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Cover image: New housing projects in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2016.
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A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

INTRODUCTION: Mobility and Inhabitation Amidst Racial Capital

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This series examines how the ecologies of race, labor, housing, and belonging are co-constituted within often rapid processes of infrastructural renewal. Through ethnographic, historical, and theoretical engagements, these essays explore how shifting environments in urban and maritime settings affect people's experience of racial subjugation and the structures of exposure and capture. The authors pay particular attention to modes of mobility and inhabitation through which a host of actors improvise, work, and live while navigating the forces of state control and economies marked by volatility. Instead of furthering a narrative of the urban poor and modalities of suffering, this collection of essays ethnographically describes aesthetic forms of improvisation and economic collaboration in material worlds. The modality to improvise is not merely an act of emergency but entails the search for relations (social movements, momentary alignments, diasporic modalities of kinship) and the mobilization of emergent

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backgrounds. Intellectual histories of Pan-Africanism and Blackness, broad communities such as an Islamic *umma*, colonial and new social housing projects, and living together along economically volatile landscapes all serve as emergent backgrounds. The search for an elsewhere is often not articulated in terms of politics or something easily apparent but in aesthetic and tacit formations. Famously, infrastructure reveals itself as background. We learn about infrastructure only when it breaks down (Star 1999). But what if we do not capitulate to the notion of a breakdown and envision infrastructure rather as a spillover indicating unseen alignments? In this vein, each paper in this collection explores how backgrounds (as abyss, infrastructure, nonknowledge) appear as forceful agents, bonds, or even soundscapes and how residents themselves *shift* narratives in their everyday lives.

Ideas for this collection of essays emerged from a workshop (entitled Capture/Connect/Shift: Infrastructure, Blackness, and Racial Capital) that took place in 2022 at the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In this workshop, we, the authors, aimed for an interdisciplinary conversation among anthropology, Black studies, history, urban and maritime studies. The thematic focus on registers of inhabitation seemed crucial and timely in terms not only of seeking to situate race, capital, and infrastructure outside the specificity of our own ethnographic regions but also of thinking about methods and theory within our discipline and, more importantly, beyond. In 2023, we returned to the conversation, with the editorial collective of *Cultural Anthropology* supporting our project. This time, we merged our efforts with scholars from the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, who had been conversing and discussing similar themes. We framed the project as an “Open Book” to signal the ongoing process of the endeavor and to make the relations visible. Developed over a series of conversations and workshops between 2024 and early 2025, the Open Book is a collective effort in building and resonating ideas. Each chapter not only emerges from an ongoing research project but also echoes and builds on ideas found elsewhere in the collection. We hope that this proposal of open-endedness invites more engagement and interventions. Building from ethnographic encounters and realities, this collection of essays has sought to think and engage them through the keywords of *capture*, *connect*, and *shift*. The interest in these keywords emerged from multiple avenues—from the specificities of our ethnographic and archival locations where these themes resonated across space and time and from a scholarly archive on infrastructure and capture.

REVISITING INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Recent literature on infrastructure in the Global South has fundamentally enriched our understanding on how we in this field think about infrastructure as sociality and surrounds (Simone 2004, 2022) as social meaning (“infrastructure as a condition of possibility for the relative commensurability of value judgments” across and within a community itself; Kockelman 2010, 419; Kockelman 2013; Larkin 2013) and how both visible and invisible infrastructures shape the spatial and temporal logic of a city (De Boek and Plissart 2004; Klinenberg 2015; Larkin 2008; Elyachar 2005, 2010). Instead of regarding the city as a mere extension of the state or simply as a refuse of state-led programs, scholars have shifted their attention to exploring more broadly the urban processes in the Global South. This has resulted in a scholarship on urban governance and urban planning that examines how urban residents navigate access to infrastructure, public goods, and belonging and that explores, vice versa, how infrastructure imposes itself on people, attachments, and the promise of a just future (Amin and Thrift 2002; Pieterse 2010; Larkin 2013; Caldeira 2000; Anand, Gupte, and Appel 2018; Anand 2017; Lancione 2016, 2020; Gastrow 2024). Scholars have also probed more explicitly the relationship between an anthropology of infrastructure and an anthropology of capture, a lens that is driven by centering the history and future of capitalism, climate, and fossil fuels (Cons 2025; Degani 2022; Degani, Chafin, and Cross 2020; Chafin 2019; Günel 2019; Mitchell 2009, 2013; see also Boyer’s 2014 proposition to understand “energopower” as a form of capture and power through the lens of electricity and fuel).

Yet, if infrastructure and capture were to be understood as similar operations with the logic of attaining a complete grasp of the grid, territory, or colonization, the telos in which we would begin to “see” infrastructures would be seemingly “straight,” linear, reifying proper (formal) and improper (informal) infrastructures. Conceptually, this would mean that complications within this (whether emic or etic) logic would appear as “failure” or breakdown. Furthermore, these spaces of breakdown or failure would become imbued with potentiality (see Ojani [2023] on fog capture and its material impossibility). Being attached to these promises and failures at the same time can be cruel, especially if these promises are denied from the outset. Lauren Berlant (2011) discusses how political subjectivity is formed through “the good life fantasy” and through the cruelty that arises during dramas of adjustment to the transformation of what seemed foundational into binding kinds of optimism. For Berlant, cruel optimism is an embodied, affective, and historical state in which subjects find

themselves bound to objects of desire that prohibit their full “flourishing.” In a similar vein Prince Guma proposed to understand urban infrastructures as incompleteness (collapsing ends and means), arguing against an implicit assumption that infrastructures are “the completist lure and inclinations” (Guma 2020, 728). Andrea Ballestero has highlighted that not everything can be captured and traces moments when objects (such as aquifers) resist being “infrastructuralized” (Ballestero 2019, 22).

We have learned that infrastructures as material and affect not only emerge from the site of factory floors and public goods, but also gain their force through circulation. We build on this idea of circulation in relation to *capture/connect/shift* in this collection. As the essays in this collection attest, infrastructures are forged within fugitive spaces, defined through their temporality, and momentary intersections and are encapsulated within networks of kin, strategic alliances across oceans among merchants, politicians, pirates, migrants, and residents on land. In line with Édouard Glissant’s (1997) radical proposition of relations, which calls for a space that acknowledges opacity, we do not aim to formulate new categories or claim to have a grasp of how to make infrastructure transparent, which is often aligned with thinking of domination and discovery. These insights into infrastructure’s opacity and incompleteness resonate with how Blackness operates as infrastructure—circulating, structuring life, and exceeding capture.

CAPTURE/CONNECT/SHIFT

This Open Book intervenes in infrastructure and Black studies scholarship by showing how capture, connect, and shift operate as co-constitutive rather than oppositional forces across diverse geographies of racial capital. Most essays extend the geographies of blackness beyond the North American context and classifications. In doing so, we aim to decenter race, Blackness, and oceanic movements from a U.S.-bound interpretation and perspective (see also Alves 2018; Shilliam 2015; Pierre 2013; Clarke and Thomas 2006; Gilroy 1993). Rather than proposing a singular origin of slavery and thus its afterlives, the Open Book traces how blackness emerges and circulates historically as an infrastructure, as an episteme, and as a diasporic and black experience in different geographies across time, space, and form. The aim is not necessarily to universalize or to compare but to think of the registers of inhabitation.

Capture has increasingly become a productive notion to describe the long durée of the transatlantic enslavement of Africans and the experience of forced labor within the plantations in the Americas, as well as the afterlives of slavery

more broadly and globally. “What is Man?” was a question often posed by scholars of the European Renaissance. Yet the idea of the “human” did not gain its force as a concept and a geographic identifier for Europe until the height of European imperialism and the Industrial Revolution. Ironically, this notion of the human deepened alongside the brutal scramble for Africa and a global logic of imperial and colonial expansion. Epistemologically, the idea of the human was co-constitutive to the term “nonhuman” (appearing under numerous aliases such as the “savage,” “enslaved,” “barbarian,” “native,” “colonized,” “postcolonial subject,” and “surplus labor”), which was simultaneously generic and specific (see also [MacLochlainn 2022](#) on indigeneity and the generic in Christianity). The complication arose when notions of humanity as universal, yet racialized and hierarchical, represented “both a system of thought and a mode of existence the meaning of which is a problem of historical analysis” ([Mafeje 1976](#), 309). For [Neferti Tadiar \(2022\)](#), the human, a reference to a society in which Man emerged, embodies a twofold capture in the regions of the Global South at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. First, it is embedded in war-making to bring “humanity” to a time or place where it had seemingly not previously existed (a war to be human); and second, it is the intricate process of becoming human in a time of war and decolonization (nonhumans being afforded humanity) ([Tadiar 2022](#), 6). The poet and politician Aimé Césaire wrote that it was not human contact between the colonizer and colonized, but relations of power that foregrounded a sensibility and reality of capture:

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = “thingification.” ([Césaire 2000](#), 42)

Frantz Fanon, who was taught and deeply influenced by Césaire at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France in Martinique, elaborated on the structures and objects of domination in [Césaire’s *Discourses on Colonialism* \(2000\)](#) by attending to the embodied affect of capture. Fanon described capture under (de)colonialism as “atmospheric violence, this violence rippling under the skin” ([Fanon 1963](#), 31) and connected the ephemeral feeling “rippling under the skin” to infrastructures. “We have seen as it develops how a number of driving mechanisms pick it up and convey it to an outlet.” ([Fanon 1963](#), 31). For Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, feeling, breathing, screaming, and pain are ways

of describing empire after colonialism (“The first wound for all of us who are classified as ‘black’ is empire,” [Dangarembga 2023, 19]). Disembodiment and embodiment are not necessarily dialectical; they can be operations and forces that are felt prior to definitions and classifications.

Wanguĩ Kimari’s essay (in this collection) frames the afterlives of slavery in urban Kenya (a landscape “replete with both the spectre and reality of capture”) as the promises of “enshacklement.” Capture enforces a modality of enclosure, and yet it also operates as a relation, potentiality, and life. These openings, caused by the pressures of capture and surveillance, entail numerous outlets. Capture as well as its countermovement can be written on the bodies of young people (Diouf 2003; Mohamed in this collection; Siegel 1998) and appear in music productions as counterculture (Gilroy 1993; Cielo, Vera, and Bone in this collection); capture can be configured spatially in the built environments (Beaujon in this collection; Gupte in this collection; Peano in this collection) and seen in the refusal of accepting the gifts/cargo from the ocean (Dua, Ben-Yehoyada, and Carnì in this collection).

One example of the afterlives of the histories of slavery as a global phenomenon is the exploration of how places and bodies in the Global South were translated as mere sites of resource extraction and waste (Tadiar 2022; Rodney 2018 [1972]). These afterlives of the histories of slavery also include an inquiry into how the sea beyond the Black Atlantic has become a site to think about “anti-imperial oceanic routes” and anticolonial imperialism (Hawthorne and Lewis 2023, 4; Ho 2004) as well as about how the sea has become capitalized as a mode of global shipping (Khalili 2020; Dua 2019; Cowen 2014). Scholars have had to theorize not only the notion of capture but also “escape” and the emergent fugitive spaces that became a generative site for escaped enslaved Africans, illicit kinship and trade, Black reconstruction, and anti-imperialism (Du Bois [1935] 2021; Spillers 1987; Moten 2018; Thomas 2019; Lewis 2020, 2022; Getachew 2019; Hawthorne and Lewis 2023). For Fred Moten, “fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It is a desire for the outside, for playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument” (Moten 2018, 131). Yet, as everyone knows, music can simultaneously captivate and lure one into a different space, offer solace, and create a space and site for a spontaneous ensemble (Sun Ra; Alice Coltrane; Hartman 2019; Simone 2019; see also Abels 2022 for sound and co-becoming). That is to say, music itself can be a site of intervention and allows for rupture. For example, Cielo, Vera, and Bone’s essay on how

young Ecuadorian Afro-descendant residents in coastal Ecuador inhabit extreme violent enclosures and yet, despite the risk of being captured by gangs, engage in musical collaborations and percussion ensembles. These ruptures extend beyond music and also appear in other spaces such as piracy at sea, rebellion on land, sabotage within production sites, sirens/shrieks in the domestic space, and self-invention to elevate one's social positionality.

If capture is about being held, about restraint, but is also captivating in its possibilities for fugitivity, escape, and rupture, it holds within itself the possibility of connection and relation. This mode of capture is resonant with an older anthropological tradition of building and sustaining relations. From marriage by capture (Herzfeld 1985; Barnes 1999) to the anthropologies of pastoralism (Fleisher 2000) to ontologies of hunting (Nadasdy 2007) to more recent discourses of extraterrestrial captivity and conspiracy theories (Lepselter 2016; Masco 2014; Masco and Wedeen 2024), capture has foregrounded and sustained socioeconomic, spatial and temporal relations. Far from refusing to enter a world of exchange, capture is often a privileged modality of inaugurating and sustaining social relationships (O'Neill and Dua 2018). This is not taking without giving; instead, capture conceals a reciprocity that often undergirds what initially appears as expropriation.

The ethnographic pieces in this collection bring together these multiple insights on capture, archives of maroonage (Brown 2020; Cielo, Vera, and Bone in this collection), practices of solidarity in face-to-face worlds (Diallo in this collection; Peano in this collection), and histories of transregional and of a “deep, global infrastructure of anticolonial connectivity” (Lee 2010; Shilliam 2015) spanning oceans, deserts, and other “vast expanses” (Rozwadowski 2018). As they do so, the contributions to this collection consider in what moments and under what conditions are connections and relations forged and reforged through practices of infrastructural engagement and mobility. Connections can be ephemeral as well as enduring, they bring human and nonhuman energies together and foreground the material affordances and possibilities of infrastructures within a variety of ethical and political projects (Keane 2016). Connections made and unmade are also stories of scale and temporality. Here, too, the question of relation becomes salient. For Glissant (1997, 171), relation is “a totality as openness and a temporary product of the process: ‘what is totality, once again, and through return, if not the relation of each matter to all others?’” These relations are forged in and through histories, but always in ways that emphasize futurity and becoming. Yet, connections are also toxic and corrosive, as

a number of our contributors note. To be connected is also to be hierarchically related, to be subjugated and burdened with the detritus of history such as the histories of capitalism and transnationalism. Relations, however, are not bound to the knowing subject and its constructs, but rather produced by its concept and within this order emerge through “its own specifications producing phenomena of a particular kind (ideas linked in a narrative)” (Strathern 2020, 18). As discussed above, infrastructurally, relations and connections are crucial not only materially but also socially. However, what and who is related and seen as connected is neither stable, nor fixed, nor ontologically preexisting (and thus cannot be understood through the dominant Western metaphysics of individualism). Against the notion of givenness and in line with Karen Barad’s proposition of inter-action, relations become determinate and exist within ongoing materializing relations (Barad 2007). Similar and yet different is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (2015) proposition of perspectivism, which provides a context for and genealogy of Amerindian thought that elicits forms of relationality and distinction that do not align with or mirror ingrained Western forms and insists on a radical alterity of the “native” conceptions.

Neither valorizing connection nor always seeking escape, the contributions emphasize the ever-present modes of captivity and care; they call attention to connection and corrosion and to the possibility of shift (shifting terrains; shifting relations; shifting power dynamics) that is at the heart of these sinews of connection (see, for example, Grewal and Kaplan 1994 on scattered hegemonies and transnational solidarities).

The essays in this collection describe the spaces within and beyond capture. Moreover, they engage with infrastructural spaces and life that exceed the logic of capture and extraction. For example, Aïcha Diallo’s essay reorients Dakar’s colonial and transatlantic history and contemporary forms of urban dispossession from capture to refuge. She shows how artistic collaborations and practices in Dakar unveil a different map, one that leads to sacred and spiritual spaces. Danielle Beaujon highlights in her description of the history of segregation in Algiers, a history shaped by expropriation, racism, and unequal urban planning, how the very attempt of capture also “lent itself to the subversion of the colonial panopticon. . . . The opacity of the Casbah became a resource, fostering a zone of fugitivity where rebellion flourished.” Sabine Mohamed’s essay equally emphasizes that even in the urban core, a site saturated with all kinds of surveillance, residents evade capture by turning its imperial logic of domination upside-down and turning a space to a site where one has nothing to lose (“A poor kid has

nothing to lose and a *4 kilo* [Arat Kilo] kid has nothing to fear.”) Rupali Gupte’s essay analyzes inhabitation, examining how residents of a large settlement in Mumbai have appropriated unaccounted space within the settlement’s housing scheme. She describes how they settled in the “gap” created by these policies and built a common space that extended the boundaries of their home. An extension of space not formally afforded to them. Similarly, Irene Peano’s essay suggests campization to understand the physical site of racialized labor force for Italian agribusiness. While these encampments act as a reservoir of workforce and a space of abandonment and enclosure, they are also sites of autonomous infrastructure and fugitivity and thus need to be understood as an extension.

But the infrastructures of capture can also create surplus and disavowal. In Jatin Dua, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, and Andrea Carni’s essay, Dua’s friend in Somalia learned about buried toxic material on land in Puntland and refused to get involved: “Oh, it’s on land? No. You don’t want to go there. If it’s on land it means someone drove it there. Someone buried it there. Don’t even send me the picture.” This statement illustrates not only disavowal but also the agency of the interlocutor to not be involved in the complicated nature of sovereignty and capture on land. Here, too, there is possibility of shift. If land is marked by refusal and disavowal, containers that wash ashore or shipwrecks at sea allow for the possibility of reflecting on relations, including toxic relations.

“THERE ARE NEW SUNS”

AbdouMaliq Simone (2022) proposes to think about the surrounds as a site (“as not this, but could be,” 33) that utterly refuses definition “where its nature is not captured in any specific manifestation but can nevertheless manifest itself in forms and situations that do not inherently belong to it” (Simone 2022, 33). Simone’s insistence on looking at the surrounds as a site is not only a radical re-configuration of what it means to inhabit but also points to places (the need for new vocabularies) and the sites that need to be prefigured and created (“there is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns,” Octavia Butler [1998]).

The search for new suns is a shared method across these contributions as they inhabit, however contingently and tenuously, conceptual and empirical worlds where capture and connection are not contradictory pulls but work together in constantly shifting constellations. But this world of shifting constellations is not just contingent and fleeting (albeit saturated with politics, affects that are precisely fleeting and evasive); it is one framed within histories of imperial relations and refusals, of genealogy and alliance.

Through our respective ethnographic and archival work, this collection reflects the intricacies of *capture/connect/shift* in the everyday and the long *durée* of (infra)structures and backgrounds. We are committed to exploring the thresholds that allow people to enter spaces of new potentialities. Of course, the politics of capture (in particular forms of neoliberalism, racial capital orderings, and effects of climate change) have entrapments that are neither easily sidestepped nor allow for an isolated “outside.” Blackness evaluated within preexisting paradigms and value systems makes it difficult to relocate the complicated and complex lives of Black and Brown people. However, our work describes how people (often in collaboration with nonhuman actors) are in search of a new language, new assemblies and gatherings, and environments that are as yet unarticulated. That is to say that often these assemblies, gatherings, or collectives (humans and nonhumans) are not seen as sufficiently legible or transparent within dominant logics of capital, politics, and classification.

We aim to tease out the relationship between modes of *capture*, *connect*, and *shift* among people, places, and meaning across planetary geographies. This Open Book leans conceptually on the Black radical tradition and anthropological literature that have engaged infrastructures in the Global South as well as on the study of affect in the world. In addition to arguing for the centrality of the Black radical tradition to anthropological formations (in the past, present, and possible futures of the discipline), we wager collectively that Black studies is generative in taking apart certain limits to categories such as the “urban poor” and the “Global South” that end up being trapped in a dualism where our interlocutors emerge as surplus or frozen in a never-ending dialectic. *Capture/connect/shift* is a gesture of dynamism and that points to the potential ends to the dialectic.

