Adwa with *yätqur säw* (የጥቁር ሰው; the black man), a reference to Emperor Menelik II, who had led the soldiers into battle. Someone suggested they could print "Mo Ambessa" (a reference to another emperor, Haile Selassie I) on their shirts, which again brought together biblical themes and imperial references. Blackness operated as a sign of both resistance and empire. When the organizing committee decided on the T-shirt, they contacted a graphic designer, a former resident, to materialize their ideas. For the front, they had chosen an image of Mother Mary holding Baby Jesus in her arms. For the text on the back, they chose chapter 23, verse 34 from the Gospel of Luke: "Father, forgive them, for

they know not what they do" (የሚያደርጉትን ኢያዉቁምና ይቅር ብላቸዉ።; *Yämi-yadärgutn Iyawuqum-na yqr blatschwu*). This famous phrase from the Bible is what Jesus says during the Crucifixion as his followers beg for his release. Despite being executed, Jesus asks for forgiveness for his murderers.

Tamrat explained to me that the text needed to both fit the religious occasion and contain a play on words, evoking a dual imaginary that resembled *säm-na wärq* (ሰምና ወርቅ; wax and gold). Tamrat told me that in doing *säm-na wärq*, a linguistic composition that encompassed at least two meanings, they would have to find something important and appropriate from the Bible, but this part ought to also convey another story, one that resonated with the social lives of my interlocutors and with the neighborhood's residents. One interpretation of this text referred to their impending eviction and the experience of their vanishing neighborhood due to urban renewal projects. The second meaning expressed their opposition toward the Ethiopian government, which they blamed for the evictions.

WAX AND GOLD FOR THE PEOPLE?

The Amharic tradition of *säm-na wärq*, a subgenre within Amharic *qné* (ቅኔ; a form of poetic expression), is tied to the histories of the *Täwahedo* (ተዋሕዶ) Christian Orthodox Church's literature, the clergy and aristocracy, and the activities of the wandering *däbtära* (ደብተራ). *Däbtära*, unordained clerics of the Ethiopian church, were priest-like teachers, Ethiopian Christian liturgical musicians, and traditional healers. Moreover, their roles involved fluency in oral tradition, knowledge of rituals (such as making magical scrolls or amulets), but also literacy, although the latter was historically restricted to aristocracy and clergy (Shelemay 1992).

Traditionally, the wax (ሰም; *säm*) transmits the message to all and the gold (ወርቅ; *wärq*) is for those who can decode the double and the true meaning. Religious studies scholar Maimire Mennasemay (2014) notes that the wax describes a reality (ዕውን; *ewen*), often localized, and the gold a truth (እውነት; *ewenät*), often a universal truth. For Mennasemay, it is through knowledge (እውቀት; *ewqät*) as part of the wax (*säm*) that one can approach truth/gold (*wärq*), which then allows one to reinterpret knowledge through the lens of truth (see also Keane 2003, 2018). From this perspective, there is never a completeness to knowledge, because the truth necessary to understand it is not always accessible. Sociologist Donald Levine examined in *Wax and Gold* (1965), his classic study of Ethiopian society, how dominant cultural themes in Ethiopia describe the traditional world of Christian Orthodox Amhara Ethiopians, as well as how these ideas of

non-confrontationality and the language of ambiguity (ሰምና ወርቅ; *säm-na wärq*) have shaped governmental and cultural domains and what it means to act "Ethiopian."[9]

Not only did creating the T-shirts involve writing as communication and thus sociality, but the group that assembled to find the phrase also did not resemble the class of people typically associated with this kind of "sophisticated" play with language: Amhara nobility, the middle class, and especially clergy, deacons, *däbtäras*, and church associates. Using *qné* or *säm-na wärq* has historically been a sign of (class) distinction and exclusion. It was religious and Amhara but also imperial and elite. But the crucial difference in Arat Kilo in 2016 was that this instance of *säm-na wärq* was undertaken not by clergy, nobility, royalty, or Amhara elites in distinguished settings. To the contrary, a collective body of young residents with mixed ethnic backgrounds invoked the practice. They used the imperial infrastructure and aesthetics available to them. Rather than formal politics that had excluded these residents, aesthetics and the material itself became a site of knowledge and truth (see also Gastrow 2017 on aesthetic dissent). *Qné* was traditionally a sign of intellectual sovereignty, superiority, and independence of one's mind, but here the collective emerged through the black T-shirt. This process of finding a text and subtext for the T-shirt was thus a form of reappropriation and sovereignty.