ESSAYS IN THE OPEN BOOK

The eight original inquiries in this collection explore the relationship between modes of capture, connect, and shift in a wide variety of contexts. Cristina Cielo, Cristina Vera, and Vanessa Bone’s essay examines future-making projects and trickster pasts in Black coastal Ecuador under conditions of military surveillance and racialized violence; Aïcha Diallo explores creative practices of enacting refuge as method and collectivity in Dakar’s spiritual and cultural landscapes, as well as in sites of disposability. Some essays address issues related to (post)colonial urban registers: Irene Peano looks at the colonial specters of migrant encampments in Italy and how these spatial formations function as extensive spaces of resistance; Wangui Kimari focuses on postcolonial urban governance practices in Nairobi, employing the notion of ensnarement as a mode

to maintain the unjust operations of the city; and a third, Danielle Beaujon's essay explores how racial segregation under French colonial rule in the city of Algiers emerged not from one legal ruling or policy, but rather from a slow yet persistent project of erasure, racial violence, and expropriation, reducing the urban opportunities for Algerians in the city. Rupali Gupte's essay is about inhabitation, analyzing how housing policies in Mumbai have brought to the fore the absurdity of demand-supply logics and how evasive domestic arrangements remind us to conceptually reframe the question of housing around questions of inhabitation and its spatial dimensions. Sabine Mohamed's essay on blackness as affective infrastructures spotlights a T-shirt that demonstrates how urban residents in Addis Ababa inhabited and critiqued the foreclosure of their urban district with the resonances of displaced bodies and their futures. Jatin Dua, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, and Andrea Carni's essay is on toxic relations and the disavowal of toxic waste circulating from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea.

NAVIGATING CAPTURE/CONNECT/SHIFT

In envisioning this collection as an Open Book we want to make explicit the forms of hospitality that structure our relations of writing and reading. While each essay can—and should—be read as a stand-alone piece, the conceptual work on the thematic ideas of capture, connect, and shift exceeds the boundedness of each piece. Rather it emerged very much in the conversations that structured the collaborations as well as juxtapositions from reading pieces that are otherwise separated by geography and disciplinary boundaries. We encourage readers to think of capture/connect/shift as both keywords that organize these essays, but also as invitations to think between and across these pieces. We invite you to read and think across, for example Danielle Beaujon and Rupali Gupte's essays and what thinking across time and imperial histories (French and British) can spark on homes and habitability? How might disposability (and resistance) emerge in Irene Peano's essay on migrant encampments in contemporary Italy and in Aïcha Diallo's essay navigating Dakar's spiritual and cultural landscapes? How do histories of enslavement and (anti)colonialism frame urban governance practices in Nairobi and Addis Ababa as explored by Wangui Kimari and Sabine Mohamed? What is gained in thinking from the littoral in both coastal Somalia and Ecuador as in the pieces by Jatin Dua, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, and Andrea Carni and Cristina Cielo, Cristina Vera, and Vanessa Bone? These juxtapositions are one possible itinerary, amidst multiple journeys, and we invite annotations, reflections, and comparisons to continue the conversations whose snapshots frame these pieces.

ABSTRACT

The introduction proposes capture/connect/shift as a dynamic framework for understanding how infrastructures operate through spillover, opacity, and incompleteness. Capture operates not only as enclosure but as a modality that holds within itself possibilities for fugitivity, rupture, and relation. Connections—whether through marronage archives, transregional solidarities, or toxic circulations—are simultaneously generative and corrosive, material and affective. Shift attends to how terrains, relations, and power dynamics remain in constant flux, revealing spaces within and beyond capture’s logic. Across eight essays that traverse diverse geographies and draw from historical archives, ethnographic encounters, legal and urban fields, and sonic engagements within black (maritime) geographies, the collection aims toward new vocabularies for inhabiting worlds where “there are new suns.” [Black studies; race; capitalism; infrastructure; urban planning; aesthetics; architecture; oceans; colonialism; Global South]

NOTES

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A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

TOXIC RELATIONS: Circuits of Evasion from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea

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In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino describes two vantage points from which to arrive to the city of Despina (Calvino 1974, 54–55):

Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea.... Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.

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Port cities, like Calvino's Despina, are "borderscapes" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 9) straddling two geographic media: land and water, a liminality that is central to processes of moving and mooring; of circulation and exchange. This dual orientation marks port spaces as constant sites of arrival and departure. Some regulated, some clandestine, these arrivals and departures give a rhythm to life along this threshold of land and sea (Denning 1996). Sometimes, certain arrivals muddle distinctions and temporalities—objects wash ashore; ships run aground; tsunamis churn up rubble from the hidden depths of the sea. In these moments, classifications and distinctions are sought and remade (Tazzara 2017; Hecht 2023, 16n57; Iodice 2025). Flotsam and jetsam, gift and theft, are not transparent descriptors. They rather encapsulate legal and ethical arguments about movement across the threshold, arguments which emerge from within encounters and arrivals (Shryock 2012). What arrives in and departs from ports and littorals is often referred to as "cargo," increasingly signified through dead-weight tonnage (DWT), the unit of measurement that quantifies the weight that a vessel can carry. Cargo, this abstraction, known through categories like "dry goods," "bulk," "oil," and "container," makes the specificities, geographies, and histories of trade disappear, thus concealing the relations of exploitation, violence, and commodification at the heart of maritime mobility (Baucom 2005; Sharpe 2016; Dua 2024). Here, we focus on a specific sub-category of cargo, referred to often as "toxic cargo," in order to understand the relationship between evasion and investigation in the making and unmaking of relations across space and time.

Relations across the Mediterranean and the Red Sea appear in the written archive as early as first-century, Roman sailing manuals that listed in rich details a diverse port geography from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean (Casson 2012). From the mid-sixteenth century an imperial infrastructural imaginary sought to cut a sea-lane through the Sinai Peninsula to connect the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and to ease access to the riches of the Indian Ocean. The Ottoman grand vizier had planned to dig a canal between the Mediterranean and the port of Suez in 1568, but the idea was abandoned after surveyors deemed it infeasible (Casale 2010, 135–37). It was only in the mid-nineteenth century, when the semi-private Suez Canal Company took on the task, that the idea came to fruition. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 marked a watershed moment in world economic history. The distance one had to travel from London to India was reduced by almost half, and the volume of goods that made their way to the port cities of the Indian Ocean increased exponentially.

Empire followed in the wake of the canal's construction as British, French, and Italian ships entered pre-existing worlds of trade and connection and ports like Massawa, Djibouti, Aden, Berbera, and Bosaso forged new routes and connections that continue to this day.

One such route connected Bosaso in Northern Somalia to ports in Italy between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. It channeled toxic, and perhaps also nuclear, waste. That route added Somali ports to a list of others around the world—Venezuelan, Romanian, Lebanese, Nigerian, to mention a few infamous cases—that became destinations for transnational toxic waste circulation in the 1980s. What sets the Italian-Somali route apart is that it is the only one that is both known and has not triggered a demand from the country that received the material that Italy excavate and retrieve it. Thus, there is something that is disavowed, acknowledged and evasive, hidden but also visible in these circuits of toxic circulation (Abu El-Haj 2023). These toxic circulations, we argue, emphasize the centrality of relations—corrosive and opaque but nonetheless relations—that are sustained over space and time; their corrosion persevering, through such opacity and “latency” (Liboiron 2021, 100). Through an examination of how relations are made—simultaneously legible and opaque—we reflect on the multiple registers of evasion that structure toxic waste's transnational *transportation*. Thinking through the trajectories of this “rubble” (Gordillo 2014) at sea and over land enables us to make visible the sinews of relationality that shape ports and other littoral spaces. We can thus consider the worlds of toxicity and obligation created in the wake of these relations—these arrivals and departures. In turn, our attention to the relations that facilitate toxic waste's circuit permit us to see how toxic waste attains new, destructive, value.

We join scholars who argue for a rescaling of toxicity from portraits of “chemicals as discrete entities” harming bodies in place (Murphy 2017, 495), emphasizing in our account the transregional relationship of evasion where transparency, secrecy, and history all structure mobility. To “capture [these] forms of violence that are ongoing, accretive, yet also diffuse” (Fennell 2018, 523), we examine how people see each other not just as connected through toxic circuits but also related (Ben-Yehoyada 2017, 12). This entails not only following ships, but also relationships (Hughes et al. 2021)—racialized colonial and postcolonial relations (Kahn 2023)—of cargo logistics and the investigative logics and limits of liberal governmentality structured through the production and circulation of documents (Hull 2012).

Our focus on toxic relations within a transregional frame is also an attempt to work against the kinds of regional silos within which this story gets told. This is a collaboration between scholars of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Andrea Carnì developed his research interest in the case of the Italy-Somalia route while studying the international trafficking of hazardous and radioactive waste from Italy to developing countries. To understand it, he analyzed some historical and legal primary sources about this illegal movement and he came to study the Somali case in the scenario of the “bad cooperation” (*malacooperazione*) within Italian foreign policy. Naor Ben-Yehoyada came across this Italo-Somali “bad cooperation” case and the Italy-Somalia route within his work on the 2011–14 trial for the murder of Mauro Rostagno, the sociologist, journalist, and co-founder of extra-Parliamentary left-wing group *Lotta Continua* (continuous struggle), who was murdered in 1988 after two years of intensive investigative journalistic work in the province of Trapani. Jatin Dua encountered tales of containers washed ashore and barrels buried inland in Puntland during his research in Northern Somalia from 2008–2014 on regimes of risk, protection and piracy in the Western Indian Ocean.

TOXICITY AND REGULATION

The unregulated or undocumented shipping of toxic and nuclear waste is situated at the intersection of two attributes of shipping cargo: the danger of carrying it and the risk in the discovery of the act of shipping it. The first entails shipping infrastructures and marine precautions, the latter—secrecy. These attributes do not always align. Various forms of toxic cargo that do not check both conditions have travelled in the broader period that interests us: the Cold War and its aftermath, throughout the Mediterranean and, more broadly, the European littoral (Paci 2024).

One captain who worked for twenty years in the national shipping company of a country that underwent arms embargo in the 1970s and was involved in other energy export limitations, recalled how before embarking from the company’s main homeport for a shipping voyage that entailed secrecy,¹

people would come with a portfolio with documents, which put everything under Liberian flag, with a Liberian home port. They would have gotten it from the embassy. It had all the appropriate signatures. If you needed to take jet fuel to Odessa or arms [...] from Zeebrugge, or export [dangerous chemicals], you also repainted the ship’s name and home port on the [ship’s] hull.

The “Sparky,” the ship’s communication’s officer also had to report to that country’s navy “every six hours our location, encrypted.” In one case, while the country was at war and under international limitations on what ammunitions could be shipped to it, the ship was about to carry arms back to the ship’s actual home port. When the pilot maneuvered the ship in port, “he knew to take you to an isolated pier, even though I saw on the way many vacant slots in the more central parts [of the port].” The pilot at least, also knew exactly where the ship had come from. “The pilot comes on board, and the first thing that he asks is for glass of [the country’s national drink].”² Similar voyages have caught investigators’ attention over the years. In the late 1960s, Italian ports served in shipping to Israel arms it was not supposed to receive. Italian prosecutors who were tracing the networks of neofascist terrorists came across how Italy’s unique position within NATO made it an actor in U.S.-drawn triangulations with Israel.³

The particular case of transnational maritime toxic waste circulation that we examine here is of the dangerous *and* unregulated kind. It is unregulated not in the sense that there are no documents about it. There are: forged, fake, false, or misleading. Similarly to exposed cases of breached sanctions (Yıldız 2020, 2021), in the aftermath of those voyages that do get discovered, documents proliferate: investigative, prosecutorial, testimonial, parliamentary (Carnì 2023). What remains crucially undocumented is a certain combination of the sender, the receiver, the composition of the material, and/or the route, rendering the paramount account of the circuit uncertain, and thus accountability for it largely unattainable. This form of *undocumentation*, we argue, reflects the centrality of opacity in structuring relations.

Since transnationally circulating toxic waste embarks on unregulated journeys because of someone’s need to move them offshore exactly in that manner because of their toxicity, it departs from the wider set of things—dangerous, secret, or both—that anyway travel through ports; as they do from the wider set of shipped goods, which are neither dangerous nor secret (Mellinato 2024). This opacity turns the choreography of investigation and evasion regarding toxic relations into the maritime infrastructure of transnational disavowal (Abu El-Haj 2023). That is so, because while official and independent investigations have revealed enough about this circuit to merit calls for justice and accountability, the dynamics of these investigations and institutional conduct, which have made it impossible to deny the circuit, can still ultimately dismiss it (Wedeen 2019, 164; Abu El-Haj 2023, 257). In our particular case, the dynamic of such disavowal is transnational and international, rather than personal or limited to the state.

This toxic waste circuit has received media and some political attention as soon as it was revealed and, more recently, academic attention as well (Hilz 1992; Hecht 2012; Müller 2023; Carnì 2024). Most famously, Greenpeace coined in 1992 the term *toxic colonialism*: “the dumping of industrial wastes of the West on territories of the Third World.” In her illuminating *The Toxic Ship* (2023), which follows the voyage of the *Khian Sea*, a ship that left Philadelphia in 1986 carrying 15,000 tons of incinerator ash, Simone Müller recounts the globalization of hazardous waste, environmental justice, and environmental governance in the following decades. Müller explicitly focuses on the kind of regulatory aspect that excludes nuclear waste. Her reason for doing so is that “[n]uclear waste [...] constitutes a waste category legislatively, culturally, and historically distinct from hazardous waste” (Müller 2023, 6–7). Others have focused more specifically on nuclear waste and its afterlives (Hecht 2012). Studies on toxicity often foreground the particular materiality of toxic waste and the epistemic communities and fault lines that form around it: how bodies and communities engage with “the local, regional, and global forms of power that have made... [their] contamination possible.” This perspective reveals how “bodies are connected to commodity chains, to uneven relations of colonial/postcolonial power, and thus to world systems” (Agard-Jones 2013, 192).

In this essay (and in our broader project), we focus less on the particular substance, but on those cases where the nature of the material is mixed or unverified. First, because such mixing plays a role in the attempt to evade discovery. Second, because such a focus permits a shift in attention from the toxic material to the relationship that sustains its evasive transport, its disappearance and its, ambiguous if any, reappearance. The opacity of transnational waste transport, resonates with, and at times depends on the longer histories and geopolitical worlds of capture and evasion, within which these circuits emerge, become legible and, finally, disappear. We do not claim that this scenario is unique to shipping. We rather suggest that at sea we gain a privileged perspective of the transnational relations, political imaginaries, and colonial or imperial pasts (Ben-Yehoyada 2017; Dua 2024). These relations and histories are crucial to understanding circuits of toxic waste transportation.

A SHIPPING CIRCUIT

The transnational shipping of toxic waste challenges our idea of global shipping for one important reason. Maritime shipping in the global economy has mostly been understood as the transporting culmination of an economic

exchange: the shipment of merchandise following a selling and purchase deal. In this scholarship, shipping routes are made and unmade through transnational circuits of labor and financialization (Khalili 2020; Campling and Colás 2021). Toxic waste shipping, while built on a buyer-seller transaction, contains within it a deep uncertainty. The uncertainty and surprise regarding the ability to unload, bury, and leave underground or on the seabed toxic material means that shipment is an open-ended voyage, which can take the material, and at times the ship, through multiple continents and ports of call. Yet, as we will show here, these detours are not random but rather reflect longer histories and relations. Toxic routes, thus are routes made *in media res*.

While transnational toxic waste traffic is probably as old as nations, two key years structure the toxic routes we explore here: 1972 and 1986. Until 1972, throwing waste overboard was not regulated. That year, the London “Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter,” which went into effect in 1975, promoted the effective control of all sources of marine pollution (currently, 101 States are parties to the London Convention or the London Protocol).⁴ The second date, April 26, 1986, to be exact, is the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster, which triggered a shift in public opinion and institutional treatment of nuclear waste and, by implication, toxic waste as well. In Italy in particular, a national referendum in November 1987 abrogated three laws “concerning nuclear plant siting and the activity of the public electric company *Ente Nazionale Energia Elettrica* (ENEL) in the nuclear sector” (Orsini 2022, 139). At that point, all traffic of radioactive material became illegal. The various forms of trade and transport that had proceeded more or less promiscuously until that point began to receive more attention. For example, until that point, there were no radioactive detectors in ports in Italy, so it was impossible to turn a ship away because it carried radioactive material. More broadly, the late 1980s marked a rise in public awareness to the movement of objects from urban and industrial heartlands to planetary peripheries (Caraher 2024, 52).

Until the 1987 referendum, nuclear material transit through or from Italy was a transparent affair. Most of these trades had been authorized on paper. As a result, they left a paper trail. There are documents from the Foreign Ministry that authorized all these trades (two examples are Nigeria and Lebanon; Carnì 2025). After the referendum, even that partial authorization was annulled. From that point, clandestine trafficking was investigated when it was discovered. What this means for us methodologically is the prevalence of a rich trove of

documentation on transnational waste circuit that centers on Italy's critical role as the originator and a major site of transshipment of toxic waste both when it was legal and then when it was illegal. This allows us to start mapping the ways in which shipping of toxic waste was categorized as waste or not, critiqued and made legible at multiple locales, from ports to governmental reports as we see below in the voyage of the *Radhost*.

In January 1987, three ships carrying over 2,000 tons of toxic waste left the Italian port of Marina di Carrara for the Red Sea. The *Radhost*, the *Baru Luck*, and the *Lynx* were contracted by a Milan-based company called Jelly Wax following agreements to bury this waste in Djibouti. In Djibouti, the French Navy blocked the ships and prevented unloading. After several days, they left toward Puerto Cabello, near Caracas, in Venezuela, where upon arrival, unloading commenced. Since this took place in early 1987, before increased illegalization, all loading and unloading was documented, including some wrongdoing and false reporting. Once those were discovered, the Venezuelan authorities forced the Italian company to reload and repatriate the waste. The *Radhost* made its way to Beirut, arriving in Beirut port on September 21, 1987. At that point, ten months had passed and still the waste had not been permanently deposited. In Beirut, the *Radhost* started to unload 241,131 tons of material for more than two weeks (until October 6, 1987). Meanwhile, Lebanese press and Greenpeace started mobilizing against the operation. During preliminary research, a former resident of Beirut told us that churches organized to toll their bells while the trucks were passing toward the Beq'a valley so as to encourage people to come out and block them. Following the uproar, the Lebanese government forced the Italian government to intervene, and the material—at least some of it—was repatriated to Italy in 1988.

The Italian government agreed with one caveat: the state refused to take responsibility for an affair that it insisted on considering as involving only companies, not states:⁵

It seems appropriate, in this case, to clearly emphasize that the recovery intervention carried out by the Italian Cooperation in 1988—of the approximately 12,000 barrels then found of residues of the Italian chemical industry Jelly Wax, transferred to Lebanon through the Ecolife Company—*was merely humanitarian in nature* and did not involve any implicit admission of responsibility on the part of the government, moreover never even aired by the Lebanese authorities. (Braga 2018, 38)

The Italian government's rhetorical framing choice illuminates both the growing moral recrimination of transnational irregular toxic shipping and the postcolonial context in which it sought to operate as evidenced by the choice to frame this simultaneously as an entirely corporate affair and made legible through the discourse of the “*merely humanitarian*.” What we have here is not just evasion, but transnational disavowal.

FROM EVASION TO TRANSNATIONAL DISAVOWAL

Shifting our analytical attention from evasion to transnational disavowal, we must retrace how waste dumping became an object of investigation in Italy, what relations the circuit mobilized, as well as the relations that attempted to counter this circuit. For that, let us return a bit in time. Several reports and investigations mentioned Romania as one of the first countries supposed to receive radioactive waste in the 1970s and 80s, particularly the Sulina Peninsula in the Black Sea. Sulina is situated at the end of one of the branches of the Danube River, just south of Romania's border with Ukraine, which runs along the river's main, northern branch. As we shall see, Sulina does appear in some of the official Italian authorizations for transport and export of material, however the absence of facilities to process the waste in Sulina meant that any reference to Sulina was really a recognition that waste had been dumped at sea. The 2010 Greenpeace report on Italian toxic ships acknowledges as such in its conclusion: “The Italian magistrate investigating the case confirmed that much of the waste had been exported to Sulina, Romania, on board the ship Akbay-1 and others. Since no waste facility existed in Sulina, it is likely that the barrels were dumped at sea.” Such assumed dumping had been the previous practice as well. Specifically for the Greenpeace report, it connected to “364 barrels full of waste [including solvents, pesticide residues, acetone and lead] washed ashore on the Turkish Black Sea coast” between July-December 1988 (Greenpeace 2010, 11–12).

This mode of documentary practice—of transforming a call for repair by a postcolonial state into “*merely humanitarian*” action or the invention of Sulina as a destination for containers is a process of transnational disavowal that draws our attention from the specific question of documents' existence to the epistemological labor of disqualifying, ambiguating, and ultimately dismissing their location, existence, or the meaning of their content (Abu El-Haj 2023, 253; Ben-Yehoyada 2024). In the case of Sulina, the information came from the documents we mentioned, but also from the deposition of a person called Aldo Anghessa. He was interrogated by prosecutor Francesco Neri and his investigating

collaborators (one of them was Natale De Grazia, more on him below) in 1995.⁶ After describing to his interrogators the long chain of investigations against him, Anghessa explained the traffic:

The real contents of the traffic are usually hidden under the name of iron material, landfill, inert, and even grain. The inert materials could make people think that the abusive disposal of these substances can take place in quarries safely located in the South ([Italian regions of] Campania, Apulia, Basilicata and Calabria).