THE EVENT AND THE PROBLEM WITH COLORS AND WORDS

Even before the T-shirts arrived from the printing house twenty-five miles outside of Addis Ababa, there were many heated discussions about whether the residents should wear the T-shirt on the feast day. The political situation in the country had grown increasingly tense. There were reports of ethnic grievances spurring several conflicts and killings in the country's northern region of Amhara and in nearby towns in the Oromo federal region that surrounded the capital (Davison 2016; Makahamadze and Fikade 2022).

A couple of days before the holiday, a local police officer from their neighborhood—I will call him Yared—inquired about the T-shirts for *mäsqäl*. The police officer told Sahle that they should refrain from wearing dark colors; blue or black were unacceptable. Blue was associated with the banned opposition party *Sämayawi* (ሰማያዊ; Blue) and black with mourning and grief. At the same time, various social media oppositional channels issued calls to wear black in solidarity with the imprisoned students and the protests in Gondar, the capital of the Amhara region. The members of the organizing committee were neither public figures nor did they have a clear link with formal politics and oppositional parties.

Figure 1. Back of the T-shirt made for the feast. September 2016. Photo by Sabine Mohamed.
Figure 2. Front of the T-shirt made for the feast. September 2016. Photo by Sabine Mohamed.

Yared, the police officer, lived in the neighborhood and had known most of the residents since they were very young. I had met him several times, and he seemed comfortable around everyone. He liked to make jokes, but no one ever forgot his authority when he insisted that the color of the T-shirt mattered. Some members of the organizing team I talked to said they did not care about Yared's orders. Sahle told me that the group had already ordered the T-shirts and that the black was a sign of grief and solidarity with the arrested and murdered people in the northern Amhara region, as well as a sign of bravery (a reference to the black man, *yätqur säw*, Menelik II, and another emperor hailing from Gondar, Tewodros II; who became a popular figure during the protests, see also Mohamed 2019).

Two days before the feast, Iyasu, Sahle, and I were having coffee at Bethlehem's house when Dawit distributed the T-shirts. Sahle warned us that wearing the shirts could cause trouble. Iyasu said that he was not afraid of the police. Sahle replied that the police might see me as the diaspora sponsor if I wore the T-shirt (for example, they might suspect me of being a member of the Blue Party, which was outlawed in the country and had become a diaspora party), which could cause even more problems. Sahle was referring to the infamously broad and vague provisions of the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Law. He said that the police had advised them to wear white because that was the proper way to observe a holiday. The police had also warned them that they were not allowed to wear the T-shirt that they had "heard about."

On our way to the site on *mäsqäl* day, Iyasu and I met our friend Sahle, who saw that Iyasu was wearing the T-shirt and told him immediately that it was not a good idea. He warned us that the police were present in the neighborhood. Iyasu closed his jacket. When we arrived at the main street, the sound of *muzmur* (meaning "spiritual music" in Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) played through large loudspeakers, creating an almost sacred atmosphere. Dawit told us that residents had started at six in the morning to build up the *dämära* (ደመራ; a large pile of wood and grass decorated with daisies for a bonfire). It looked like a big torch or pyramid.

Only three people wore the T-shirt, and they disappeared as soon as the police appeared on the scene. Two other male residents wore the T-shirt under jumpers or jackets. The T-shirts seemed to be only for *yä-säfär lij* (የሠፈር ልጅ; the residents of the neighborhood). My female friends Rediet and Bethlehem were not wearing the T-shirts even though they had received them too. Bethlehem had even stored the T-shirts at her place. Her house, which consisted of a very small room, was important. It was where many conversations among the organizing committee took place. Bethlehem was holding a space of care in her home when she was not working and the house was not otherwise occupied. I did not see any elderly people, children, or women wearing those T-shirts on that day.

Some of the younger residents began to take pictures in front of the *dämära*. Iyasu started to pose in the middle of the crowd, claiming fearlessness. He was wearing the forbidden T-shirt. He opened his jacket and urged another resident to take off his jumper and take a picture with him. Although he acted unafraid, he was also checking to see if the police were around. The street was decorated in red, green, and yellow, recalling the country's national colors. However, the current flag's emblem—a yellow, radiant pentagram (five-pointed star) with equally long rays on a blue disk—was notably and intentionally missing; residents had decorated the street instead with a flag from the previous imperial government of Haile Selassie I, even though it was forbidden to fly it (Federal Republic of Ethiopia 2009).

Alemayehu and Sahle showed me the posters they had printed for that day. They had pinned one small poster on the *dämära* and another on a pole on the street. The posters said that it was "the last *mäsqäl* feast in Arat Kilo" (የመጨረሻው ይ ፬ ኪሎ መስቀል በዓል; *Yämetschereshaw yä4kilo mäsqäl bä'al*), referring to the ongoing demolition of their neighborhood and its anticipated complete erasure within one year. It showed pictures of the residents (young and old) from their neighborhood. The top of the poster also said, "A poor kid has nothing to lose and a *4kilo* [Arat Kilo] kid has nothing to fear" (እጓዳልኮራ የደሃ ሊጅ

ነኝ፤ እንዳልፈራ የ ፬ ኪሎ ሊጅ ነኝ።; *Indalkora yä däha lidsch nänge. Indalfera yä 4kilo lidsch nennge*). Indeed, this poster attracted a lot of attention from the police. The residents had become urban *däbtära* accounting in prose poetry for the shifting grounds and objects in their neighborhood.

At first, one police officer demanded to talk to the person who made the poster. Soon, there were three police officers at the scene, then more. The police officers wanted to know who had made the poster, whose idea it was, and what the writing meant. One officer, pointing at the poster, asked Mekonnen, "'I am not afraid'? What does it mean?" Mekonnen stumbled in his reply. He later told me that he was too upset to respond properly. Others also worried about how to answer this question. The officers took resident ID cards from some bystanders (including Sahle) and collected their personal details and phone numbers. The police called the company that had printed the poster and ordered the organizers to take the posters down. After they took down the posters, the police officers walked away.

As more police arrived, Yared, the local police officer who knew the organizers quite well, tried to joke with them, but the situation became more intense as the residents were now under scrutiny. One officer approached Sahle to ask him why he was wearing a plain black T-shirt and told him that he should wear a white one instead. Sahle returned from this conversation with Yared and told the organizing group that one of the officers even offered him 400 birr ($7.39 USD) to buy a new white shirt. People laughed, but tensions were rising.

In the meantime, more officers and police cars arrived in the neighborhood. One officer seemed to hide behind some trees and was hard for us to see. Two other police positioned themselves directly opposite of where most members of the organizing committee, including Iyasu and myself, sat; only a street separated us. A bit further down the street to our right were two more. The residents were surrounded. Another etymological meaning of *säfär* (and emblematic for the history of the city) is encampment or camp; the neighborhood was enclosed.

Iyasu said that he felt uncomfortable. He had been arrested in the 2005 post-election period because he had been in the wrong spot at the wrong time; he did not want to go to jail again and he urged me to leave with him. Two days after the event, one of our friends, Sahle's brother, told us that there had been even more police hiding and observing the event. One officer was requesting information about Iyasu and me. However, the police approached neither of us. Iyasu believed that they were not sure if we worked with or against the

government. After we left, more police arrived at the scene and arrested six residents while others ran away and escaped. The police held those they had caught at the police station for a day. The officers confiscated their IDs and ordered them to bring all the T-shirts to the station to retrieve their IDs.

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE T-SHIRT: EMERGENT SIGNS AND SIGNS OF EMERGENCY

By 2016, economic, ethnic, and urban land reform conflicts were breaking out in various parts of the country, mainly in the Oromo region surrounding the capital city and the northern Amhara region but also in Addis Ababa. Two weeks after *mäsqäl* on October 8, 2016, the government declared a state of emergency.[10] As early as November 12, Tadesse Hordofa, chairman of the newly installed State of Emergency Inquiry Board (popularly known as 'the Command Post'), said in a televised statement on the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation that the government had detained 11,607 people, of whom 347 were females. Most of the detained people were accused of "creating and inciting violence, spreading terror and creating instability, burning private and public service institutions, and destroying investments" (EBC 2016). In the name of the Anti-Terrorism Law, Hordofa declared, the Ethiopian government and the security forces would arrest, detain, and surveil more people (see also Kibret 2017).