With reference to the abovementioned traffic, it is certain that disposal can take place in three distinct ways: a) burial in locations in southern Italy in old quarries or landfills; b) sinking of ships normally in extraterritorial areas (7–8 cases are known); [c] disposal in third world countries (until the year 1989–90 they were Romania, port of Sulina – where the commander of the port was shot for opposing the unloading of these said materials...

As are various other impresarios of this realm of commerce and shipping, Anghessa was a compelling figure. In the article recounting his passing in the Italo-Swiss newspaper of Ticino region, described him as “self-styled secret agent” (Storni 2020):

One of the most controversial faces in Ticino and Italy from the 1980s to today has died in exile in [Dakar in] Africa at the age of 76—he was involved in various large investigations, often with unclear roles: sometimes informer, sometimes accused, sometimes both.

A more empathetic piece added (Fusi 2020):

The legendary Alpha-Alpha, Lotti-Ghetti Agent, Commander Manfredini. Take your pick from his thousands of successful masks. He died alone, as he always lived, even when he was among others, an actor in a spectacular play, of which he was the author, protagonist, and director, and which had since his youth taken the place of his real existence, his real feelings, his real self.

As he was wearing one of these masks, Anghessa told his interrogators the story about the “gunned down” commander of the port of Sulina, which they duly wrote down. It remained unclear whether he had attained that information in the first person or had read it in the newspapers. For example, already in October 1990, the *Corriere della Sera* reported on the shifting of waste traffic toward Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. One of the pieces on the topic that day argued:

That the port of Salina [sic], facing the Black Sea, has not been during the 1970s and 1980s a normal commercial port is demonstrated by an obscure episode of 1987. That year, the port manager was put under judicial investigation, arrested, and replaced by a right-hand man of the “royal family” [Ceașescu].

Why Anghessa turned the investigation, arrest, and dismissal of the commander into being “shot”—we could only assume. In any case, this liberal rephrasing shows how indices of evasion and its context come from sources that, much after the fact, remain invested in maintaining things unclear. Within our attention to transnational disavowal, such a question illuminates the tension between trying to reconstruct what happened on the one hand and trying to reconstruct the epistemic relationship that accompanies exactly such attempts at investigation.

These investigations have taken many shapes over the years. The most stable organizational attention to toxic cargo comes from the longest method for studying the routes and fates of cargo more broadly: that of maritime insurance companies. Since insurance companies act as guarantors and protectors of cargo (Dua 2019, 110 et passim) in the aftermath of loss (and given that many ships were sunk and containers “lost” at sea), a paper regime exists of claim-making by ship owners, shipping companies, and cargo owners where toxic cargo is converted into claims for compensation.

Another form of investigation is by environmental organizations, the most central of which is Greenpeace, as already mentioned. In their 2010 report, Greenpeace researchers construed the object of their study as a network with a global reach, which during 1994–7 expanded its influence. Through company ownership and financial relations, the 2010 reports outlines “a loose network of companies, trusts and individuals” (Greenpeace 2010, 6):

Greenpeace found out that between 1987 and 1996 the network attempted to dispose of hazardous waste in Guinea, Brazil, El Salvador, Lebanon, Nigeria, Mexico, Mozambique, Paraguay, Romania, Somalia and Venezuela. The network's operative branch in Italy included at least 26 companies handling an estimate 3000 tonnes of waste per day, with a total value of about \$4.8 million.

Yet another form of investigation is that carried out by state officials. Here too variety and hierarchy of criminalizing power is the rule. We can examine the pathways of investigation from their end. The parliamentary investigative commissions have operated since the mid-1990s, in various distinct moments. For example, the first commission's chairperson was Massimo Scalia, one of the founders of the Italian national environmentalist union, *Legambiente* (then "*Lega per l'ambiente*," founded in 1980 out of the antinuclear and environmentalist struggles of the late 1970) and later a deputy from the Green Party (Carnì 2023, 95). The Commissions have been summoning documents from various investigations over the years, by different investigating and prosecuting offices, which had dealt with infringements as broad as insurance fraud, shipping document fraud, waste register fraud, misclassification of hazardous waste, and illegal waste dumping. The investigative bodies varied between local prosecutors of environmental or economic matters, the regional districts of anti-mafia prosecution directorate, and provincial magistrates (*pretore*). Investigators included pretty much all policing entities: the Forest Corps, the *Carabinieri*, the State Police, the Coastguard, and Financial Police. Regardless of the particular investigative body in question, no case of a poison ship ever made it to the conclusive phase of criminal investigation and prosecution. While most researchers of this realm—some of them by decree and delegation from state and international institutions—agree that something should have been found, officially speaking, nothing ever was. In a sense, transnational disavowal expands from the logic of concealing testimony to the logic of state. Such logic pilots "ships of poison" to the next leg in their voyages. When they are sunk within the horizon of Italian public attention, that is, offshore Italy, they turn into "ships to lose [*navi a perdere*]."

A POISON SHIP TO LOSE

The ship *Jolly Rosso* was one of the vessels leased by order of the Italian government to collect and return the material from Lebanon. On January 10, 1989, while the ship was loading the material in Beirut port, several shots were fired at

American journalists who were filming the operations. Eight days later, the *Jolly Rosso* made it to the Italian port of La Spezia, and in April unloading began. It remained in port until 1990. The ship, which was not deemed seaworthy on December 6, 1990, was suddenly approved for departure less than a day later and sailed to Malta. At that moment, the ship's owning company changed its name to *Rosso* (Carnì 2024, 101). The *Rosso* arrived in Malta on December 12 already under her new name. A day later, after some transshipments, the *Rosso* left headed toward La Spezia and then Port Sudan. On the next morning, after crossing the Strait of Messina northward, the ship emitted SOS for taking water in. The crew was rescued by a ship transiting nearby, while the ship drifted and then beached at Amantea, on the Calabrian coast.

Several irregularities in the following days raised the suspicions of environmental officials and activists. The entire area was cordoned off, yet subsequent checks concluded that some material had been taken off the ship. Later examinations revealed a sort of opening in the hull from which some material would have been pulled out clandestinely. Yet no legal evidence of such retrieval was ever produced. Finally, and strangely, someone had painted over the company name on the ship's hull.

The waters offshore southern Calabria are strewn with sunk ships like the *Rosso*. Dozens of them have been suspected over the year as “*navi a perdere*” or “ships to lose” (Braga 2018; Carnì 2024). The only one concretely traceable to the routes of toxic waste is the *Jolly Rosso*, then *Rosso*. And even in this case, no material was found on it at the moment of its beaching. The *Jolly Rosso/Rosso* is the only ship of the entire toxic shipping fleet that combines various conditions that make it legible as a toxic ship: it made it back to Italy, supposedly with material that had been sent transnationally. It was identified with the material that it carried until its last journey—making the ship itself an emblem of its cargo, rather than its mere vessel or host. And it beached, as opposed to drowning or altogether disappearing. As a result, the *Jolly Rosso/Rosso* became a monumental emblem of the entire chain of affairs. Consequently, it received much attention from journalists, activists, and magistrates.

At the same time, no investigation about the beached ship clarified the multiple doubts surrounding the fate of its cargo. On the contrary, investigations proliferated these doubts. The name change from *Jolly Rosso* to *Rosso* construed the ship not through its penultimate part in the set of “poison ships, but rather through its ultimate voyage *en route* to become a “ship to lose.” It is in the folder bearing that title that the ship's beaching resides in the Reggio Calabria Public Prosecutor's Office, under her last name, *Rosso* (Carnì 2024, 101).

In the case of the Calabrian ships of poison, one investigating official was killed in circumstances so obscure that an enquiry into his death was opened by the Italian Parliamentary Commission on waste circuits. Natale De Grazia, mentioned earlier, was an officer of the Italian Coast Guard. In 1994, after he was transferred to Reggio Calabria, he collaborated in a pool of three investigators and one magistrate that looked into the traffic of toxic and radioactive waste. On December 12, 1995, while on a mission to La Spezia with the other two investigators, De Grazia died suddenly, and his autopsy, which spoke of “athlete’s collapse,” raised even more doubts. At least one of his collaborators, who told us about their work, treats De Grazia’s death as the act taken to derail their investigation, which succeeded.

The affair that ended with the beaching of the *Jolly Rosso/Rosso* reveals how evasion and investigation produce an ongoing transnational relationship of disavowal. At sea, such relationship accompanied the toxic cargo for four years: from the January 1987 departure of the *Radhost*, the *Baru Luck*, and the *Lynx* from Italy, to the beaching of the *Rosso* in December 1990. Ashore, the dynamics continue through periodic attempted investigations to this day.⁷ This particular form of disavowal requires, therefore, continuous maintenance. In this case, maintenance entails killing, thereby opening up new investigations and further forms of evasion. This goes beyond situated coverups or individual corruption, though plenty of that happens too. This transnational form of disavowal ends up dismissing—ironically through the investigation that produces doubts and dead-ends—the suspicions that triggered it in the first place.

The co-production of evasion and investigation into transnational disavowal also emerges when looking at another circuit, the transportation between Italy and Somalia. What sets the Italian-Somali route apart is that it is the only one that is both known and has not triggered a demand from the country that received the material that Italy excavate and retrieve it. Indeed, what emerges most clearly here is how the colonial and the postcolonial seamlessly move into each other and the multiple scales of disavowals that nonetheless constituted, and constitute, an enduring, albeit toxic, relation.

ITALO-SOMALIA

Italy’s encounter with Somalia was one forged by the sea. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the period preceding and immediately following the construction of the Suez Canal, a scramble for ports and protectorates emerged along coastal Horn of Africa. As nineteenth-century European imperialism

encountered non-European others, a central legal question emerged regarding the relationship between Europeans and the “uncivilized.” Within an emerging world of legal positivism, where legal relationships could only exist between two sovereign nations, how might one understand the non-European other? For many, legal relations could only be envisioned between Europeans, citing international law “as a product of the specialized civilization of modern Europe... [that] forms a highly artificial system of which the principles cannot be supposed to be understood or recognized by countries differently civilized” (Hall 1880, 40). Against this position, Jon Westlake in his now classic *Chapters on the Principles of International Law* (1894) suggested that international law turn to established form of the Protectorate, that had its history in European encounters with Indigenous populations in the Americas. As Westlake noted:

When a people of European race comes into contact with American or African tribes, the prime necessity is a government under the protection of which the former may carry on the complex life to which they are accustomed in their homes, which may prevent European powers for supremacy on the same soil, and which may protect the natives in the enjoyment of a security not less than they enjoyed before the arrival of strangers. (Westlake 1894, 141)

Along the Red Sea coast, the protectorate became the dominant mode of establishing relationality between European powers and coastal sultanates. A tri-partition of the coast between French, British, and Italian Somaliland emerged by 1884 with each imperial power eager to secure Somali port cities as fueling ports and trading entrepôts. Here, as elsewhere, protection served as imperial idiom (Benton, Clulow, and Attwood 2018). Italy gradually began to take an interest in the southern region of Somalia, which was dependent on the sultanate of Zanzibar after the signing of a trade agreement on May 28, 1885. Spearheaded by Filonardi, a trader and the consulate in Zanzibar, Italy managed to impose its own protectorate on the Sultanate of Obbia and the Sultanate of Majeerteen which then became part of the colony of Italian Somaliland. In 1893 the Italian government obtained a lease on the ports of Barawa, Merca, Mogadishu, and Warsheikh from the Sultan of Zanzibar and their administration was granted for three years to the Filonardi Company. This model of a company-led empire built around expropriation through key ports continued through the Fascist period (1922–1943) when the colonial government expanded further south into the fertile Jubba valley and established banana and sugar plantations. These

plantations were all managed and run by Italian business interests employing, in extremely exploitative and coercive conditions, a large Somali labor force. While Italy was forced to relinquish its colonial domains in Africa following World War II, Somalia was “returned” to Italy as part of a trusteeship agreement supervised by the United Nations until Somali independence in 1960 when British and Italian Somaliland united to form Somalia. Within a decade, a military coup led to the establishment of a single party state under the dictatorship of Siyad Barre, a regime that lasted until the dissolution of the central government in 1991 and the ensuing civil war. This long colonial and neo-colonial relationship between Italy and Somalia, was one built on plunder and overseen by companies. Bananas, cattle, and other resources went to Italy through sea routes. These routes were also circuits of toxic returns.

Suspicious regarding the discharge of toxic waste from Italy along the Somali coast emerged already in the late 1980s and reported in 1992 (Brevik 1992). In 2005, the UN Environmental Program already denounced such a traffic, particularly following information that went beyond toxic dumping per se. It also included a trade in weapons for containers and barrels being undertaken between Italian shipping mediators and people close to the interim government of Ali Mahdi in Somalia.

As the UNEP 2005 report, *After the Tsunami*, elaborated,

During the Somalia civil war, hazardous waste was dumped in the country by industrialized countries. Somalia appeared attractive for hazardous waste dumping due to:

- *Political instability.* Since 1991 Somalia lacked a central government to safeguard its long coastlines and territories.
- *Availability of dumping sites.* There is a general problem of finding suitable dumping sites within the countries generating these wastes as well as high cost of recycling or incinerating. Somalia happens to have abundant sites for dumping waste.
- *Low public awareness.* The public were hardly informed about dumping of wastes in the country. Besides the people were trying to eke their living in the midst of extreme social problems and poverty created by the war.

The impacts of the December 2004 tsunami stirred up hazardous waste deposits on the beaches around North Hobyoy causing some health and environmental problems in the area.

The report specified that “the impact of the tsunami stirred up hazardous waste deposits” in the coastal areas north of Hobyo and in Warsheik:

Contamination from these waste deposits has thus caused health and environmental problems to the surrounding local fishing communities. Many people in Somalia’s impacted areas are complaining of unusual health problems including acute respiratory infections, mouth bleeds and skin conditions. (UNEP 2005, 11)

The UNEP report outlined the preliminary findings from visits conducted by UNEP, FAO, and WHO experts between May 25 and 29, 2005, in some coastal locations in the Puntland territory, including Lower and Middle Shabelle, Lower Juba, Bay, Bakool and Puntland (UNEP 2005, 129). The experts examined coastal areas that would have been affected by alleged waste dumping but not by the findings following the 2004 tsunami. They concluded that “no traces of toxic waste were found” although in the same report it was pointed out that “Somalia is one of the many Least Developed Countries that reportedly received countless shipments of illegal nuclear and toxic waste dumped along the coastline” (UNEP 2005, 134). Despite the lack of empirical evidence—either in 1992 or in 2005—the UNEP report concluded that discharges of hazardous and radioactive wastes had actually been taking place in Somalia since at least the late 1980s, with shipments increasing around the very early years of Ali Mahdi’s interim government—coinciding, therefore, with the Italy-Somalia arms and toxic waste agreements that the UN Environmental Program report denounced in 1992 (Sniffen 1992; Brevik 1992).⁸

In contrast with the Nigerian, Venezuelan, and Lebanese cases, in the Italian-Somali case, toxic waste shipments were more closely tied to illicit intergovernmental agreements. Moreover, in 1992, these shipments were already clearly illegal for more than one reason. The reference to Somalia as a “war-torn country” in the UNEP 1992 (Sniffen 1992, 1) report referred to the relationship between illegal arms deals and the shipment of toxic waste. The Ali Mahdi government was interested in weapons that the international embargo prevented it from attaining (an embargo similar to the earlier 1970s embargo against the home country of the ship whose captain opened this essay). Italian officials were willing to offer such arms in return for the Somali willingness to receive Italian-origin waste. The context, or perhaps the pretext, for such collaboration appeared in the shape of two infrastructural projects: industrial fishing development in the port of Bosaso and the construction of a road from Bosaso to Garowe.

These infrastructural projects, moreover, turned out to play a central role within Italian development cooperation projects. This role illuminates the broader constellation of transnational and inter-state and diplomatic relations within which we should analyze the trafficking of waste and arms to Somalia. Such projects, in fact, were often poorly designed or fragmented, to the point of favoring the interests of local élites or the financiers themselves, rather than responding to the needs of the Somali people. For this reason, too, in the early 1990s, the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office investigated these affairs, speaking of "bad cooperation [*malacooperazione*]" for development (Raffaello De Brasi et al. 2006, 7).

TRANSNATIONAL DISAVOWAL

In this complex scenario, in March 1994, Ilaria Alpi, a journalist of the Italian RAI national television company, was killed in Mogadishu with her cameraman, Miran Hrovatin. She was investigating the circuits of arms and waste, mostly radioactive, in a new context. Speaking and writing about these matters in Italy was no longer a forbidden matter. After all, almost a decade of public attention and mobilization made the issue public and overt. But Alpi did not remain at the level of general denouncing. For her audience, she interpreted the toxic circuit within the context of the ongoing civil war between Siad Barre and Ali Mahdi. Particularly, Alpi was using her contacts within the Siad Barre side to learn as much as she could about Ali Mahdi's involvement with Italy and the United States. In that specific moment in October 1993, the Battle of Mogadishu had taken place, including the downing of the American Blackhawk Helicopter. The United States was supporting Ali Mahdi, whose dependence on Italy and the United States in the war Alpi was exposing in detail. By that point, many Italians had written about radioactive waste in general or on the basis of existing publicized documents. Ilaria Alpi went to interview the brother of the governor of Bosaso, where the ships from Italy were docking and from where the road to Garowe was to be constructed.

Alpi was not only making visible the presence of a circuit but creating a *cartography of culpability* of U.S. dollars, Italian arms going to specific individuals in parallel to circuits of toxicity that were traversing similar geographies. Toxicity was not only the detritus of war, as has been importantly documented by a number of scholars (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2021; Vaughn, Guarasci, and Moore 2021; Crane 2023). It was also fueling war and conflict in deeply causal and tangible ways. Like many other industrial production chains, those that produced

the material that ended up in Somalia did so as a “byproduct.” Yet such products embarked on an entire circuit that related it to other things—like arms or the interests and funds of international Italian-Somali “mis-development” and “bad cooperation.” Such toxic material attained, in this sense, a new set of values.

Exposing this culpability, challenging evasion, and naming the relationship at the heart of this unequal exchange is what made Alpi a threat in ways that were different from the logics of state responsibility (or lack thereof) in other investigative reports. It is in that moment, as with the case of the *Jolly Rosso/Rosso*, when the actual relationship becomes documented and spelled out, when investigation can no longer simply produce dismissal, that a different logic—a deadly one—comes to the fore. Alpi and Hrovatin, like De Grazia, had grasped the transnational and local scenario within which the trafficking was unfolding, the actors pursuing it, and the broader institutional and political responsibilities. When investigation is able to “connect the dots” so to speak, it has to end abruptly. As one of the minority reports of the Parliamentary Commission investigating Alpi and Hrovatin’s deaths noted, it is plausible to assume that their articulate understanding of the nexus between arms, waste, and bribes related to Italian-Somali ill-cooperation (as those staged for Italian and U.S. interests within the ongoing civil war) led to these journalists’ deaths (Raffaello De Brasi et al. 2006, 161 et passim). Here, the logic of the report mirrors the tensions and aporias of ethnographic research. To explain this, let us return again to the port of Bosaso.

The port of Bosaso served as an important hinge not only for the operations of evasion but also for the boundary of transnational disavowal. The 2004 tsunami had exposed many barrels that had been thrown overboard in Somali territorial waters. We don’t know whether the Italian ships threw them overboard instead of bringing them on land, or whether the Somali side of the relationship had done so. Perhaps we do not need to know. That ambiguity reveals both sides’ ability to disown their responsibility for the hazardous effects of the toxic or radioactive materials’ presence on Somali environment.

Yet some material definitely made it to land, through the Bosaso Port. That material was buried somewhere—that is, in someone’s territory—in a shifting political geography of protection. In this sense, to receive material from Italy functioned as *abaan* or protection (Dua 2019), with all the relational and violent implications of such an act. One of co-authors of this essay, Dua, learned of the gravity of this relationship of protection that emerges from harboring someone else’s toxic waste, when he asked a friend in coastal Somalia if he could send him

on WhatsApp an image that Ben-Yehoyada had sent him, which showed where containers had been buried in Puntland. In reaction, Dua's friend said:

Oh, it's on land? No. You don't want to go there. If it's on land it means someone drove it there. Someone buried it there. Don't even send me the picture. A container that washes up on the beach is different.

The seabed furnished an alibi – for it provides the ability to admit the presence of toxic cargo without the territorial, institutional, and personal responsibilities that the same cargo's location on land would entail.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of evasion into disavowal occurs therefore on either side of the transnational, postcolonial, ongoing relationship between various scales and instances of government in Italy and Somalia. Pointing that out does not call for a framing of symmetry or equal culpability between the shipper and the receiver. On the contrary. The “toxic colonialism” that Greenpeace has coined depends on the racialized postcolonial inequality between the parties. It also depends on the graded and proliferating forms of mediation, facilitation, and dismissal by actors and investigators whose official title does not exhaust their role in the chain of events. In our particular case, both the attempts to expose the toxic circuit and the attempts to fudge or avoid them confront an ongoing presence of toxic material in the postcolony and, therefore, the interest of those who accepted the material in the first place to hide their responsibility.

The routes of toxic cargo, dangerous and unregulated, rechart maritime routes through ports and coasts that depend on older relations. While these past relations—colonial in the Italian-Somali case—prefigure the toxic circuit, they are reinforced and reframed through the shipping, concealment, investigation (which deepens the parties' investment in concealment) and paramount disavowal. This anthropology of evasion has emphasized that something has to remain invisible, submerged, or unclear at the heart of transnational toxic waste disposal. In this sense, the circuits of disposal are circuits of disavowal. And while one form of evasion leads to the killing of the investigators, that violence at times only proliferates further investigation, and reinforces the political import of the search for repair and the justice it is hoped to beget.

ABSTRACT

In the middle of the Cold War, various state officials, politicians, middlemen, and mafiosi operated in transporting toxic (chemical and radioactive) waste from Italian ports to Venezuela, Nigeria, Lebanon, Syria, and Somalia. Public protest in some receiving countries triggered, at least to some extent, repatriation. In some cases, ships carrying toxic material sunk at sea in mysterious circumstances. The circuit stood at the center of numerous international and Italian journalistic investigations, judicial enquiries in more than twenty Prosecutor Offices throughout Italy, and several Italian Parliamentary investigative commissions (with self-described inconclusive reports in 1995, in 2001, and in 2018). Aspects of the circuit interested UN and international environmental organizations as well. We focus on the maritime, transnational, and evasive characteristics of this circuit and its aftermath. Specifically, we emphasize how erstwhile and ongoing colonial and imperial relations mobilized to facilitate the transit and depositing of toxic waste, and how this everchanging circuit reshaped those relations. This is a circuit that is known through investigations, at multiple scales and exercising multiple jurisdictional authority. At the same time, these investigations—we argue—produce and reproduce the very evasive relations and a transnational politics of disavowal that sustained this circuit in the first place. Through a historical anthropology of this circuit and its enquiries, we discuss the co-production of evasion and investigation within the transnational histories and presents of maritime mobility. Toxic circuits thus straddle the geopolitical temporalization that hinges on the end of the Cold War. They also provide a corrosive twin to the historiography of the globalization of commercial shipping and the world, which the container and super-tanker made. [toxicity; logistics: documents; colonialism; evasion; relations; bureaucracy]

NOTES

1. Interview by Ben-Yehoyada, September 14, 2024.
2. The port official responsible for maneuvering the ship from the port approaches to the pier and vice versa.
3. As recounted by Italian Magistrate Guido Salvini at the conference “*Potere Occulto*”: “Among other things were found corroboration, some of which is full proof, that there is a character who is above of Digilio to whom [Digilio] points as one of his referents, who is called Joseph Pagnotta [...] the American to whom he points as the head of his network. We go and see what happened to Joseph Pagnotta. In a search we found the entire diagram in a notebook of triangulations of weapons, and [the shipping of] aircrafts and helicopters to Israel, which at that time were not permitted by international agreements. Israel could not receive weapons because it was [in] a war situation. And the Americans [are] basically somewhat using NATO [...] and they pull off various triangulations.” (Salvini 2019, 2:07:42)
4. Eighty-seven governments had ratified or acceded to the Convention. With the recent accession by Iraq in September 2023, fifty-four states had now ratified or acceded to the London Protocol. In total there are 101 parties to the two treaties combined; see the 45th Consultative Meeting of Contracting Parties to the London Convention and the 18th Meeting of Contracting Parties to the London Protocol (LC 45/LP 18).
5. Translation from Italian by Ben-Yehoyada.

6. *Verbale di assunzione di informazioni* (art. 360 e 549 c.p.p.) July 10, 1995, by PM Dr. Francesco Neri, *Procura della Repubblica presso le Preture Circondariali di Matera e Reggio Calabria*. Nr. 2114/94 RGNR (Reggio Calabria) Nr.2554/93 RGNR (Matera). Declassified document following the communication of the Public Prosecutor's Office at the Court of Reggio Calabria to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, September 17, 2015.
7. Apart from the cited parliamentary investigations, journalistic inquiries continue (Grimaldi and Scalettari 2010; Carere 2017; Mistretta and Sarzana Di Sant'Ippolito 2018; Birolini 2023).
8. Both documents were originally filed among the proceedings of Criminal Case no. 450/1994 against Aldo Anghessa, which were submitted by the District Anti-Mafia Directorate within the Court of Brescia to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Rome on May 10, 1995, Document no. 3/146, ASCDAH online, p. 30. They are available online in the Historical Archives of the Chamber of Deputies, Rome, Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the deaths of Ilaria Alpi and Miran Hrovatin, XIV legislature, Documents deposited in the Historical Archives.

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A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

(RE)BUILDING ALGIERS: Racial Segregation in the “Republican” Empire

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La ville du colon est une ville en dur, toute de pierre et de fer. C'est une ville illuminée, asphaltée... La ville du colon est une ville de blancs, d'étrangers. La ville du colonisé, ou du moins la ville indigène, le village nègre, la médina, la réserve est un lieu mal famé, peuplé d'hommes mal famés... La ville du colonisé est une ville affamée, affamée de pain, de viande, de chaussures, de charbon, de lumière. La ville du colonisé est une ville accroupie, une ville à genoux, une ville vautreée.

The settler's town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt . . . The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute... The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. (Fanon 1966, 39)

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In this passage from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes the archetypal colonial city. To Fanon, it was a space defined by its duality. The city of the colonizer—the white, European city—prioritized ease, comfort, concrete, and open space. In contrast, colonial authorities squeezed Indigenous populations into crowded, haphazard zones. As Fanon describes, this “starved” city was deprived of economic power, downtrodden by police control, and denied resources. Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* after working in Algeria and in writing of the double-sided colonial city, Fanon might have had Algiers in mind. Throughout the colonial period, Algiers existed as precisely this model of bifurcated city, an urban agglomeration with invisible but inescapable boundaries between the city of the *colon* and the city of the *colonisé*.

When French observers talked about the *ville indigène* of Algiers, they meant the Casbah. The Casbah, originally named for the Ottoman fort that stood at its apex, filled the hilltop of central Algiers with a network of white-washed residences. Colonial commentators describing the Casbah evoked a world of sensuality, danger, and difference. For them, the Casbah stood as a metonymy for the Algerian population of Algiers.¹ Algerians crammed into the confines of the Casbah, while European settlement sprawled out in the rest of the urban metropolis (Kaddache 1970, 13). This pattern of residence is perhaps not surprising. As Fanon points out, Algiers was hardly the only colonial city to see racial difference inscribed onto urban space, but segregation there contradicted the proclaimed logics of France’s assimilationist colonial policy. Algerians civilized by French tutelage, the argument went, could eventually become equal partners in the republican French empire. Racial discrimination, although evident in legal codes and governmental practices, was not openly condoned by politicians. How then did the Casbah become such a profound space of *de facto* segregation in the absence of a *de jure* legal apparatus?

Scholars have explored the complicated construction of French Algiers. Urban historians have traced how French conquest destroyed the Ottoman city and how French urban expansion redefined its boundaries (Benatia 1980; Çelik 1997; Icheboudene 1997; Kaddache n.d., 1951; Lespès 1930). All these authors agree: like Fanon, they describe Algiers as a dual city, divided into European and “*indigène*” spaces.² Historians have largely accepted urban segregation in Algiers as fact, focusing on differing French visions of urban planning, debates over social dangers in the *bidonvilles*, or political histories of anti-colonial resistance to French rule (Çelik 1997; Descloitres 1961; House 2018, 2019; Icheboudene 1997). Yet there has been little attention paid to *how* Algiers became a segregated space.

In other contexts, there is a rich literature examining the creation of racial urban segregation. African Americans, for example, were trapped in underfunded, overcrowded neighborhoods due to legal tools like restrictive covenants and red-lining (for example, [Michney and Winling 2021](#); [Rothstein 2017](#)). Colonial cities, too, offer examples of segregation orchestrated through pass systems, public health codes, or racial zoning laws (see [Myers 2003](#); [Mitchell 1988](#); [Murunga 2005](#); [Nightingale 2012](#); [Swanson 1977](#)). In one such case, the French colonial state used a plague outbreak in Dakar in 1914 to impose racial segregation, using a language of public health to justify land expropriation and the ghettoization of African communities ([Bigon 2016](#); [Curtin 1985](#); [Velmet 2020](#)). Unlike other colonial cities, however, no formal laws restricted Algerians' buying power, no pass system kept them cordoned to specific zones, no policies empowered landlords to deny tenets based on race. Nor did segregation in Algiers follow the "preservationist" logics of Lyautey's Rabat (see [Rabinow 1989](#)).

The mechanics of segregation in Algiers are opaque in the archive, but no less real for their near invisibility. This article draws primarily on documents created and preserved by the French colonial state, archives formed as practical ledgers for managing the conquered city. In engaging these records, however, I deploy a method of reading "along the grain" of the archive, pointing out the omnipresent racial assumptions and interrogating the things left unsaid in official decrees ([Stoler 2009](#)). As [Michel-Rolph Trouillot \(2015\)](#) argues, elements of the past can be "silenced," removed from the history we teach and talk about because they threaten hegemonic narratives. Likewise, the history of segregation in Algiers was silenced, an effort by French colonial actors to render this separation inevitable and natural.

As colonial rule solidified, segregation became a defining feature of colonial Algiers. Colonial urban planning, coupled with every day, street-level racism, steadily rebuilt Algiers as a French colonial capital. This revision was supported by a colonial apparatus that understood *Algérois* as divided into two categories—"indigène" and French. I argue that no one code created segregation in Algiers. Rather, it emerged from a slow, constant project of erasure, racial violence, and expropriation that limited the urban possibilities for Algerians. To claim Algiers as their own, French settlers made the Algerian inhabitants of the city, the original *Algérois*, invisible, frozen in historical time and displayed only as a contrast to the gleaming new city they planned to build.

But these same segregated spaces, like the Casbah, could also become chosen homes and zones of solidarity in a colonial city built to reproduce violence.

As Édouard Glissant (1990) suggests in his call for a “right to opacity,” opacity can be a source of power. French officials complained about the “closed” nature of the Casbah, unable to understand its physical logics or control circulation within it. Residents of the Casbah concealed political organizing, built networks of community that were illegible to the French state, and inhabited space in ways that matched their own priorities rather than a colonial mandate. The same opacity that made Algerian spaces invisible in formal governance also made these neighborhoods a meaningful resource for movements of resistance.

DESTROYING ALGIERS

Prior to French conquest, the city of Algiers was contained within the ramparts of an Ottoman fortress, the literal *casbah* that gave the neighborhood its name.³ In the Ottoman period, the city housed a diverse array of peoples, including Ottoman Turks, Arabs, Amazigh, Maghrebi Jews, European foreign merchants, and a small number of Black Africans.⁴ The urban divisions of Ottoman Algiers, ruled by a local Dey, reflected this social world. Algiers was comprised of dozens of small neighborhoods, each with its own administrative system and often grouped by ethnicity, religion, or status (Çelik 1997, 13–15). The Jewish quarter, for example, sat next to the major marketplace and the wealthy Turkish ruling class congregated in the upper reaches of the walled city. When the French arrived, they imposed new logics of social division, ones that flattened the complex hierarchies of the Ottoman city into a “European” and “*indigène*” binary.⁵ The category of “*indigène*” was codified with the *indigénat* code, denoting both a legal status and a racialized group.⁶

The French first invaded Algiers in 1830 following a trumped up diplomatic dispute with the Dey, brutally disrupting the city (Sessions 2011, 25). The French army reconfigured Algiers to meet military needs, renaming roads, expropriating homes, and eventually tearing down the walls of the fortress.⁷ French authorities designed a new main square, the Place du Gouvernement, including a courthouse, mayoral residence, library, stock exchange, and church, all built in French style. This French city, dubbed the Marine Quarter, swallowed entire sections of Algiers, a process of expropriation that redefined Algiers as a European space, rather than an Ottoman stronghold.⁸ In remaking Algiers in their own image in the first decades of colonial rule, the French strategically created space for European settlers to occupy.

Prior to 1830, Algiers had a relatively compact footprint, restricted by the walls that enclosed the town. After invading the city, the French army

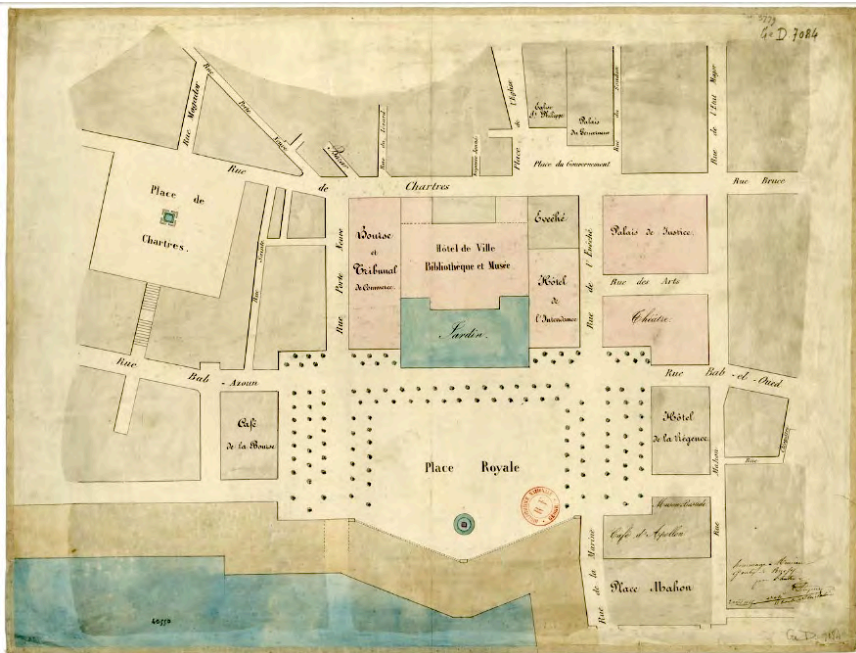


Figure 1. C. Dupuy, « Plans des rues avoisinant la place Royale et la place de Chartres, à Alger. » 1845, Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

immediately began knocking down buildings, clearing roads, and commandeering space to use for drills. Military planners designed roads, squares, and entire new neighborhoods, using requisition orders to acquire land. As the army ripped apart Algiers, they often failed to compensate the Algerian owners of requisitioned buildings, reducing these families to poverty and homelessness (Lespès 1930, 220). A note from 1836 confirms this point. In a letter, the Director of Finances in Algiers wrote to the Minister of War in Paris about indemnities due to property owners for the homes and businesses demolished by the military in Algiers. Due to poor budgeting, the director warned, the “unhappy” property owners would likely remain unpaid for their land.⁹

Scholars traditionally narrate this early period of French invasion as the “flight” of Algerians from the city center. With the chaos of military occupation, wealthy Algerians began to leave, heading to suburban villages like Hamma, Kouba, or Saint-Eugène.¹⁰ French observers argued that the exodus was driven by Algerian cultural norms that dictated separate spheres for men and women. The traditional *dars* that dotted Algiers had small exterior windows but luminous interior courtyards and balconies. Women reigned over this interior world

but rarely went out in public. According to the French explanations, Europeans settling in the city ignored gendered conventions and invaded the privacy of Algerian women, causing disgruntled Algerian families to flee the Marine Quarter for the relative privacy of the “*haute-ville*” or Casbah. In 1840, for example, the Director of the Interior wrote to the Minister of War to discourage a plan to requisition more land in the heart of Algiers. He cautioned that the “lower city is almost entirely depopulated of *indigènes* and it tends every day to become exclusively European.”¹¹ He claimed that Algerians had fled the area because European families would indulge in “indiscreet investigations” of Algerian households from their neighboring terraces. Most of the evidence for this narrative comes from sources written by French colonial authorities, but local Algerian historians, too, offer this reason to explain the flight of Algerians from the lower city and their resulting concentration in the white-washed reaches above.¹²

But cultural difference was not the only reason Algerians streamed towards the Casbah. In the same 1840 letter, the director also mentioned another factor: rent. He noted that “*indigènes*” had been pushed from the city by “the high cost of rent developed by the ever-growing needs of commerce in that section of the city . . .”¹³ As European speculators bought up or rented more and more land, rent prices increased to such outlandish heights that ordinary Algerian families simply could not afford to live in the neighborhood. As a result, Algerians retreated to the upper echelons of the city, “whose tranquility corresponds better to their habits and whose rents are more in line with the limits, or in other words, the almost nullity of their resources.”¹⁴

If the director discussed the more reasonable rents of the Casbah as a pull factor, he pointedly ignored the French role in impoverishing Algerians. The colonial government lured French commerce to Algeria, encouraging shipping companies, industrial production, and agricultural entrepreneurs. All these ventures required space and the intense European demand for land bred rampant speculation (Icheboudene 1997, 132–33; Lespès 1930, 238). Historian Larbi Icheboudene argues that French colonialism introduced capitalism to Algerian society. Before French arrival, the Ottoman state promoted artisanal production, but under French rule, artisans were stripped of their international networks (Icheboudene 1997, 142). French policy instead supported a chain of imports and exports that centered France and favored French merchants. When the Algerian economy collapsed after French conquest, France actively prevented Algerians from rebuilding wealth. Denied access to French-language education and legally prevented from obtaining certain public sector jobs, many Algerians found themselves relegated to the lowest-skilled, lowest-paid work. Rent prices

soared throughout Algiers, while at the same time colonial expansion throttled the artisanal economy and expropriation and road “alignment” projects cut Algerians out of land and homeownership. Algerians could not afford to live in the lower parts of Algiers, which already by 1840 had become “almost exclusively European.” Concluding his warning, the director noted that planned expansions into the Casbah were misplaced. “There would be a sort of barbery, Monsieur the Minister, to take from them this last refuge,” he cautioned.¹⁵

The continual process of urban demolition exacerbated other factors that eroded Algerian wealth. One Algerian homeowner, Mamed ben Mahmoud, protested in 1844 against an urban planning project that would require the demolition of his home. While municipal authorities proposed to compensate him, Mahmoud argued that the city had not fairly appraised the value of his home. He described his home as a traditional *mauresque* construction that was “one of the loveliest of Algiers.”¹⁶ Yet the administration proposed to compensate him only for the land and not the value of the house itself. Although colonial officials claimed to fairly pay owners, road-widening and reconstruction projects stripped Algerian property owners of assets, creating a colonial sub-class forced to retreat to the Casbah or leave Algiers together.

Not all Algerian homeowners meekly abandoned the *basse ville* city center. In 1861, for example, the Prefecture of Algiers prepared to expropriate a series of buildings to expand streets near Place Napoléon. As part of the process, officials collected testimonies from the owners to assess potential costs. One owner, Abderhaman Zemarly (almost certainly a misspelling of his name), protested the proposed demolition of his home. The dossier noted, “He has only his profession as a barber, which he exercises in this boutique, to live off of and if he is forced to leave [the home], he will see himself reduced to destitution, along with his numerous family.”¹⁷ Zemarly was losing not just his home, but his livelihood. Despite his protest, the plan went ahead. The colonial government determined that he would receive 4,000 francs for his lost property, but no other accommodations were made to compensate for his lost business.¹⁸ As Zemarly’s case demonstrates, not all Algerians willingly fled the Casbah to avoid Europeans’ cultural intrusion. Such arguments, by both French administrators and historians, silence a history of violence visible within the colonial archives.