Just a few weeks after the T-shirt incident, the English-language version of the Ethiopian newspaper *The Ethiopian Reporter* (see Figure 3) summarized on its front page the new rules of the Command Post or — in the words of the newspaper, "The Main Don'ts of the State of Emergency" (October 22, 2016). What was allowed and what was seen as a menace remained at best only vaguely defined even by the government. According to the new guidelines, social media was a potential threat and a gateway to communicate with "outside forces." They classified certain TV channels such as the U.S.-based ESAT as terrorist organizations and potential sites for inciting terrorism. The Command Post also declared universities and schools to be sites where hatred was being or might be fostered. The section on gestures resonated with the experience of my interlocutors. Gestures such as crossing one's arms had suddenly become a political sign and a potential threat to the government and the country. Although initially introduced for six months, the state of emergency only ended in 2018.

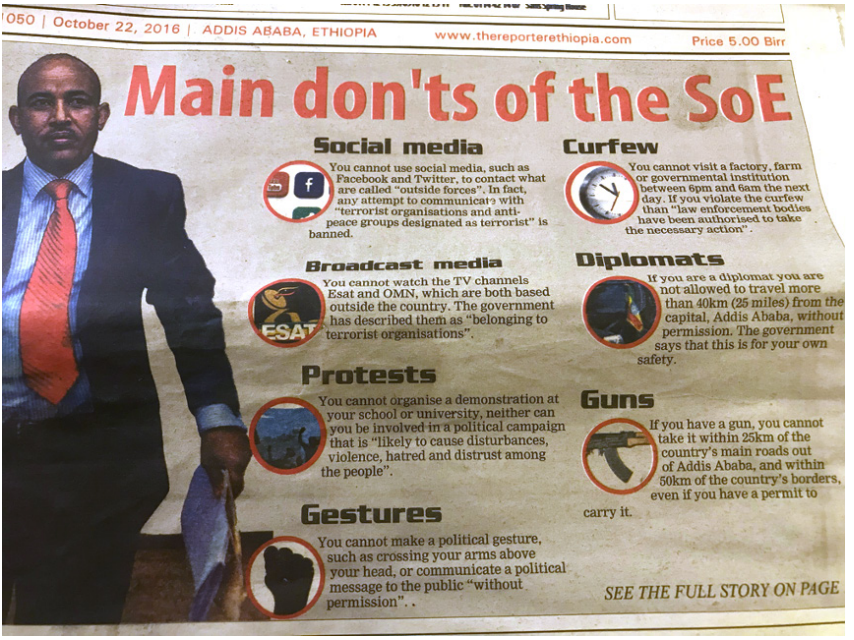

Figure 3. Front page of the October 22, 2016, issue of *The Ethiopian Reporter*, a daily Ethiopian newspaper. The article depicts Siraj Fegessa, the Minister of Defense and Head of the Command Post Secretariat, alongside the "Main Don'ts of the State of Emergency."

THE EMERGENCY AND THE ORDINARY

Several days after *mäsqäl*, police arrested Andergatschew, a friend of the *mäsqäl* organizing group. He had refused to wear the T-shirt. Regardless, Andergatschew was recognized in a picture from the feast that the opposition TV channel ESAT had circulated. The channel, based in Washington, DC, and Amsterdam, had reported on their T-shirts and subsequent arrests and shared pictures from the event (see Figure 4).

During Andergatschew's interrogation, other residents had to return to the police station to pick up their IDs while the rest hid. The fact that the police claimed to have recognized Andergatschew in the picture (not the image displayed in Figure 4) surprised me. How was it possible that someone in law enforcement could locate and track down Andergatschew in such a densely populated city, based solely on a diaspora media outlet report? My interlocutors replied that there was one local officer, Yared, who could recognize them. Even Iyasu seemed unfazed by Andergatschew's arrest and the intimacy of these transnational forms of recognition and capture that unfolded within a couple days. They felt connected not only to what happened in the country but to the diaspora in North America, Europe, and the world at large. But there was something

Figure 4. Screenshot of ESAT's breaking news broadcast on September 2016, depicting residents wearing the T-shirt. The heads and hands of the residents are blurred to ensure anonymity.

else. Andergatschew was of Oromo descent; his parents had given him an Amharic-sounding name in the hope that he would face less racialized discrimination and not be a target of state-surveillance or incarceration. Yet he was still captured. Some of his friends said that the authorities may see a young, poor, male Oromo as a potential menace. Iyasu was also profoundly upset at ESAT for releasing a picture of the residents wearing the T-shirts and said that ESAT only cared about their image as an oppositional counter force against the EPRDF government and not the fate of the people. For Iyasu, this made them no better than the government.