The rise of a new political regime in France tempered the initial destruction. In 1848, Louis-Napoleon came to power as President of the Second French Republic and then staged a coup, declaring himself Emperor Napoleon III and creating the Second Empire. While Algerian colonization had thus far proceeded haphazardly, Napoleon III espoused a vision of France as the leader of an “Arab

kingdom” and encouraged policies that offered some autonomy to local Algerians.¹⁹ In this spirit, French authorities sought to chart a different path for Algiers. In a letter from 1865, the Prefect of Algiers argued that European settlement should stay in the “lower city”—the newly reconstructed Marine Quarter. He insisted that “the Casbah [*haute ville*] should stay as it is, considering that it is appropriate to the morals and habits of the *indigènes*.”²⁰ The same letter also argued that urban improvements in the Casbah, like widening streets, would be “onerous” to *indigènes* and that “the lower city [*ville basse*] it seems to His Majesty should be reserved for [Europeans] and it is in this part that we must do all the work of amelioration and beautification.”²¹ This framing froze the Algerian section of the city in time, resigning it to an unchanging past in contrast to the “modern” European city.

With this letter, the French government established a policy prioritizing modern improvements for European sectors. Running water, sewers, streetlamps, even gardens and parks—all of these existed primarily in European Algiers. If many Algerians surely did want to keep the architectural specificity of their homes in the Casbah, the assumption that Algerians were ill-suited for “modern” life rested on racist stereotypes of North Africans as backwards, primitive, or uncivilized. In declaring that Algerians would not want to live in the European city, French administrators also set up a tacit rejection of Algerians in this space, albeit without a law that formalized this practice through public health initiatives or residency restrictions.

First military and then civil authorities in Algiers reshaped the city, razing, rezoning, or redesigning large sections of Algiers for military, and later, settler usage. In the archives documenting this destruction, the silence of Algerians is palpable. Stacks of reports note that “houses were evacuated” to facilitate the alignment of streets in Algiers.²² The passive voice callously hides the human reality. Each home that “was evacuated” represented a family, a repository of memory, a form of generational wealth destroyed. The erasure of Algerians in the records of nineteenth-century urban planning attest to the fact that French authorities had come to conceive of Algiers as a European city. In naturalizing Algiers as a European space and setting up specific neighborhoods as “*indigène*,” colonial authorities reversed the history of the city, justifying segregation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, “the Casbah” had come into being. Once an Ottoman fortress, Algiers was now a colonial capital, rebuilt to look like any other French city. Within the new sprawl, the Casbah filled the hill above the port, a mass of white buildings rising upwards. The winding streets

descended towards the sea, before coming to an abrupt halt at a large Haussmann-style boulevard, Rue Randon. French observers described the Casbah as a mysterious, dangerous labyrinth where adventurous visitors could feel transported to the ancient past. The exoticization of the Casbah also marked it as a space apart, disconnected from modernity and held up for Orientalist voyeurism. This rewriting of Algiers, and of the Casbah, was an intentional process of dispossession, one that reified Algiers as a French colonial capital and silenced its prior history.

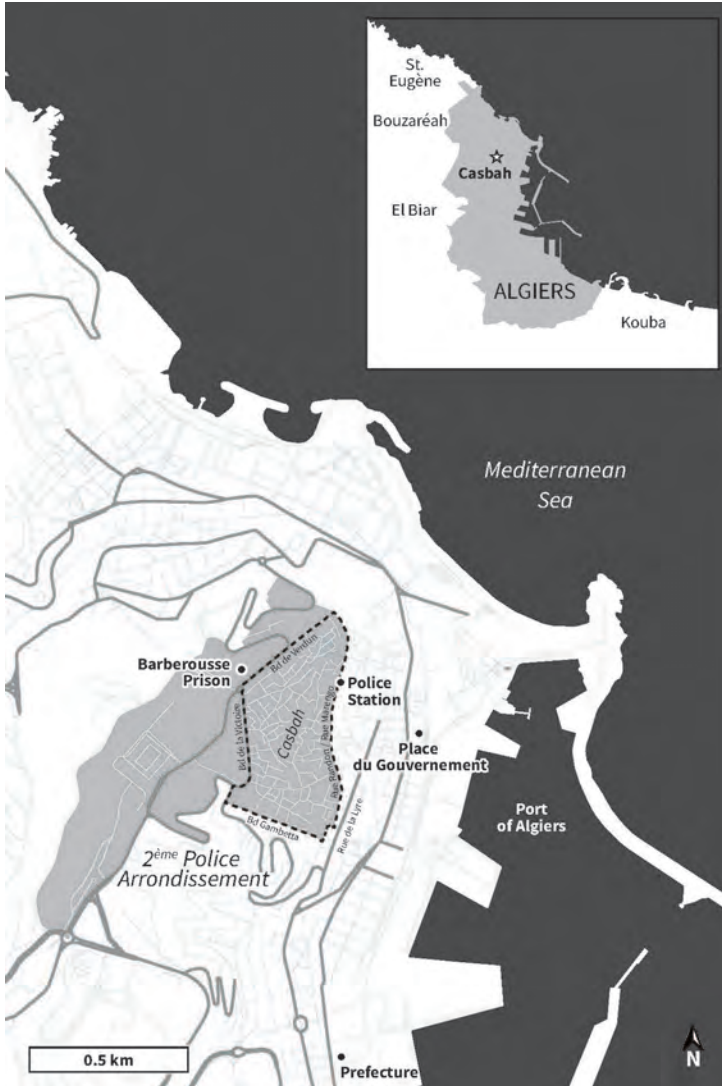


Figure 2. Map by Tim Stallman.

PLANNING THE HOUSING CRISIS

The nineteenth century razing and rebuilding of Algiers resulted in a city that would have been unrecognizable to Algerians in 1830. Segregation had become the norm. Algerians made up only 25 percent of the total population of Algiers in 1911, but more than 75 percent of the second district of Algiers (2ème arrondissement), which included the Casbah.²³ By 1921, as much as 80 percent of Algerians in Algiers lived in the Casbah.²⁴ Another pocket of Algerian settlement clustered near the Muslim cemetery in the Hamma neighborhood, cordoned off from surrounding European populations in the “Little Casbah” (Desclotres 1961, 42). While the flight of wealthy Algerian families continued, rural Algerian migrants began arriving in Algiers, particularly from the mountainous Kabylia region. By 1936, a third of the Algerian population of Algiers was Kabyle. These newcomers reconfigured Algiers’ connection to the countryside and introduced a new language, as most Kabyle migrants spoke Amazigh rather than Arabic (Kaddache n.d., 16). As the population of the Casbah grew, the constraints of the former walls, surrounding European developments, and the natural verticality of the city kept the neighborhood from expanding. Instead, population density rapidly increased and disadvantaged Algerian families piled into rooms in what were once single-family homes (Kaddache n.d., 38).

The continuing growth of Algiers in the early twentieth century created what local officials called a “crisis” of housing. In the decades-long attempts to address this problem, initiatives focused on a vision of urban life that took racial segregation as an accepted starting point and consistently prioritized access to housing for Europeans. Throughout the early twentieth century, municipal council debates reveal concern over the cost of living and available housing in Algiers. City officials spent hours in municipal council meetings debating how to lower the price of food and other necessities and urged city-wide planning measures to create affordable housing.²⁵ To address the crisis, the government created a local office of *Habitation à Bon Marché* (HBM) in Algiers in 1922, to finance and build subsidized housing.

The racial segregation already present in the city, however, was fundamental to these new social housing projects.²⁶ In the 1930s, for example, the city signed off on creating several *cités indigènes*: complexes specifically intended to house Algerian families. In 1931, after years of discussion, officials launched the first 62-unit building on Boulevard de Verdun, at the top edge of the Casbah.²⁷ The architects and city planners considered this and subsequent projects culturally respectful to the needs of Algerian families. They built white-washed buildings with interior courtyards that mimicked the Casbah or low-lying complexes

with “Arabesque” architectural designs. If the buildings reflected Algerian architecture, however, they also lacked conveniences like an indoor toilet or separate kitchen.²⁸ French architects justified their plans by citing the “traditional” needs of Algerians, but they designed the units without input from Algerian stakeholders.

The racial segregation in public housing routinely prioritized the needs of European families over Algerians. In 1930, Algerian municipal counselor, Abdennour Tamzali, declared that the government had created more than 15,000 units of affordable housing in Algiers in celebration of the centennial of French rule. Only sixty-four had gone to Algerians (Aïche 2014, 98). By 1940, correspondence from the HBM bureau cited only two hundred units allocated to Algerians.²⁹ Algiers remained a majority European city in this period but the housing crisis disproportionately impacted Algerians, who were more likely to arrive in Algiers as rural migrants with few resources. Municipal council records, for example, evidence repeated pleas from Algerian representatives for more credits to be allocated for housing initiatives for Algerians and their critiques of policies that continued to prioritize “European” housing.³⁰

Despite the real needs of the Algerian population, officials used the “crisis” to justify building more housing for Europeans and reinforcing the racial segregation that already marked Algiers. Politicians, planners, and architects imagined segregated solutions, labeling complexes explicitly as “European” or “*indigène*.” Indeed, historian Thierry Guillopé has argued that social housing in Algeria was an intentional project of the French colonial state to encourage colonization by making Algeria more habitable for settlers (Guillopé 2023, 100). The prioritization of Europeans in social housing efforts was a tool of empire, not an accident. This binary division between European and “*indigène*” reflected colonial social divisions and also racist beliefs that Algerians “wanted” less and would be uncomfortable in units designed to meet Europeans’ more “modern” needs.

The decades-old concerns over housing would only increase as Algiers survived the chaos of World War II. The city grew exponentially during the early twentieth century, particularly during the war, leaping from 266,268 residents in 1926 to 473,261 by 1948 (Descloitres 1961, 79). Multiple factors drove this rapid population growth. The war brought refugees from mainland Europe and thousands of soldiers—Allied, French, and colonial—to the city. Algerians from the countryside also flooded into Algiers during the war, driven by a series of rural famines and the abject poverty caused by the disruption of trade and production (Descloitres 1961, 93–4). The population of the Casbah grew by nearly

50 percent between 1936 and 1946, reaching a staggering population density of 3,800 inhabitants per hectare in some areas (Guillopé 2023, 441). Facing entrenched racial segregation and unable to find affordable housing, many Algerian migrants also moved into makeshift shantytowns, or *bidonvilles*, that began to spring up in vacant lots around the city.³¹

After the war, France started to rebuild its political structures, casting aside the acrid memories of Vichy collaboration with Nazi Germany. In a direct rebuke of Vichy anti-Semitism, French legislators designed the new constitution to eschew any language of race. Instead, they emphasized the equality of all French citizens before the law. The Fourth Republic also granted Algerian men citizenship and officially ended the much-hated *indigénat* legal code that governed colonial subjects. Algerian women, however, could not vote and a two-tiered voting system effectively nullified the voting power of Algerian men. Still, in at least name, France had promised to provide equal rights to Algerians, now Frenchmen like any other.

If the legal category of “*indigène*” ceased to exist in the post-war, urban planners in Algiers continued to approach housing with a rigid idea of racial difference. The rural Algerians arriving in Algiers during the war filled the Casbah to capacity and increased the geographic spread and density of the *bidonvilles*. After the war, the Governor General of Algeria wrote to the Mayor of Algiers to convey the absolute urgency of creating *cités musulmanes* to house Algerians. Because of budget constraints during the war and disputes over who would foot the bill, all plans to build public housing for “Muslims” had been on hold since 1937.³² By 1948, the Muslim Association for the Homeless was still bringing up concerns to the Mayor of Algiers, pointing out that public housing projects for Algerians remained stalled.³³ Seemingly untouched by these budget constraints, European housing projects had continued apace in the years leading up to the war and major construction began again almost immediately after.³⁴

Despite the changing language of citizenship and reform, racial segregation remained a stubborn feature of public housing policy in Algiers. In 1952, for example, urban planners envisioned a series of public housing units in the Marine Quarter. The proposal explicitly referred to the units as “European housing.” Planners were aware of the proximity of these new apartments to the Casbah. “The Marine Quarter is a zone of direct influence on the Casbah. It is, it seems, inopportune to design ‘European luxury buildings’ here.”³⁵ The report worried about the optics of having new, “luxury” housing for Europeans built adjacent to the crumbling infrastructure of the Casbah. Administrators in Algiers all seemed to agree that the rapid influx of Algerians into the city and the growing *bidonvilles*

posed the greatest concern. Despite this, policy around public housing reliably created opportunities for Europeans while failing to address the *bidonvilles*, prioritizing access to resources along racial lines even as ideas of race were officially rejected in “colorblind” political discourse.³⁶ Architects and city planners imagining solutions continued to assume that Europeans and Algerians could never occupy the same building, an assumption that betrayed the continuing racial divisions of colonial society despite the post-war declarations of equality.

EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION

In addition to policy, everyday racism also determined housing possibilities for Algerians. Records of overt discrimination prove elusive in French records, a silence that becomes visible only in discussions of laws that eventually dismantled some forms of discrimination. For example, when the collaborationist Vichy regime controlled Algiers in 1941, officials implemented laws that prevented landlords from discriminating against large families. The Vichy regime, like its Nazi allies, pursued brutal policies of anti-Semitism, openly embraced racial hierarchies, and sought to promote conservative family structures, including dependent wives and large families (see [Cantier and Jennings 2004](#)). In a note, French intelligence services stated that Algerian families generally approved of the new law but “do not dare hope, however, that one considers this law as being applicable to them, so much are they accustomed to seeing themselves refused rental housing because they are *indigènes*.”³⁷ The bureaucrat writing the letter quickly excused the European landlords, saying even “evolved” (*évolués*) Algerians made poor tenants since they did not take care of their homes.³⁸ The solution the note proposed was two-fold. The prefecture needed to ensure that the protection of large families *did* apply to Algerians. However, they should also facilitate the eviction of tenants who “do not take care of the locale enough.”³⁹ If this language seemed to be race-neutral, the description of Algerians as dirty, uncivilized tenants was seeped in colonial racism. Moreover, by enabling evictions, the proposed solution reinforced the power of landlords to eject Algerian tenants over the slightest perceived misstep, creating a precarity that destabilized Algerians’ access to housing in desirable neighborhoods.⁴⁰

This passing statement in an internal note is one of the few archival references I found of the profound impacts of racial discrimination on access to housing. Algerians knew that this new Vichy law, though in theory for all large families, would not apply to them and did not protect them from the racial discrimination of landlords. Though the government of Algiers did not create laws that restricted Algerians to specific neighborhoods, the lack of laws *protecting*

Algerians from discrimination also meant that overt racism was a ubiquitous part of Algerians' search for housing in a city plagued by shortages. Algerians' concentration in the Casbah or in the growing *bidonvilles* happened because landlords could, and did, refuse to rent to them in other areas, evoking excuses about large families or baldly stating they did not rent to "*indigènes*."

There is also archival evidence of European settlers' deep desire to avoid sharing space with Algerians, a hatred backed by Europeans' ability to mobilize local government. In 1946, for example, the government requisitioned a house in the suburb of Kouba owned by M. Bel Bahar for a European woman.⁴¹ Bel Bahar wrote to the Prefect in the following weeks asking for permission to put his homeless, widowed sister and her eight children in part of the house. The European occupant, however, refused, saying she "does not want to cohabitate with Arabs."⁴² She lobbied the Mayor of Kouba to requisition the unoccupied rooms for a European teacher instead, thereby preventing Bel Bahar's sister from moving in. A note responding to the case insisted that this sort of civil requisition was "forbidden" and emphasized that "M. Belbahar, his sister and her children. . . who live in a slum in the Casbah, merit for their case to be taken into consideration."⁴³ Despite this sympathetic response, the case remained unresolved in October 1947, when it is last mentioned in the archive.

This example demonstrates how racial discrimination operated in Algiers. European residents refused to live with Algerians and mobilized their cultural capital to find (illegal) loopholes that backed their view. In this case, Bel Bahar owned the home in question but was nonetheless prevented from housing his own family because of the racial prejudice of the European tenant. Bel Bahar and his relatives, unable to inhabit the more desirable Kouba residence, seem to have had no choice but to live in a "slum" in the Casbah. This case was exceptional but likely reflective of broader trends. Landlords, perhaps at the behest of European tenants, regularly refused to rent to Algerians, preserving segregation so Europeans did not have to "cohabitate with Arabs."

Although citizenship reforms after WWII eliminated racial distinction in French law, discrimination continued to permeate Algerian society. A particularly egregious scandal erupted in July 1955. Algerian Municipal Counselor Abdelhamid took the floor to denounce an incident in which three young Algerian men had been refused service at a local pool "because they were Arab."⁴⁴ Abdelhamid insisted that the refusal to let the young men swim was not an anomaly. "I noticed the same attitude towards myself on a nearby beach. I went alone, they took me to be a European and no one ever said anything to me, but when I brought with me someone with brown skin and they knew that I was an Arab,

they refused to let me in. These things happen all the time.”⁴⁵ Abdelhamid’s story indicates that a type of “passing” was possible for Algerians who spoke French and wore European clothing styles, but once “outed” as Algerian, businesses refused them service.

Visual categories of race in Algeria were notoriously hard to pin down, in part due to the Mediterranean exchange of populations that had defined Algiers for centuries. The “*indigènes*” of Algeria could not be neatly labeled by physical appearance. Indigenous Kabyle populations, for example, could famously include individuals with blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, a fact often remarked upon in French Orientalist texts that praised Kabyles over Arab Algerians.⁴⁶ Ideas of race in colonial Algeria, therefore, were defined through skin color, but also language, education, citizenship status, religious practice, and clothing. This meant that, at times, a form of “passing” could occur for elite, light-skinned Algerians like Abdelhamid. If revealed to be Algerian by association with darker-skinned compatriots or a companion dressed in traditional clothing, however, this momentary assimilation disappeared. In his story, Abdelhamid alleged that when perceived as European, he had full access to the beaches. When perceived as Algerian, these same services were denied. The only explanation, he contended, was the racist attitudes of the hotel staff, a stance in direct contradiction of French postwar “colorblindness.”

In the subsequent letters, reports, and articles about this issue, a pattern of racist refusal of service becomes clear. Hairdressers, hotels, beaches, gyms—all were accused of discrimination against Algerians. The police investigation into these accusations did not deny discrimination. Instead, Commissioner Costes of the Algiers police justified it by saying that businesses refused Algerians service not because of racial discrimination but because the high standards of the establishments made them understandably picky about the dress and cleanliness of their patrons.⁴⁷ This interpretation once again implicitly rendered Algerians as dirty or undesirable. Although these complaints were about stores, discrimination surely permeated housing markets too. This everyday racism, though opaque in official records, played an essential role in urban segregation. It was also a quotidian discrimination that could have physical, fatal consequences in the violence enacted by French colonial police officers, whose patrols reinforced the spatial boundaries of the city.⁴⁸

After World War II, French laws denounced eugenicist ideas of race. Yet in acknowledging race as a social construct, French laws failed to also acknowledge the violent, visceral reality of racism. French anti-racism laws, only established in the 1970s, so narrowly defined hate-crimes, for example, that victims had to meet nearly insurmountable barriers to launch a viable legal case (see [Brahim](#)

2021). In the colonial period, Algerians who experienced discrimination in the housing market, or in other areas of their life, had little legal recourse. Race operated in opacity, operationalized to maintain social hierarchies but rarely openly named by French actors. Unable to sue, Algerians instead opted for public shaming, showcasing examples of racism in public debates and newspaper campaigns.

HOUSING AND THE PRAXIS OF RESISTANCE

It would be too shallow, however, to assign all agency to French government programs, local racism, or colonial poverty.⁴⁹ There were also real advantages and communal benefits to living in an “Algerian” space in a colonial context that criminalized the very fact of being born Algerian. Police sources constantly complained about their inability to “access” the Casbah because residents banded together to avoid police surveillance, refusing to provide testimony or literally forming crowds that forced the police to retreat. Living in the Casbah offered access to a network of relationships that, at times, shielded Algerians from the omnipresent surveillance of the French state.

One can see community building in action in the advocacy of the Committee for the Defense of the Haute Ville-Casbah Neighborhood (CDQC). This civic organization was one of many similar committees throughout Algiers that represented the interests of their neighborhood through correspondence with local officials and grassroots fundraising efforts. The CDQC mobilized to push back against negative stereotypes of the Casbah, reclaiming the space as their own. In 1949, the president wrote a scathing note to the Prefect protesting a planned screening of the film *Pépé le Moko*. The movie, set in the Casbah, portrayed the neighborhood as the playground of gangsters and promoted racist stereotypes of local Algerians. The president demanded that the screening be cancelled, calling it disrespectful to the “in great majority hard-working and honest population” of the Casbah.⁵⁰

Beyond ideological advocacy, the committee also worked to deliver material support to the residents of the Casbah. The police folder on the CDQC documents charity events, fundraisers, and clothing drives, all organized to benefit the poorest residents of the Casbah. In a series of revendications published in the leftist newspaper *Alger Républicain*, the committee made demands on the colonial state for public baths, soup kitchens, and improved infrastructure.⁵¹ They advocated, too, for the creation of a medical center in the Casbah.⁵² Again and again, the committee also pushed for more housing in the Casbah. French observers, however, tended to focus on solutions proposed by French architects and urban

planners, when they paid attention to the Casbah at all.⁵³ Although not always materially successful, the public campaigns of the CDQC provide a powerful example of the possibility for solidarity within the segregated enclave.

There is also evidence in the records of this committee of how political resistance could develop within a marginalized space. In 1948, police sources fretted that many members of the CDQC supported the MTLD, an Algerian nationalist party gaining strength in the post-war period. Internal government sources raised the possibility that the committee's charitable events could turn into "political spectacles."⁵⁴ Another note reported that the committee had decided not to ask the municipality for a 500,000-franc subvention because politically active members of the board did not want the city council to use this funding as an excuse to "claim to execute any control whatsoever."⁵⁵ The CDQC mixed social uplift with political organizing, asserting their own agenda. These collective actions were at least partially based on the geographic solidarities of shared space in the Casbah.

Expropriation, racism, and unequal urban planning all shaped segregation in Algiers. But there were many reasons why Algerians might have *chosen* to live in the segregated spaces of Algiers labeled as theirs. Living with other Algerians created a collective power that could more effectively voice demands to the French state, as with the CDQC. Choosing to settle in the Casbah also meant gaining access to networks of Muslim religious life or political advocacy that could not operate openly elsewhere in Algiers. The very urban geography of the Casbah lent itself to the subversion of the colonial panopticon. The buildings of the Casbah were internally directed, with few windows facing out to the streets. These interior spaces were inaccessible to the French police. The population density and residential pattern of the Casbah, with multiple families crammed into too small buildings and shared courtyards and balconies the only space of leisure, fostered forms of kinship that crossed households. Algerians constantly faced the everyday racism of settlers, forbidden access to chic areas of Algiers because of their clothing or the color of their skin. But in the Casbah, Algerians were the majority. This was their city, as it always had been. For at least some Algerians, the choice to live in the Casbah was just that—a choice.

Novels, memoirs, and popular portrayals of life in Algiers after World War II often evoke, with a twinge of nostalgia, the social cohesion of the Casbah. These networks became imperative to the operational success of nationalist resistance during the Algerian War of Independence from 1954 to 1962. When the French army encircled the Casbah in barbed wire during the famed "Battle of Algiers," residents banded together to support nationalist militants, smuggle goods and weapons, and plan skirmishes (Benatia 1978; Carlier 1995; Crane

2017; Icheboudene 1997).⁵⁶ The resilience of residents of the Casbah became an international symbol of anti-colonial activism, a model that revolutionary groups around the world would emulate. French efforts to cordon off Algerians from the larger city played into their military strategy of containing nationalism, but on a symbolic level, it backfired. Algerians' unity in the Casbah defied the odds and inspired others to join the nationalist cause. The history of segregation in this city and this neighborhood helped shape resistance to colonial inequality, even as discrimination helped to create the space. The opacity of the Casbah became a resource, fostering a zone of fugitivity where rebellion flourished.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

After independence, the city of Algiers charted a new path. The bloodshed and bitterness of the decolonial struggle meant that nearly all of Algeria's European population left, most of them heading to France. Algerians reclaimed their "right to the city," moving into buildings once owned by European *colons*. The segregated city became again a thoroughly Algerian space. And yet, housing shortages continued to plague Algiers, a pattern that Algerian historians have argued is rooted in legacies of colonial urban development (Benatia 1978). In the immediate post-independence period, the Algerian government hastily built suburban housing complexes to shelter families from the Casbah, whose homes threatened to collapse on their heads after decades of disinvestment (see Martinez 2000 and Vergès 1994). Today, the Casbah is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Despite this status, visitors to the Casbah encounter crumbling homes, poor infrastructure, and evidence of neglect. The Casbah, Algiers' treasure and blight, remains a space apart in the reinvented post-colonial city.

The same spatial practices of control visible in the history and practice of segregation in Algiers would make their way to the metropole, too.⁵⁸ In twentieth-century Paris and Marseille, police officers and specialized surveillance services tracked Algerians by targeting the neighborhoods where they lived.⁵⁹ In these cities, segregation existed because of the same intertwined processes of urban planning, everyday discrimination, and the choices of Algerian families. The official invisibility of the drivers of segregation, both in Algiers and in France, also made it harder to fight with judicial strategies (Brahim 2021). Today, legacies of these logics of race and space color the French state's relationship to the *banlieues*, where many Algerian immigrants and their descendants live. Racism still impacts residents of the *banlieues*, although discrimination remains opaque in government sources, in part due to the official refusal to study questions of race in France.⁶⁰

The Casbah emerged from a long, intentional history of segregation and racial control in Algiers. The French military appropriated land for Europeans in the nineteenth century, making longstanding Algerian settlement on the land opaque and naturalizing their own presence. In subsequent decades, the colonial government prioritized Europeans' right to the city through public housing initiatives based on race. Although framing colonial rule as "civilizing," French officials prevented Algerians from accessing the very signs of modernity they purported to bring—denying segregated Algerian neighborhoods access to electricity, plumbing, public transportation, and public health infrastructure (Descloitres 1961, 60). Everyday racism blocked Algerians from expanding beyond the confines of *bidonvilles* and the Casbah, a racism supported by complicit elected officials who refused to censure discrimination. But to view segregation as resulting solely from French action would also miss the intentional strategies of Algerian families, who sought out spaces like the Casbah to shelter from colonial oversight, organize resistance to French rule, and create alternative forms of solidarity. Marginalized by the French, Algerians used their illegibility to develop social networks that would be fundamental to the overthrow of colonial rule. In playing with opacity, Algerian anti-colonial actors weaponized the tools of the state, a strategy with continuing resonance.

ABSTRACT

Under French colonial rule, the city of Algiers was visibly divided by racial segregation. European settlements sprawled out from the port, while a large percentage of the native Algerian population lived crammed into the Casbah, the ancient center of the city. Yet no formal legal structures, like public health codes, pass systems, or racial covenants, set up these divisions. In this essay, I explore the history of segregation in Algiers, arguing that segregation emerged not from a single code or policy but rather from a slow, constant project of erasure, racial violence, and expropriation that limited the urban possibilities for Algerians. But these same segregated spaces, like the Casbah, could also become chosen homes and zones of solidarity for Algerians living in a colonial city built to reproduce violence. The very opacity that made Algerian spaces invisible in formal governance also made them a meaningful resource for movements of resistance. [segregation; racial discrimination; Algiers; colonial policy; urbanism; anti-colonial resistance; twentieth century]

NOTES

1. I use "Algerian" to describe the Indigenous populations of Algeria, both Amazigh and Arab. Although this term flattens ethnic, class, and linguistic differences, I use it to avoid borrowing racist colonial language and to establish this group in opposition to the multi-national settler population, whom I call "European."

2. I intentionally leave the word *indigène* untranslated because this term, both a legal category and a racial slur, has no obvious English translation. It was used by colonial actors to describe the population I call “Algerian.”
3. The Arabic word *casbah* (قَصْبَة) can be translated as fort, citadel, or watchtower. In Algiers, *casbah* means the old town, the equivalent of a *medina* (مدينة) in Morocco.
4. In the nineteenth century, residents of Algiers identified more with their family, tribe, or social status than with an abstract construct of “Algerian,” which did not exist as such in the Ottoman period. In creating a binary in the colonial period, the French also inadvertently helped invent an idea of the Algerian nation. Kaddache asserts that there were about 400 “*nègres*” in Algiers in 1855, an offensive term that I translate here as Black. He says the Black Africans in Algiers were the descendants of Ottoman servants or enslaved domestic workers (Kaddache n.d., 20).
5. This simplified binary, for example, rendered the small population of Black Africans who lived in the Casbah largely invisible in French imaginaries. French Orientalist observers broadly categorized them as working for the road service, as masseurs, or (secretly) as practitioners of witchcraft (see Favre 1949). The Black population of Algiers, however, is not mentioned in government discussions of housing policy or urban renewal.
6. The *indigénat* code in Algeria established distinct legal codes for French citizens and “*indigènes*.” Although supposedly in deference to “traditional” Islamic law, the code also criminalized resistance to French authority and created a legal category that distinguished between European settlers and native Algerians. On the *indigénat* in Algeria, see Le Cour Grandmaison 2010.
7. On the symbolic value of renaming streets, see Grangaud 2009, 190.
8. Zeynep Çelik (2009) has argued that usurping urban space was carried out in the name of imposing “modernity” and “rationality” on Algiers.
9. Directeur des finances à M. le Ministre de la Guerre, « Vente des terrains, » 15 July 1836, GGA 1N 3, Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM).
10. This narrative is evident in the histories of Algiers, see Benatia 1980; Çelik 1997; Icheboudene 1997; Kaddache n.d., 1951, 1970; and Lespès 1930.
11. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
12. For example, both Kaddache (n.d., 1951, 1970) and Icheboudene (1997) assert this rationale.
13. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
14. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
15. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
16. « Observations des parties intéressées au sujet du plan de la ville d’Alger, » August 1844, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
17. Zermaly signed in Arabic, although the statement is in French, indicating that there was likely a translator acting as go-between. Préfecture d’Alger, « On demande l’expropriation de divers immeubles... » 23 August 1861, GGA 1N 4, ANOM.
18. Etat Supplémentaire des Maisons à Exproprier, GGA 1N 4, ANOM.
19. On the political history of Algeria, see Stora 2004.
20. « Rapport du Maire sur la création d’un square à Bab-el-Oued », 15 May 1865. Lespès cites this quote as an example of why construction in Algiers slowed during this period (1930, 305).
21. « Rapport du Maire sur la création d’un square à Bab-el-Oued », 15 May 1865.
22. For example, see Colonel Charon, Directeur des fortifications à M. le Gouverneur Générale de l’Algérie, 30 September, 1849, GGA 1N 3 ANOM.
23. The traditional Jewish Quarter of Algiers clustered around the synagogue at Place Rabbïn Bloch, adjacent to the Casbah. This likely accounts for some of the 25 percent

- of non-Algerian residents in the second district (2ème arrondissement), as Jews in Algeria had gained French citizenship and were considered European in state record-keeping (Kaddache 1970, 32).
24. Though Kaddache labels this as the Algerian population of the Casbah, he seems to include the Marine Quarter and the Casbah in the calculation. He notes that 60 percent of Algerians lived specifically in the 2ème arrondissement, or the “haute ville” Casbah (1970, 13).
 25. *Bulletin municipal officiel de la ville d’Alger*, various dates. Archived and accessible at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32731184v/date>
 26. On social housing in Algeria and its racial, colonial goals, see Guillopé 2023.
 27. “Indigène” housing units were also built in Clos Salembier and Maison-Carrée. See Çelik 1997, 131; Guillopé 2023, 136–39.
 28. Çelik details the design of several “indigène” housing units in the 1930s (1997, 131–143).
 29. Office Public d’Habitations à Bon Marché, 12 December 1940, 91 101 9, ANOM. In part, this disparity in access existed because obtaining social housing required a stable job contract and a minimum salary that was out of reach for most Algerians. See Guillopé 2023.
 30. Délégation Financières, Session of November 1936, GGA 3CAB 25, ANOM. See also Guillopé 2023, 137–38.
 31. On the *bidonvilles*, see Çelik 1997; Crane 2017; Descloitres 1961; House 2018, 2019.
 32. Gouverneur Général de l’Algérie à M. le Maire d’Alger, « Object: Construction des cités musulmanes, » 19 April 1946, 91 101 9, ANOM.
 33. Capitaine Missoum à M. Le Maire d’Alger, 29 November 1948, GGA 9CAB 140, ANOM.
 34. For one such project, see « Inauguration de la première tranche de maisonnettes au Clos-Salembier, » Undated, 91 101 9, ANOM. For graphs of these trends, see Guillopé 2023, 439.
 35. Préfet d’Alger, André Trémeaud à M. Claudius-Petit, Ministre de la Reconstruction, 17 May 1952, 91 1K 593, ANOM.
 36. Though some post-war, HBM projects valorized mixing Algerian and settler populations, the logics of segregation largely continued. In the 1950s, there were renewed efforts to create specifically “Muslim” housing, often located far from the city center. See Guillopé 2023, chs. 7–9.
 37. CIE d’Alger, « Renseignement: Location de logements aux indigènes, » 25 February 1941, 91 4I 31, ANOM.
 38. CIE d’Alger, « Renseignement: Location de logements aux indigènes, » 25 February 1941, 91 4I 31, ANOM.
 39. CIE d’Alger, « Renseignement: Location de logements aux indigènes, » 25 February 1941, 91 4I 31, ANOM.
 40. In the postwar, leftist newspaper *Alger Républicain* indeed highlighted a rash of “unjust” evictions, although the articles did not give evidence of racial bias. The prefecture, however, denied the accusations, saying all evictions had just cause. « Note sur l’activité de la Fédération Algériens des Locataires et du Journal Alger-Républicain, » 1948, 91 2I 34, ANOM.
 41. It is unclear why this particular woman had the right to a requisitioned home, but it was relatively common during WWII for the local government or military to requisition “unused” homes.
 42. « Expulsions de locataires (1946-1949), » Undated, 91 1K 201, ANOM.
 43. « Expulsions de locataires (1946-1949), » Undated, 91 1K 201, ANOM.
 44. Extrait des Délibérations du Conseil Municipal, 22 July 1955, 91 4I 32, ANOM.
 45. Extrait des Délibérations du Conseil Municipal, 22 July 1955, 91 4I 32, ANOM.
 46. On the “Kabyle myth,” see Lorcin 1999.
 47. Commissaire Divisionnaire Costes à M. Le Préfet, « Object: Refus de services, » 12 June 1954, 91 4I 32, ANOM.
 48. On policing and racial violence in Algeria, see Beaujon 2025 and Kalman 2024.

49. Similar dynamics existed in segregated cities in the United States. For example, see [Drake and Cayton 1945](#).
50. Lettre du Président du Comité. 7 May 19-9 (likely 1949), 91 4I 184, ANOM.
51. « Le comité de quartier de la Casbah présent à M. Naegelen, au préfet et au Maire d'Alger un cahier de revendications, » Alger Républicain, 31 July 1948, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
52. « Le comité de la Casbah a tenu son assemblée générale annuelle. » Alger Républicain, 12 September 1947, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
53. « Faut-il moderniser la Casbah ? » Echo d'Alger, 11 December 1949, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
54. SLNA, « Objet: A/s du comité du Défense des Intérêts des Quartiers de la Haute Ville-Casbah, » 8 January 1948, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
55. SLNA, « A/s du comité du Défense des Intérêts des Quartiers de la Haute Ville-Casbah, » 17 January 1948, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
56. This is not to say, however, that the Casbah was a politically homogenous neighborhood and there is also a record of (often violent) conflicts between different political parties operating in the Casbah.
57. On fugitivity, see [Campt 2017](#).
58. On the “boomerang” of colonial technologies, see [Go 2024](#).
59. On this policing, see [Beaujon 2025](#), [Blanchard 2011](#), [Prakash 2022](#), and [Rosenberg 2006](#).
60. Important recent work has pushed against this tendency to ignore race in sociological studies of France. See for example [Fassin 2011](#); [Jobard 2002](#); [Jobard, Lamberth, and Névanen 2012](#); and, most notably, [Slaouti and Le Cour Grandmaison 2020](#).

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Capture /Connect /Shift

A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

SHACKLE CITY: Capture and the (Im)Possibility of Nairobi Life

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They say the chains are gone

but we see the shackles

Dorphanage, *We March*, 2025

In the span of less than two weeks, ostensibly prompted by the youth-led anti-finance bill protests that started on June 18, 2024, 24 people had been killed by the Kenyan police, 627 were arrested, and 32 were abducted. Many other missing and injured were confirmed, and a significant number of them have suffered fates that are still unknown (Kinyanjui 2024). The vast majority of the dead, disappeared and abducted during and beyond this period were under thirty years of age, constituting a generation that is now increasingly familiar with the terrors of our police state.

For President Ruto and his administration, the capture and killings of these young people were legitimate actions to contain and silence what he termed

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“treasonous” elements (Madowo et al. 2024); a necessary response to what the state deemed novel conditions—an unprecedented cross class, interethnic, multitudinous youth uprising. Yet, many observers of this current moment shared that these events were redolent of earlier regimes and invoked decades of dictatorship under Kenyatta (1963–1978) and Moi (1978–2002); “Return of state abductions; how state abductions have unleashed terror” read one headline (Wasuna 2024).

In this essay, however, I take us back to times that precede those of our first two post-independence regimes, and even that of formal colonial control, and argue that these state actions are the outcome “of [a] society that developed from the meeting and confrontation of masters and slaves” (Cooper 1977, xi). Here, I take the position that what I call *the promise of enshacklement*, which prevails in the (im)materialities of the city of Nairobi—this is, the ever present potential for the curtailing of freedom and the ubiquity of tangible forms of bondage (the handcuffs, prison cages, police sequester in both mobile [cars] and fixed [police stations] forms, the county *askari* officers, etc.), stem from a much longer genealogy than the postcolonial or colonial excesses they are understood as signaling. This promise, which is related to other phenomena such as forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, is a consequence of the afterlives of slavery. And, certainly, while the periods of slavery and the colonial have porous boundaries, I distinguish these two eras since the Scramble for Africa, formerly launched by the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, allowed for a situation where, in the words of a Lagos newspaper of the time, “a forcible possession of our land has taken the place of a forcible possession of our person” (Gathara 2019). Surely, while feigning an abolitionist commitment to end the slave trade (Getachew 2019), the Berlin Conference formerly marked the catalyzation of what Gathara (2019) refers to as the “rules for the conquest and partition of Africa.” It is this seeming transition—from a more intense trade in humans to a more committed parceling out of the continent—that allows me to hold, however tenuously, this permeable separation between the formal periods of enslavement and colonization.

In centering the shackle as animating the promise I elaborate on here, it is my position that the materialization of an urban landscape replete with both the specter and reality of capture affirms not just of the events of a repressive post-colonial state or the formal British colonial era in Kenya, which has been well documented over the last two decades (see, for example, Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005), but, as well, the centuries of enslavement preceding these periods. This is even as:

references to slavery largely disappear from written sources, both mission and official, once colonialism was fully established; in other words, at the point when reference to continuing servitude would have undermined the narrative of East African colonialism as a successful abolitionist intervention. (Becker et al. 2023, 132)

Without a doubt, at the state level, whether in curricula, heritage management, or on the international stage, recollections of centuries of slavery in East Africa are “unwelcome in the discourse of post-colonial nationhood” (Becker et al. 2023, 133; c.f. Kiriyama 2022). The dead, sought by Hartman (2008) in Ghana, are here too, but, to a much greater extent, rarely reclaimed (c.f. Cousin et al 2024).

Yet, from the chains still visible in a subterranean “slave pen” in the town of Shimoni; the presence of a bell to warn “residents of slave ships sighted in the creek of Mombasa” that still hangs, albeit in replica, in a Mombasa market (Shah 2024), and, even, the normalized application of the words *mwungana* [free person] (Cooper 1977) and *vibarua* (Meier 2024) in daily lexicon (the latter a term historically used to reference the lowest of the enslaved class in the late nineteenth-century East African Coast), underscores that, despite silence about the chattel trade in this region, we are still living in its time—the time of the shackle.

Slavery’s afterlives in Nairobi, and in particular the potential of capture, are shored-up by the intentional carceral brick and mortar of the colonial and postcolonial periods; the high walls, barbed wire, impromptu detention sites, illegal raids, numerous police posts, “smart” surveillance, and more, which are key features of its landscapes. For these reasons, in this essay it is my position that for those connected and generational lives that were not meant to be free—the enslaved, the African and, now, low-income dweller, the city’s privileged built environment ensures they know only too well that enshacklement is the promise for they who are understood as out of place in and having the potential to breach Nairobi’s exclusive zones. This promise notwithstanding, though urban governance regimes are informed by the logics of the shackle and proceed via material and intangible forces that encourage modalities of self-regulation, as in the time of slavery, capture is never certain or total since residents navigate means to elude enclosures and create possibilities of life in this urban space (c.f. Mikidady 2023).

In the following section, *The Promise*, I discuss how Nairobi’s environment is shaped by earlier slave economies and will elaborate on how this reality

intersects with colonial and postcolonial carceral urban practices. The intention is to evidence how the promise of enshacklement and its corollaries—extrajudicial killings, hyper policing, the dominance of private security forces, abductions etc.—become established in this city as normal operations, and, I would argue, de facto urban governance interventions. In the final section, *The (Im)Possibility of Nairobi Life*, I convey how those who are forced to be cautious residents of Nairobi, continue to challenge, however temporarily, the capture immanent to this shackle city.