However, long before the state of emergency, the authorities had effectively declared these residents' neighborhood a site of emergency, foreshadowing the national state of emergency. While middle-class Ethiopians in Addis Ababa were just learning about the Command Post's new regulations, these rules had already been operating in most informal settlements in urban, poor Ethiopia.

BLACK EMPIRE AS AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE?

The materiality of the black cotton T-shirt with its specific iconography—Mary, biblical text—as well as the built environment that is unravelling and surrounding the residents coalesces with the affect that the T-shirt produces among the police, as well as the solidarity and grief for displacement among the residents. It opens an abyss. Édouard Glissant's poetic metaphor of the open boat bound to the abyss (1997) resonates with the openness and instability inherent in the black T-shirt—an object embodying and bound to the violent histories of urban dispossession and the uncertain futures of those displaced in Addis Ababa.[11] The abyss also mirrors a liminal space occupied by the T-shirts and their circulation: sites where the irrecuperable loss such as Finfinne, trauma,

and the possibility of new relations converge. That is, the impending vanishing of the neighborhood, and with it the social and economic bond it contained, opens space for new possibilities such as the collective work and the semiotic redefinition of *säm-na wärq*. The practice of *säm-na wärq* has an inherent double meaning. Yet who gets to inscribe meaning to words and the surrounding (as well as the question of individual or collective agency) is neither fixed nor stable. More importantly, this ethnographic moment shows that the visibility and (il)legibility of the T-shirt and its meaning is a semiotic process itself. Historicized semiotic landscapes such as the imperial histories, contemporary political tensions as well as the global capital flows provide a crucial background especially when mobilized in fragmentation.

The case of the T-shirt depicts the multiple scales of circulation as a constitutive force. From the residents, the organizing committee, the printing house to the neighborhood feast. Through police surveillance, to arrests to diaspora media and transnational recognition. Each circulation creates new meanings and affect. Yet there are also limits and boundaries within affective infrastructure. Andergatschew's arrest even though he was neither wearing nor involved in the T-shirt, is pointing to racialized and ethnic histories of exclusion and racial profiling. There are also gendered boundaries that simultaneously offer refuge. While Bethlehem's house was a crucial site of care and protection, women weren't wearing the T-shirts during the feast holiday (albeit Rediet was part of the organizing committee). Lastly there were important class distinctions and religious dynamics, in terms of what could function as a background and which other forms were discarded (see MacLochlainn 2022 on the generic).

To understand these dynamics, I suggest using the term *affective infrastructure* and *affective infrastructures* interchangeably to unpack how material and immaterial worlds are conjured, assembled, and felt. The distinction between the material and immaterial is of course anything but straightforward and certainly not stable (Drucker 1994; von Schnitzler 2013). Nonetheless, tracing how and when infrastructures and material objects emerge—and how they shape social worlds, or the other way around—implicitly stabilizes the subject-object relationship. Moreover, efforts to understand the effects of the material on the immaterial, and vice versa, rely on an already consolidated framework for locating objects and meaning. That is, a semiotic landscape already situates what we understand to be objects/material things and how to identify a sign. This process of identification does not occur in the interaction between the material and immaterial but rather through the backgrounds (or a consolidated frame) that already and practically shapes our ability to recognize things and signs.