THE PROMISE

From 1850, the northern route, passing through Ngong close to the Nairobi River, was increasingly developed in spite of the fierce reputation of the Maasai and Wakwavi. Arab and Somali traders, sometimes financed by Indian Banyans at the coast, penetrated up-country in search not only of ivory, but also of porters who would carry it to the coast and then themselves be sold as slaves.

Hake, *African Metropolis*

Writing in a publication launched to mark the jubilee history of Nairobi in 1950, [James Smart \(1950\)](#) notes that not only are “Nairobi’s beginnings, then [. . .] linked with the reason for the exploitation of the East African territories,” but, importantly, it was the narratives of the verdant “charm” of this region, brought back by both “slave traders” and “explorers,” which catalyzed the imperial desires to occupy it. [Hake \(1977, 15\)](#), too, documents that this form of bondage saw the traffic of “500–1,000 persons every month” from 1850, and in an enterprise that developed the “Northern route” occupied by many of Nairobi’s present-day geographies. These chronicles offer glimpses into the history of a nascent colonial urban territory where “old slave-traders [had] skirted the forest” previously, and possible bones of the enslaved were unearthed in the subsequent excavations for new roads once a railway town was more formally established ([Smart 1950, 9](#)).

What did this threat of bondage by slave traders entail? What messages are carried in the osseous remains of the enslaved who were disinterred and how are they reflected in the current “promise” I speak of? Writing about the “horrors” of the slave trade in East Africa in 1909, Basil Cave, the British Consul General for German East Africa, documents some of these conditions albeit through a narrative that centers the role of Britain in stemming them. In this missive he conveys:

What those horrors were it is scarcely necessary to recall; the sudden attacks by bands of armed Arabs on unprepared and defenceless villages in the interior of Africa; the ruthless slaughter of the aged and infirm; the march of the raw slaves in chains and yokes, beaten and half starved, to the Coast, the sick and weaklings left by the roadside to die or to become a prey to wild beasts; the transit to Zanzibar and sale in open market; and, in many cases, the transport in native dhows to Arabia, over-crowded, battened down in foul holds and starving, the dead and dying mixed with the living; these are some of the things which, for those who have only heard or read of them, live in the imagination, and which those who have seen them can never forget. (Cave 1909, 21)

Equally, in Frere Town, a community in the coastal city of Mombasa that was started for enslaved persons “freed” by the British, May Riziki Oliver shares memories of this ensnarement passed down by previous generations:¹

When they were taken they were chained . . . *mlolongo* [in a line]. Now when they are in the boat, when you try to stabilize yourself, and when you try to run, you are being taken and thrown into water. So many of them died on their way from Tanzania to here.

Despite the historical ubiquity of enslavement in this region, as is evident from the above witnessing and the reconstitution of slave conditions through various “conscriptations” following its ostensive “abolition” (Getachew 2019; Rodney 1983), more recent postcolonial chronicles of the emergence of (colonial) Nairobi firmly begin with the establishment of an imperial “railway camp” (see Ogot and Ogot 2020; Owuor and Mbatia 2008),² and rarely draw us back to the “Northern route” and the chattel caravans of the enslaved that mapped out future East African transit channels and towns (Cooper 1977; Alpers 2004). Confirming these origins, Kiriama writes:

The slave trade caravans into the interior of Kenya followed several routes and these were mostly in well-watered and easy terrain. Stopovers for caravans were established where there was easy access to food and these centers have now grown into big cosmopolitan towns, for example, Machakos, Kitui, Kibwezi and Mariakani in the interior and the rest of the coastline towns [. . .]

The caravan routes inevitably gave rise to caravan towns, where the traders would rest and at the same time replenish their supplies. Such caravan towns included Kibwezi and Mtito Andei (whose name is interesting because, in the local Kikamba language, it means a place of vultures. It is said that the slave traders usually left sick and weak slaves in the open camp that they had established here, and if they died, they had nobody to bury them other than the vultures, who would feast on the bodies). The other towns were Kitui and Machakos, also found along the present Mombasa Nairobi highway. (Kiriamu 2022, 47–48)

The imperative to highlight these foundations of our towns becomes more pressing when one learns that slavery in the region was only abolished in 1907 (Cooper 1977), just over a hundred years ago. That is why toponyms registering violent ecologies of the slave trade, “the place of vultures” detailed above as but one example, endure. And, also why I contend that the promise of ensnarement—the omnipresent potential of strictures on one’s freedom and particularly for the descendants of the traded—is so pervasive in local urban spaces. In place of the “old slave route,” in place of the “vultures,” are modes of “control, containment and punishment” (Pfungst and Kimari 2021) firmly established as the *modus operandi* of Nairobi and Kenya’s secondary urban regions.

SHACKLE CITY

Following its designation as a train depot by the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC), the land that the Maasai had named Enkare Nyrobi, the place of cool waters, was to become Nairobi in 1898; the headquarters of a territory that was to be propelled by the extractive pursuits of a colonial locomotive enterprise (Ogot and Ogot 2020; Owuor and Mbatia 2008). Progressively, the inchoate forms of a more formal carceral urban landscape were established as the railway town grew, and as its built environment was to layer on to former slave encampments, tracks, and routes.

As the city proceeded, so did its administration’s bid to establish legitimacy, “order” and control through various articulations of spatial enclosure. Here, then, modalities to establish this promise of ensnarement included public health dictates prompted by various situated iterations of a racialized “sanitation syndrome” (Swanson 1977), multiple municipal bylaws that encouraged arrest if contravened by the “native,” and the augmentation of a police force and policing architectures that were set-up when Kenya was merely a protectorate in

1887, preceding even its status as a colony (Wolf 1973, 41). In 1910, this police force, less than 12 years after Nairobi's official designation as a colonial railway town, already numbered 2,000 (Deflem 1994, 54; Wolf 1973), for an urban population that could not have exceeded 15,000 people (Myers 1973).

Evidencing these conditions, throughout the first sixty years of colonial Nairobi's existence, both African oral histories and yearly municipal reports register the ubiquity of the shackle. These latter accounts are filled with tallies of "natives" fined or detained for a number of council offences, including contravening prohibitions on trade (such as operating a food kiosk without a license or driving a hand cart down the "wrong side of the road"), urban residency without a permit, unpaid hut tax, and other misdeeds that overlapped with the local "rogue and vagabond" laws whose probable genealogy was the 1824 U.K. Vagrancy Act that criminalized practices, predominantly of the poor and racialized, seen as "idle," "vagrant," "rogue" and more.³ Fundamentally, what was being targeted here was not just what was seen as the cultures of the "native" out of place in the urban, but African freedom—and, ultimately, the African. Speaking to parallel practices in the Caribbean, Heron, building on Walcott (2021), writes:

When British slavery legally ended (1834–1838), nominally free Black labourers of the Antilles were coerced—with vagrancy and land tenure laws [. . .]—into low wage labour and economic insecurity exacerbated by imperial neglect and neo-colonial "underdevelopment"; the very conditions that eventually drive descendants of enslaved people to board boats for post-war Britain. (Philogene Heron 2022, 1255–1256)

In Kenya, the legacies of the provincialization of this 1824 Act create the conditions of possibility for a situation where, in 2025, young people can still, on a daily basis, be charged with offences such as "vagrancy," "loitering," "nuisance," "disorderly" behavior, "causing affray," and "begging."⁴ While "fouling the air" and "fouling water" may be crimes that did not survive to feature on the penal codes of the present day, essentially, even the supposed violations that remain make clear the ever present potential for capture in the city, with the police having access to an array of misdeeds to charge you with should your sojourns appear to contravene Nairobi's colonial logics.

In the pre-independence period, the policing and implementation of these offenses were accompanied by raids, impromptu detentions, the establishment of *kipande* passbooks as permits for "native" travel (as in apartheid South Africa),

household visits, and various forms of multi-scalar surveillance (Anderson 2005; Pfingst and Kimari 2021). Currently, even magistrates in local courts convey that in a day of 100 pleas, at least 50 percent of them are for these same misdemeanors.⁵ Such forms of superintendence, enacted in and because of the city, reproduce a status quo where the end goal is that, as a human rights lawyer declared, “everything is about imprisonment.”

Without a doubt, the demographics represented in Kenya’s remand prisons, who are there not only because of these classed and racialized colonial offences that remain in our penal code but, as well, for their coinciding inability to pay bail or acquire legal representation (Gathara 2020), evidence the reality that it is not just the criminalization of acts but *persons*, and persons in particular spaces, which undergirds these laws that both portray and inform the formative rationales of Kenya’s urban landscapes.

During the emergency period (1952–1960), the threat of the African—both the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (also known as the Mau Mau) fighter in the forest, and even those assumed to be their sympathizers in the city and villages—led to an increase in the severity of state violence for those understood as against the established “order.” No longer was one just, perhaps, a “rogue” or “vagrant,” but being further marked as Mau Mau legitimized more extreme gendered violence. Rebisz (2024) and others detail the forceful detention and enclosure—often expressed in more cloaked terms such as “villagization”—of women and girls, coupled with sexual and related corporeal violations. For men, detention or death in or beyond the gaols, many of which still function as the holding pens for today’s vagrant, was the established norm (see also Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005).

It is also critical to emphasize that these forms of torture and incarceration were not just about the person; they were also about the city and who was meant to reside in it. Evidencing this, Ese and Ese write:

On 20 October 1952, the Colonial Government declared a state of emergency throughout Kenya which lasted until 1960. In Nairobi, armed conflicts ensued in the struggle to control both urban space and its population. The British completely altered their approach to African urbanity in this period, cordoning off housing areas with barbed wire, restricting movement, and implementing ethnic segregation [. . .] This radically changed the African urban landscape in Nairobi with most of the African urban areas becoming war zones, besieged by the colonial authorities. (Ese and Ese 2020, 145)

Nairobi, for many, still remains a war zone; the post-independence years upheld the rationales of the past: from the violence of the slave caravan and the horrors of colonial incursions, to the normalized carceral habitation patterns of the city, the reterritorializations of these logics and practices in urban space prompts feelings of “siege” among many residents—the presentiment of “war anytime, anywhere” for young people (Kimari 2020; c.f. Hake 1977, 208). Undoubtedly, these circumstances spatialize a “nervous condition” for a multitude of geographies and those that reside within them.

Such anxieties about the city, I argue here, are tied to this enduring possibility of enclosure, which echoes the earlier practices of the chattel trade wagons that created and traversed the “Northern route.” In this terrain where slavers “skirted” forests, colonial forces imposed passbooks, and the police are currently de facto urban infrastructure that controls movement, access to services and, even, life itself (Kimari 2024), the likelihood of capture in Nairobi remains a common threat across decades; a connective tissue that enables similar unsettled urban embodiments for over a century, but also foments shared bids for dissent. Certainly, the proliferating spaces of control and containment and the promise of enshacklement that they enable, necessitate that “slavery’s living presence is recognized and made visible” (Philogene Heron 2022) by those inhabiting but without the legitimacy of the city.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF NAIROBI LIFE

This is the intimacy of our age with theirs—an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?

Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

IMF, World Bank, Stop the Modern Day Slavery

Activist placard, June 2024 Protests in Nairobi

Gates with spikes, electric fences, private security guards; these are some of the normalized infrastructures of enclosure that feature in a significant number of Nairobi’s geographies, constituting both a warning of, and actual tools for, enshacklement. During the anti-finance bill protests of June and July 2024,

these instruments were augmented with more impromptu detention spaces, plain-clothed police officers, weaponized water tanks, and state sanctioned vigilante abduction squads. This period in our postcolonial moment can, surely, be considered a zenith of what I argue here is a “shackle city”—an urban landscape where the likelihood of capture is a necessary consideration for many residents as they leave their homes every morning.

Almost a year after the peak of these manifestations, abductions and illegal arrests continue unabated, signaling that they are not merely the techniques of a particular political episode, but, rather, part of an established repertoire: that of arbitrary seizure by state or affiliated private security forces set in motion by the tangible and intangible enslavement/colonial/postcolonial carceral landscapes of the city (c.f. [Brankamp 2022](#); [Pfungst and Kimari 2021](#); [Kimari 2020](#)). Without a doubt, the majority of Nairobi’s residents of all sexes can convey common stories of encounters with the police at all hours of the day; contact that often precipitates the unleashing of multiple forms of restrictive equipment—handcuffs, ropes, cages, as but a few examples—and, ultimately, body confinement.

Analogously, [Gathara \(2020\)](#), highlighting the pervasive threat of arrest and imprisonment of “natives” in the colonial period, excavates the following personal narrative of enshacklement from a 1933 colonial commission report. Within these pages, one Ishmael Ithongo reports:

Once I was arrested by a District Officer on account of my hat because I did not see him approaching. He came from behind and threw it down. I asked him why because I did not know him. He called an *askari* and asked for my name. It was in a district outside. He asked me, “Don’t you know the law here that you should take off your hat when you see a white man?” Then he asked me, “Have you got your *kipandi* [native identity document/passbook]?” I said “No, Sir.” So I was sent to prison. . . . When an *askari* thinks that you look smart he asks if you have your *kipandi*. I have seen natives who are going to church in the morning who have changed their coat and forgotten their *kipandi*. They meet an *askari*. “Have you got your *kipandi*?” “No.” “Ah right” and they are marched off to prison.⁶

Close to eight decades after Ithongo’s statement, a young man from the settlement of Mathare in Nairobi offered similar sentiments when he shared: “Youth are camouflaging to save their lives [. . .] being drunk and dirty is important because the police do not want to see anyone looking clean. In order to save your

life, you need to be dirty or drunk because if you are clean and you wear fashionable clothes they will say you are a thief” (Mweru, personal communication 2016). Even fictional chronicles of Nairobi life, though to a lesser extent urban scholarship, register this daily reality primarily for those seen as out of place in the city, and this is a condition which distinctly intersects with class (see, for example, [Mangua 1971](#); [Mwangi 1976](#)) and race. Those in the bullseye of the shackle’s dragnet include young men from low-income urban settlements ([Van Staple 2016](#)), hawkers ([Dragsted 2019](#)), sex workers ([Mbote et al. 2020](#)), Muslim youth ([Al-Bulushi 2021](#); [Glück 2017](#)), sexual minorities ([Wairuri 2025](#)) and other marginalized demographics whose tenure and citizenship in Nairobi is often contested. Consequently, these Nairobians develop contingency plans should they meet with the primary vectors of capture—the police. And these are situated tactics oriented around who they will call if these encounters degenerate, how much money they will bribe, and, above all, decisions about where they should or should not wander to evade likely enclosure (c.f. [Price et al. 2016](#)). Surely, then, in this city, the pervasive infrastructures of apprehension—from impromptu detention bays, to the ubiquitous police and their handcuffs, and even the over 2,000 Huawei surveillance cameras across Nairobi⁷—continue the shackling of the past, layering the landscape with materialities and immaterialities that prompt affective experiences of terror.

In the same areas where caravans of enslaved people traversed, now pedestrian convoys or truckloads of detained persons are transported every day, echoing the memories from Frere Town shared above. Illustrating this, a short survey, conducted as part of a collaborative project in 2022 to ascertain the risk of arbitrary detentions in Nairobi, represents these realities quantitatively.⁸ Of the 40 people who responded, with an average age of 23 years, 65.1 percent had at one point been arrested by the police as they went about their wage-supplying activities, and, from the testimonies offered, these were unwarranted seizures. Here, then, whether part of a normalized repertoire of harassment or the rent-seeking bids of the police, these apprehensions were justified by the punitive, racialized and classed vernacular of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, even when more than 75 percent of those detained were not booked for anything at the police station; they may have been arrested temporarily until a bribe was made either before they reached this facility or sometime after. In whatever scenario, the effects suffered and enunciated can be said to mirror, to a smaller extent, those faced by communities that endured enslavement in the preceding centuries—that is, familial stress and trauma. Certainly, besides the loss of a day or

more of wages and the personal and collective “nervous conditions” that emerged as a consequence, these Nairobi residents became further (re)acquainted with this urban agglomeration as a site of holding pens, “too many dungeons” (Hartman 2008)—a landscape of containment.

Since colonial Nairobi “was a perfect Apartheid city without trying” (Lonsdale 2001, 220), its brick and mortar were and are effectively corralled to facilitate detention. These cement and stone machinations imposed on the tread and track of slave economies, and that were oriented by railway-led zoning priorities, allowed for the arrangement of the initial cluster of locomotive encampment tents to imprint Nairobi’s spatial order for years to come (Chiuri 1978; Hake 1977; White 1990). Ultimately, the city would then come to be “designate[d] as a specific vision of socio-spatial relationships” (Byerley 2015, 523; Harris, Parnell, and Demissie 2012, 143; see also Amutabi 2012); one, I would argue, which prioritized the ability to apprehend and monitor, enclose and detain, those it has historically sought to exclude.

The raids, evictions, torture, and killings that are at the extreme end of the capture continuum make more spectacular a normalized trend. Unquestionably, one can contend that Operation Anvil, a colonial military intervention during the emergency period in 1954, which facilitated the “largest urban cordon and search action ever mounted” in the country (Anderson 2005, 200), or the recent abductions of citizens during the June and July 2024 protests, are more acutely evocative of the endemic seizure of the period of enslavement—the same promise of capture that led to the establishment of a warning bell in Mombasa town, and that displaced communities to hilltops, caves, and deeper into the hinterland as bids for protection (Kiriamu 2022; Hartman 2008).

Prior to the abolition of slavery in the region, “the traumata of capture, transportation, and sale severed slaves from the social fabric of their original communities” (Cooper 1977, 5). Currently, over a hundred years later, the anxiety of potential “capture” and “transportation,” I would argue, highlights an enduring logic of the prevalent (im)materialities of the city, and “the daily struggle between masters and slaves to alter the demands being made upon slaves and whatever rights and privileges they may have” (Cooper 1977, 15). Assuredly, the concomitant battles to evade slavery’s dragnets and to restore community social fabric(s) endures. Here, then, those for whom the city was not imagined—the African, the poor, the woman, the migrant—persist, despite the impossibilities of this tenure. While the enclosures have proliferated, over a million Kenyans still took to the street during the anti-finance bill protests. Importantly, it is also

during this time that I heard analogies of enslavement being used more widely in public life to reference this political and spatial moment—a ghost conjured, using Hartman’s (2008) words, to “incite the hopes of transforming the present.” This was evident when, for instance, protestors enunciated their refusal, as one placard announced, of the shackles of international financial institutions: “*IMF, World Bank, Stop the Modern Day Slavery*” (Lawal 2024). Or when participating activists asserted that they were against “debt slavery” (Kalevera 2024), and were on the streets “slaving for a country I love” (Muia 2024). These recognitions that slavery is still very much in our present, and yet the continued defiance to challenge this and reclaim an exclusive built environment despite the promise of enshacklement, really breathes life into, as Cooper (1977) shared, the bids for those in bondage to “alter the demands being made upon slaves.”

What is at stake during such political moments, which, in a frightening, albeit predictable, outcome exacerbate rather than reduce the potential for the shackle, are the efforts to make life possible in Nairobi and beyond. Interestingly, whether knowingly or unwittingly, residents drew on longer histories as they encountered and sought to navigate the capture that makes visible the reinstantiating (Stoler 2008) afterlives of slavery, which, through many grave articulations, scaffold both colonial and postcolonial spatial excess.

Many scenes condense these continuities; those marginal bodies born in towns that emerged along the former slave routes are still subject to detention and exploitation; the descendants of freed enslaved in Frere Town, Mombasa, continue to petition actively to get identity documents so as to be recognized as Kenyans towards drawing from the minimal bounties of citizenship; and significant finances and infrastructures of the state and its urban administrations are unrelentingly dedicated towards body seizure—from those implicated in the production of multiple fine regimes to the labor involved in staffing and servicing the expanding and expansive formal and shadow units of apprehension (the police, the county forces, the water police unit, and other state vigilante formations). Undoubtedly, all of these events highlight a formal urban rationale still heavily reliant on shackling for its operations. But that the vast majority of the city are still here, seeking to make lives as they evade daily dragnets, registers the (im)possibilities they are determined to enact within and in between moments of capture.