Martin Heidegger's analogy of the hammer and the role of "equipment" (*das Zeug*) is a useful way of engaging the surroundings and landscapes that the T-shirt opened and foreclosed not only by its makers, but also by state officials, police, and diaspora publics. For Heidegger, the closest relationship between the hammer and its "entity" (*das Seiende*)—that which simply "is"—occurs when we encounter it detached from the intellectual knowledge and appearance of the entity itself. The "less we stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiled is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment" (Heidegger 1962, 98). Building on this analogy and the boundary-making of what is regarded as ready-to-hand or part of an affective infrastructure of black empire that the T-shirt unfolds, I suggest that forms inhabit infrastructure and affect, and signs signify them. Webb Keane frames semiotic ideology as that which tells us "what signs are and how signs function in the world" and, more importantly, highlights the openness and inherent destabilizing capacity of things (2003, 419). Keane suggests that within the practical realization in representational economies, it is actually the exclusions and omissions ("things become objects") in a process of objectification that configures the boundaries and the possibilities of becoming and appearing as subjects and objects (2003, 423). His important intervention against a blunt approach that privileges language as the model to foster "meaningfulness" is crucial to understanding the historicity and affective flow of infrastructure.

Urban residents as well as the Ethiopian national government and the Addis Ababa city administration have mobilized local histories, blackness, and color by working with the rubble and stones that the evictions in Arat Kilo left behind. I argue that we need to understand blackness as an affective infrastructure that encompasses both imperial formations and subversions simultaneously.

In short, *affective infrastructures* describe how materiality, affect, and semiotics coalesce in embodied practices that exceed conventional understandings of infrastructure either as physical constructs or as metaphors for sociality. While we often think of infrastructure and affect as separate modalities or analyze how one influences the other, I suggest considering affective infrastructure as an entanglement of the immaterial ("that which is insignificant in its materiality"; Drucker 1994, 14) and material, hinging on the background (historicized semiotic landscape) to activate this potentiality in objects and emergence of subjects through the background. Paying attention to the background recognizes the blurriness of boundaries and what is excluded from view. It also readjusts our view. For example, it maps Bethlehem's house as an infrastructure of care

(and not simply in terms of demolition/renewal), creating and holding space to store the T-shirts, as a venue for conversations, and as a safe haven for unhoused residents.

Beyond the search for freedom and liberation, the histories of rejection of enslavement and subjugation also implicate blackness and black empire as affective infrastructures—often in the language of Afrofuturism, Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism, and black imperialism. Like spoken language, infrastructure always exists within a collective frame—shared, used, and in constant motion. The literature on infrastructure has arguably overemphasized a lens of production; here, however, we see circulation not only as a transmitter but also as a co-constitutive force, creating a specific type of sociality that privileges global corridors. Yet it also remains tethered to local Indigenous histories and vocabularies. Just as Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma (2002) describe circulation as a driver of financial capital creating transnational capitalism and value, I argue that the circulation of objects such as the T-shirt also produces affective and semiotic flows that reconfigure notions of blackness and empire.

For example, the T-shirt's embodiment of black empire and the urban infrastructural desires of the city administration appear to decenter American-centric connotations and deploy a more global infrastructure. And it is a deployment that is oriented and reoriented through Chinese capital and infrastructure. Under the banner of "China-Africa friendship" and a promise of mutual benefits, such investments are an alternative to Euro-American dominance and the specter of indirect postcolonial rule (Visser and Cezne 2025; Chakrabarty 2016). Yet, these partnerships are neither new nor equal (Adem 2012). They often impose the terms of the lender (e.g., Chinese loans on infrastructure projects often require exclusive recourse to Chinese construction companies) and rely on previous postcolonial patterns of engagement (Bräutigam 2009; Kimari and Ernstson 2020).

Thus, black empire materializes in continuous rearrangements of sensibilities, historical and cultural references, structures of feeling, invented genealogies, translocal alliances and international capital (such as the construction of the Friendship Park and the Adwa 00KM Museum). Instead of analyzing blackness as a scene of violence and foreclosure, blackness here becomes affective infrastructure, a means of recuperating legacies, polities, and lines of flight from the fragmentations and residues of imperial/colonial rule and slavery. Modes of improvisation, circulation, and the never-ending process of becoming characterize this understanding of blackness as affective infrastructure.

We have seen that a black imperial imaginary can also constitute a menace for the state—if mobilized by residents seemingly not profiting from the

economic gains of state projects ("a poor kid has nothing to fear nor to lose"). Indeed, the fear of objects such as the T-shirt, was not limited to things (inherently open and instable); that fear encompassed but fundamentally involved the environment itself. Philosopher Stanley Cavell reworked Freud's psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny by stating that the return of the familiar is "never just the same." Moreover, the familiar itself "is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same" (1986, 100). In other words, the circulation of the T-shirts resonated with a return of unresolved temporalities: imperial, communist, and pluralist legacies within the country's history; an unfamiliar sense that sounded familiar by evoking a return of a loss. The EPRDF government's fantasies about a state under siege circulated in a country that, ironically, the same government had defined as a pluralist nation-state since 1995. The promise of pluralism (often also framed within a notion of an Ethiopian renaissance and, more importantly, the return of a black empire) and urban renewal did not resonate with my interlocutors. In fact, metaphorically speaking, they had to plan for their own departure from the government's narrative of urban transformation. Yet, despite their impending dispersal due to ongoing evictions, there was a radical rhizomatic relationship between my interlocutors, the non-world that opened in front of them, and the language of empire. If circulation is a form, it has limits too. Not everyone could remain to occupy a *däbtära*-like space. Although Andergatschew was not the only one of Oromo descent in the group, the ethnic and racial registers of the state read him as "Oromo." They could not fully abstract him (while they "read" Sahle and Iyasu as Amhara and part of the empire). He was seen as a risk to the state not only in terms of collaboration and collectivity but also by being adjacent to such activities—a cruel reality of racial and ethnic inscription and revealing the limits of *säm-na wärq* as a liberatory practice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The T-shirt in Addis Ababa functions as an affective infrastructure of black empire and critique, shaping and expressing complex histories of displacement, racial imaginaries, capital and urban transformation. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, the aesthetic of a new Addis Ababa, characterized by a grey palette of glass and steel, is not merely a visual style but part of an affective infrastructure that shapes collective imaginaries of modernity, progress, and resistance. As these mega projects of infrastructure saturate urban spaces often reliant on foreign investment and debt, visions of futurity build upon histories of displacement, imperialism, and blackness. That is, by examining how urban

residents circulate and inhabit these objects and spaces, the essay has demonstrated that infrastructure extends beyond physical constructions to include affect, semiotics, and collective imaginaries. Yet the ethnography also revealed the production of gendered and racialized boundaries within affective infrastructures. The absence of female residents from publicly wearing the T-shirt, despite their organizing labor (such as Rediet's and Bethlehem's work), suggests that care work and visible risk-taking operated as gendered division of political labor. Andergatschew's arrest despite not wearing the T-shirt—apparently because police read him as Oromo—reveals how racialized hierarchies emerge and shape whose engagement with imperial aesthetics registers as critique versus criminalized dissent. While a full analysis of these dynamics exceeds this essay's scope, they point to crucial questions about whose bodies can inhabit or be merely adjacent to imperial imaginaries and how affective infrastructures are stratified not only by capital, but by gender and racializing forces even as they enable collective action and redefinition.

I return to Édouard Glissant, for him the refusal of the Other brings about the abysses of nonknowledge and desperation. It is an affect of loss. Impossible history is not the loss of what was such as Arat Kilo turning into the Friendship Park; it is rather never even having the memory of possessing (Drabinski 2010, 296). Glissant breaks with the logic of the universal and of universalism; relation, in brief, is not the universal but the passage of ideas across individual cultural contexts. He invokes rhizomatic ideas of multiple rootedness. He designates the space of location in the multiplicity and the relation. This perspective applies to the ethnographic account of infrastructure and erasure in Arat Kilo. If signs among my interlocutors and for state officials were no longer rooted and found beyond the boundary of the signified (such as the confusion over color and text) and the background was fundamentally unstable, then we need to think seriously about the open-endedness of relations as well as the affective (back) grounds as an abyss of nonknowledge. Meaning occupies different and multiple parameters before its formalization, but more importantly, meaning highlights its own historicity: signs always exist, but which ones count and to what end? It orients people toward opaque relations, yet the aesthetics and abyss point perhaps to modalities of repossession without possession. Rather than returning to an original point (such as Finfinne, which becomes an impossible history itself) making the T-shirts (albeit by an imperial bricolage) amid the loss of everything was perhaps a form of refusing capture and defining life beyond an extractive logic.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores a vanishing district in Addis Ababa, and the mobilization of material objects as a means of critique and resistance to state-led urban erasure. Tracing the production and politicization of a T-shirt commemorating the neighborhood's destruction, I consider how local histories, blackness, and imperial iconography circulate to shape collective imaginaries of black empire. I propose affective infrastructures *to describe how materiality, affect, and semiotics coalesce in embodied practices that exceed conventional understandings of infrastructure either as physical constructs or as metaphors for sociality. In particular, I show blackness operates as an* affective infrastructure *in contemporary Ethiopia, simultaneously mobilizing both histories of anti-colonial resistance and imperial formation to create new possibilities for critique and collective agency in the face of dispossession.* [Ethiopia; Black studies; empire; infrastructure; affect; semiotics; displacement]

NOTES

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1. The corridor projects currently encompass two spans: one stretching from the urban subdistricts of Piassa to Wollo Sefer and another from Piassa to Arat Kilo. Relocations were ongoing (in 2024), and the Piassa to Wollo Sefer corridor was slated to relocate an estimated 3,250 households and 14,183 people (Endale 2024). The future of the dislocated and dispossessed residents has been a major concern amidst these foreclosures (Solomon 2023; Fantahun 2024; *Economist* 2024; *Guardian* 2024).
2. Infrastructures also shape how people respond to precarious conditions and how crisis and violence shape lived experiences (Hudani 2024; Mbembe and Roitman 1995).
3. Hannah Knox (2017) and Alice Street (2012) have proposed *affective infrastructure* in their work; I build on their essays and elaborate the concept of *affective infrastructures*. Knox focuses on formal politics vis-à-vis material articulation of politics in the construction of a road and Street's essay studies of the role of spatial layering within infrastructures in a postcolonial hospital landscape.
4. According to the state, the "00KM" in the official name of the Adwa 00KM Museum signifies the zero-kilometer point in Addis Ababa from which the troops that fought in the Battle of Adwa were dispatched. This marker was built near the statue of Menelik II. Both sites point to black imperial histories of victory and geographical proximity.
5. The historian Endalew Djirata Fayisa (2020) has addressed and analyzed new archival data on the impact of the eviction of ethnic Oromo peoples from Finfinne and Menelik's occupation of the land and people. In doing so, his work focuses on Finfinne as a city and the history of Finfinne's transformation into Addis Ababa.
6. The names of my interlocutors have been anonymized. I used pseudonyms to protect their privacy and ensure their identities remain confidential, as they permitted me to conduct ethnographic research with and among them.
7. Marco Di Nunzio (2019) writes about the migration of people from rural areas to the city under the pre-1991 socialist regime and traces the economic changes and reconfigurations post-1990s for the second generations of internal migrants, like Dawit.

8. *Arat* means "four" in Amharic. Arat Kilo is often abbreviated as "4k."
9. Donald Levine's (1965) main argument is that the avoidance of confrontation marks the traditional habits, linguistic expressions, and psychological interiority of Amhara Ethiopians, which proliferated as Ethiopian culture. Thus, they constitute a major obstacle to modernization in contemporary Ethiopia and leadership echelons. Of course, others criticize Levine's argument as "orientalist" and describing a static, ahistorical tradition and homogenizing the culture and traditions of a particular group within Amhara (located in the cities and regions of Gondar and Wonz). On the contrary, we see in Mennasemay's (2014) analysis of *qné* a way of understanding change and emancipation. For Mennasemay, the *qné* tradition was a practice of social critique as well as space for reflexivity. "The *qné* conception of *ewqät* (knowledge) as part of the *säm* suggests the involvement of the body (as *siga*) and society in knowing, offering an alternative to the Cartesian conception of knowledge that undergirds development/modernization theories" (Mennasemay 2014, 23). Understanding the reality through the truth is a way of "giving *ewqät* conscience" and the tools for emancipation.
10. An obvious trigger for the national state of emergency was the stampede that occurred during the Ireecha harvest holiday on October 2, which became a political space that the government perceived as a threat (Horne 2017). The government said fifty-five people were killed while the opposition media estimated nearly 700 deaths.
11. The abyss, as Glissant describes it, refers to the geographies of the Black Atlantic and is a space of the unknown (boat, sea, and image), trauma and potentiality. This comparison is not to force a relation or to equate events and their long afterlives, but to probe similarities and differences. Invoking Glissant's abyss is an attempt to trace how a notion of blackness circulates across different spatial-temporal contexts.

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