CONCLUSION

“Are you taking me across an ocean”? This question was asked repeatedly to filmmaker Saitabao Kaiyare when he approached residents of Murang’a, Kenya,

during a process to interrogate the restitution misadventures of African artifacts from European museums.⁹ While, a national silence about slavery is upheld, with the ongoing state violence in the urban paralleled primarily to that of the colonial period and early post-independence regimes, these “signposts from the past” (Becker et al. 2023), enunciatory gestures that encapsulate an affective even if unconscious terror-filled memory of enslavement, highlight how we are still in its time; that pervasive fears of corporeal seizure scaffold experiences in all of our towns and draw from much earlier chattel ages censored in national forms of memorialization.

Nairobi has had many descriptors over the years. Originally known by the Maasai toponym Enkare Nyrobi, the “place of cool waters,” it has since aspired to be a “colonial capital,” a “green city in the sun,” the headquarters of the “Silicon Savannah,” and, even, less flatteringly, been identified as “Nairobbery” by virtue of the crime that made it infamous in the 1990s. In all of these periods, however, in spite of the fashion of its multiple labels, it has always been a place of capture.

In this essay, I have sought to detail what I term the promise of enshacklement in the city of Nairobi. This is a violent promissory reach that emerges as an afterlife of slavery, not merely colonial or postcolonial excess as is often pronounced in public fora, and engulfs other towns. While the formal built environment of this capital, a “perfect apartheid city without trying,” was established during the formal period of British settler colonialism, it layers onto the geographies and centuries of a genocidal trade in humans. This is borne out in the tracks that slave caravans developed, and which are now national thoroughfares dotted by towns that were resting stops for these wagons and the vultures that would eat the enslaved bodies they left for dead. Ultimately, in this metropolis established in territory where slavers skirted forests, perhaps, if one digs deep enough, we can still find the osseous remains of those who were the raw material for this chattel enterprise. Informed by this history, within these pages I have argued that Nairobi’s landscape remains charged with a fear of capture established during earlier enslavement economies, and which is upheld and legitimated by architectures and urban operations that prioritize enclosure.

The native location of early twentieth-century Nairobi is now our “slum” governed by inordinate surveillance, harassment and evictions; holding pens abound across various parts of the city (Kimari 2024), and the formal pursuit of “world class” urban ideals has led to the expansion of private and shadow security formations and their attendant “smart city” interventions (see Glück 2017). Yet,

I contend that, even with the enduring promise of enshacklement that shapes everyday navigations for the majority of residents, just like the *watoro*, grand and petit maroons of the Indian Ocean world (Alpers 2004), Nairobi's denizens seek to make life in this restrictive landscape. Their daily unwelcome tread, while maybe cautious, stamps the declarations in Meta Davis Cumberbatch's famous poem: "Shackled? No shackles can bind me! Enslaved? I am free! [. . .] . You captor vile who would enslave me; You are shackled. I am free!"¹⁰

ABSTRACT

Across Kenya's towns, and, in particular, its capital city Nairobi, pervasive architectures of enclosure have endured and expanded. Here, the high city walls and gates, barbed wire fences, police roadblocks, and impromptu security checks are but a few examples of the restrictive infrastructures that are reproduced in the city's built environment. Without a doubt, all of these architectures are there to offer a visceral warning to those who continue to have to justify their presence in the city—working class youth and the "slum dweller," for example, who know too well that enshacklement is the promise for those who are understood as having the potential to breach these exclusive zones. In this context, the simple presence of this demographic is interpreted as a threat, and the reinstantiating logics of the city, therefore, portend capture. Building on ethnographic research from over a decade, in this essay I argue that the formal governance regimes of Nairobi have historically used what I term the promise of enshacklement to maintain the unjust operations of this city. And, in doing so, the pervasive specters of the shackle and capture, arguably afterlives of slavery, shape the (im)possibilities of daily life for the majority of Nairobi's dwellers. [Nairobi; afterlives of slavery; police; Kenya; slavery; Africa]

NOTES

1. May Riziki Oliver shares this in a news segment clip by Cousin, Renouil and Bizot (2024).
2. I would also add that none of my own previous writings, which draw on the history of Nairobi, attend to this history of slavery. This is a grave omission and emerges primarily because the vast majority of historical chronicles of the city do not reference this past. I am eager to remedy this absence in my present and future work.
3. See more from the continental Petty Offences Campaign: <https://decrimpovertystatus.org/petty-offences-in-africa/>
4. See more from the continental Petty Offences Campaign: <https://decrimpovertystatus.org/petty-offences-in-africa/>
5. Communication by Judge Njagi, "Petty Offences Forum," Nairobi.
6. *Kipande* means identity document; it was launched in the colonial period, and Africans were required to carry it everywhere, akin to the apartheid passbook in South Africa. This document registered details—ethnicity, employment status, birthplace etc.—that would determine if the person was legally allowed to be in certain areas. It also had specific bearing on whether they could reside in Nairobi, for example. Currently, in many low-income areas of the city, the police still stop youth for no reason, as the

white man in the above narrative, and ask for their *kipandi*; these practices are, certainly, redolent of the colonial period and the experience of Ithongo above.

7. See Wangari (2023).
8. This survey was done as part of the safety and security research for the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC), and which was co-led in Nairobi by Zoltán Glück and myself.
9. See more in the film *If Objects Could Speak* (2021) directed by Saitabao Kaiyare.
10. From the poem “A Child of Nature (Negro of the Caribbean),” sourced from the volume edited by Busby, *New Daughters of Africa* (2019, 26).

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Capture /Connect /Shift

A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

FROM HOUSE TO HOME: Towards a Relational Politics of Inhabitation Beyond Policy and Finance

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Over the past thirty years, Mumbai has implemented three key policies to address mass housing for the poor. The Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) schemes, introduced in the early 1990s, aim to rehabilitate notified slums. In the mid-1990s, a policy was introduced to redevelop old tenanted buildings, known as “cessed properties,” which pay a nominal tax for maintenance. The early 2000s saw the launch of the Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R&R) program to relocate slum dwellers from land needed for infrastructure projects.

All three policies financialize land, using incentive development rights to generate housing stock. In slum and old building redevelopments, developers provide free housing for existing residents in exchange for additional real estate rights to produce “sale houses” that they can sell in the open market to subsidize the free housing. In the R&R program, landowners who build free housing for displaced residents receive transferable building rights, often profiting from low-value land while housing the poor.

These policies overwhelmingly produce high-rise apartments with minimal open spaces, setbacks, and gaps between buildings due to regulatory relaxations that favor developers. Lower floors often suffer from poor light and ventilation

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Figure 1. The vibrant transactional spaces of the Zaobawadi chawl in Mumbai. Photo by Sunil Thakkar.

contributing to high tuberculosis rates in resettlement sites (Pardeshi et al. 2020, 303). These apartments also limit communal spaces, weakening social networks. Unlike slum homes, they lack flexibility for workspaces, incremental upgrades, or adaptations to residents' changing needs. In contrast, older housing types—slums, chawls, and site-and-services schemes have spatial configurations that produce a sociality that supports several low-income residents in the city, making them thrive, in turn producing a rich urban culture for the city. These housing types afford higher transactions, densities, community interactions, care, safety, diversity with much lesser strain on spatial and infrastructural resources (Gupte and Shetty 2022, 553).¹

The 1990s marked a turning point in Mumbai's housing policy, shifting toward financialization and incentivizing developers, sidelining earlier approaches like upgradation and improvement programs. These policies have drawn both praise and criticism. Proponents highlight their innovative use of land markets to provide free housing without government spending (Valambhia 2021). They argue that formal housing enhances dignity by including private toilets within houses and creates assets that can be traded or inherited. Critics contend that these policies primarily benefit developers and financial institutions (Mukhija 2003; Nijman 2008; Indorewala 2018) and even perpetuate structural violence (Bhide 2023).

This essay argues that, while these criticisms and celebrations have occupied housing researchers, people have continued to inhabit and live life in fascinating

ways: finding stop gap solutions while waiting endlessly for the housing to be delivered; appropriating existing financialized house forms to cater to several social needs or completely bypassing the unreachable delivery goals by finding alternative access to housing through myriad urban processes. Four vignettes of home-making in this paper present the obdurate practices that work within the thickets of urban living, where inhabitation is constituted through a constellation of networks, material practices, incrementality, practices of extended occupation and through appropriation and the design of non-standard habitation.

The first vignette explores an SRA apartment building, exposing the precarity of financialized housing and its soft evictions. It shows us how the financialization of housing has reduced the space of possibilities that older house forms had afforded. The second vignette takes us through the story of one family in a suspended wait for an SRA project, showing the practice of waiting as an active relationship to both time and inhabitation. It points to how the making of inhabitations reaches out to mobilize multiple urban forces to incrementally upgrade the home in non-standard ways. The third vignette takes us through a process of appropriation of the housing scheme built under the Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy, where residents have “settled”² a place, filling the gaps in the social infrastructure in the area, created by a financialized housing policy that finds provision of social infrastructure wasteful and burdensome. In doing so they have extended the boundaries of home, creating an extended living room for themselves. The fourth vignette takes us through the story of an informal plotted development for migrant workers, that provides access to housing to a large labor pool that has been left out by the financialized housing delivery mechanism. By following the story of one migrant through the city, we get a sense of the multiplicity of needs of shelter that are reduced by the current policies to a “house” that works around standards and delivery mechanisms that make it unaffordable to the majority. All four vignettes show that home is much larger than the house, asking if the reduction of the questions to “house” and “housing” scuttle other ways of inhabiting.

LIVING IN AN SRA BUILDING: THE STORY OF NASEEM IN DIAMOND APARTMENTS

Naseem lives in a Slum Rehabilitation (SRA) building called Diamond Juhu, located in an upscale Mumbai neighborhood. Over the past thirty years, SRA projects have met only 17 percent of the housing demand (Anthony 2022), largely located in high-value real estate areas.³ These schemes free up land occupied by slums for development.⁴ SRA projects are deemed to be in situ constructions, built to house existing eligible slum dwellers, in return for which

developers get an incentive building right to subsidize this housing. This should ideally lead to allowing the community ties built over years to sustain while improving their living conditions. In practice however, developers often club properties and mix people from various slums. People in Naseem's building, Diamond Apartments, have been brought together from three different slums. The building, built in 2016, is fourteen stories high with fourteen tenements on each floor and has a total of 192 houses. As people are brought here from different places there is not much bonding and trust in the community. The older settlements had consolidated over years and had generated many friendships and solidarities. Even after five years of being in this building Naseem still finds this place alienating. The building design further limits interaction. Interior access corridors are dimly lit and serve only as passageways. A lack of trust in the community makes them keep apartment doors locked, unlike in the slums, where open doors fostered connection and vigilance. The developer still controls the building and restricts outdoor space usage. The eighth-floor refuge area has been converted into a rental hall for events. The ground floor society office and welfare rooms are also rented out and are out of reach for community use.

Naseem and her extended family of eleven have lived here for five years in a cramped 25-square-meter (269-square-foot) apartment. Previously, they had two slum homes, but only one was deemed eligible under SRA rules as they were not able to produce the requisite papers for the second. Unlike her former self-built settlement, the apartment lacks spill-out spaces or lofts. Government regulations and market forces discourage developers from offering additional common areas, as these would count toward built up areas, allowed as per regulations. Historically, Mumbai's chawls provided generous shared spaces. The corridors, bridges, extended one's house to create a space of commons. Even with the advent of the concept of Floor Space Index (FSI) in the 1960s, early development control regulations in Mumbai, provided spaces like balconies and corridors free of FSI up to 10 percent of the floor space.⁵ Later regulations changed as a response to people's appropriation of balconies by including them within their houses to accommodate growing families. For example, some of the generous balconies would become an extra room or a kitchen and the kitchen would be converted to a bedroom. These were cultural responses in lieu of extremely high real estate prices, where younger people could not afford to move out and continued to live with their parents. Instead of seeing these as positive cultural responses the regulatory authorities decided to come cracking down on residents. The new development control regulations have become tighter allowing no possibility of further appropriation. A somewhat dubious term, "fungible floor space index," brings any such area into the purview of calculations. Developers as a response to this regulation

do not provide any flexible spaces. Every single space is accounted for, creating an insular life where every space is privatized and belongs within the house. All outdoor spaces, shared spaces, etc., are minimized for basic functional needs like circulation and egress. These were the very spaces that had created transactions and affordances for a social life where people watched out for each other in older building types.

In Naseem's home, the absence of extended spaces forces family members to be indoors, sitting on the floor watching TV, resembling an incarcerated existence. The managing committee of the apartment building turns off the elevator during afternoons to save electricity, and frequent breakdowns discourage mobility. Residents often avoid going out except for work, fearing long stair climbs. Recently, after Naseem's husband passed away, they were briefly allowed to place a sofa outside to accommodate visitors, but the poorly lit corridor remains an unwelcoming space, unlike the lively shared areas in her old slum.

Monetization of SRA housing has caused family disputes. Naseem plans to sell the apartment and split the proceeds into four parts. Many SRA home-owners resort to "heavy deposit" rental schemes, where tenants pay a lump sum (a third of the market value) in exchange for rent-free occupancy. However, these arrangements carry financial risks. The sale proceeds are often insufficient to buy another home, and social obligations quickly deplete funds. High maintenance costs in these high-rises push many to leave, leading to "soft evictions." Unlike demolitions, these displacements are invisible and unchallenged, leaving families stranded between aspiration and precarity.



Figure 2. Diamond Apartments, the Slum Rehabilitation building in Mumbai and its alienating environment, where one of the walls on the building facing a so-called "sale building" is kept blank so as to conceal their presence. Photo by Rupali Gupte.

WAITING FOR THE SRA BUILDING: THE STORY OF VISHNU AND PUSHPA

Vishnu, an office assistant at a college, and Pushpa, a house-help, live in Vile Parle, Mumbai, in a self-built settlement of two hundred houses. Like many in the city, they have awaited an SRA project for over twenty-five years because of unclear land titles. Meanwhile, they have continuously upgraded their house to meet evolving needs, desires, and aspirations.

Vishnu's grandfather, who moved there in the 1960s, struggled with employment and alcohol. In 1971 after the Slum Act was passed, this slum was notified.⁶ The slum dwellers had to go to the Mumbai Collector's Office to register their names. Vishnu's grandfather went with two other friends for the registration, but they ended up registering only one person's name as he was the only educated person in the group and could speak to the officials. In the 1980s, Vishnu's father and uncle subdivided their inherited house, giving Vishnu's father an 8' x 6' space. The men slept outdoors and the women indoors, with the furniture designed to hang so that their feet could be stretched below it. This is how they managed to inhabit the 8'x6' space.

In 1997 Vishnu spent money in consolidating the earlier mud house with permanent materials. At the same time, he decided to claim some of the land in front of his house to extend it. He first consolidated the ground and fenced it with galvanized iron sheets. A local builder started harassing Vishnu claiming the land was his. The builder would pay people to file complaints in the municipal office, against Vishnu. Vishnu tried to pay off the complainants, but the builder continued to harass him. At one point the builder built a brick wall to claim the space. Vishnu's mother, oblivious to the politics of claims, would give the workers tea and snacks while they built it. Later they had found out that the land did not belong to the builder either. Vishnu as a young boy was active with the local political party. With the support of a local politician, Vishnu managed to reclaim the space. He demolished the wall built by the builder and used the same material to rebuild his space. In 2003 Vishnu got a ration-card and an electricity meter installed in the room.⁷ This would further consolidate his claim to the house. At the same time, they built a common washing space for clothes and a bath space that could be shared by three households. Since the drain for the entire settlement ran under the house, it could be used to drain off the grey water.

In 2002, anticipating marriage, Vishnu constructed a second floor extending over the access street. He married Pushpa in 2003, and they had two children. The upper room housed their family, the lower one accommodated Vishnu's brother's family, and their parents slept in the front space. By 2022, the

space felt cramped again. Vishnu and Pushpa expanded over the 1997-claimed land, taking a private loan of ₹250,000 (\$3,000 USD). Vishnu's brother had promised to pay for some of the construction, but was unable to do so. Vishnu and Pushpa nevertheless decided to share the space with the brother's family as they were close. Although the entire room of 14' x 10' was shared by both families, there was a tacit understanding of how many tiles belonged to whom. Vishnu and Pushpa, while building, also made two ladders to this space so that the room could be subdivided later into two clear properties in the event of a fight between the two brothers' families. The extended room was made using mild steel sections and brick masonry work with plaster and paint and vitrified tiles for the flooring. The mild steel sections required for the span would have been too large to transport inside the slum. They were therefore brought in two parts and then welded on site. They built a bridge over the access alley so that the new room could be connected with the old house thus forming a bridge-room. The bridge-room housed utilities like the washing machine, a water tank etc. Vishnu and Pushpa worked with the local contractor to attach a toilet and a bath space to this new room. Moving the toilets inside the house proved a big relief to the family, particularly his aging mother, as the common toilets were rather inadequate. The furniture was obtained from various sources and fitted in place. At Pushpa's workplace someone was giving away a cupboard made of plywood. This was a standard cupboard 6' x 6' in size. It had to be cut by one foot to fit into place in the bridge-room. Vishnu got his colleague, a carpenter, from the college where Vishnu worked to do this. Vishnu also repurposed furniture in the college workshop from materials students had used for various experiments. He made a stool, a dressing unit, some storage units, etc., from the left-over material. In the older section of the house, he had repurposed material obtained from exhibitions organized by a cultural organization he had previously worked with, to make a storage loft, kitchen shelves, etc. In the new extension, the older window was repurposed into a storage shelf. Vishnu had an original painting from the days he worked with an art dealer. The art dealer had passed away and Vishnu did not know who to return the painting to. Vishnu hung the painting on the wall of the new room, where the second staircase came into the house. He painted the backdrop a lime green to highlight the painting. The new room houses a cupboard belonging to his brother's family but the space is used by the children of both families to sleep. The family is content with this additional space and feels like this will suffice their needs for some time.

Despite high real estate value, the slum's redevelopment has been stalled due to unclear land titles. Recently, a builder claimed to have resolved the issue, raising

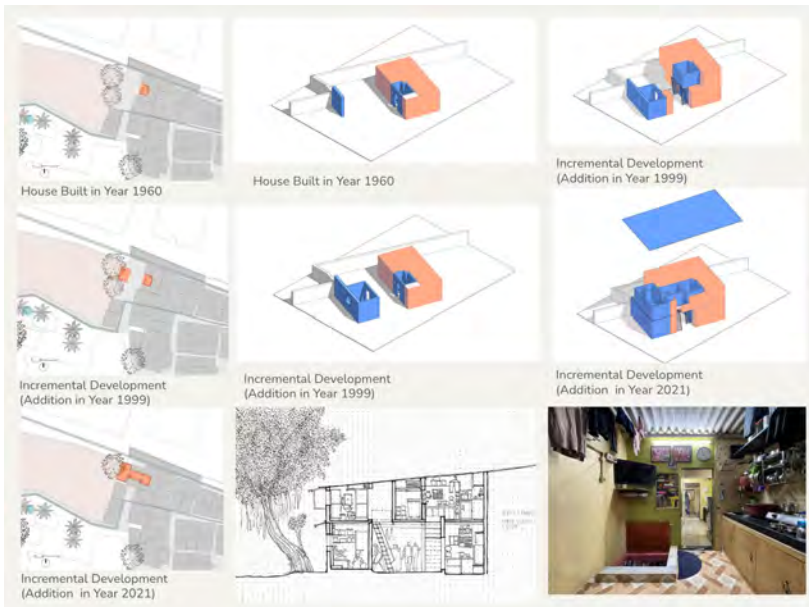


Figure 3. Incremental home upgrades in a slum in Mumbai.
Photo by Rupali Gupte. Drawings by Rushikesh Hirulkar.

Vishnu's hope of securing two houses under an updated cut-off date of 2011.⁸ Still, uncertainties remain. In the meantime, Vishnu and Pushpa have transformed their home into a dignified living space. The next step will depend on many forces operating around them.

However, the home for the family is much larger than the house they have been investing in upgrading. At the entrance of the settlement is a small access street, which houses a community hall on the ground floor and the corporator's office on the top. Right next to it is a reading room or *vachanalaya* and a society office, flanking which is another society office. There are factions in the community created on the basis of tenure: between those who have originally squatted and those who have arrived later; those who have ration cards and those who don't; and those who have managed some document from the government and those who haven't. These disputes are not resolved nor are these tensions permanent. However, on occasions of festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi or Janmashtami, people forget their differences and the entire community gets together to celebrate, turning the street into an extended home.

APPROPRIATING THE R&R PROJECT: THE STORY OF SINDHU SOCIETY

By 2010 in Mumbai, more than 35,000 houses were built under the Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) policy by the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional

Authority (MMRDA). Lallubhai Compound in Govandi was among the largest R&R sites. The settlement consists of multiple five- and seven-story buildings, each floor housing twenty apartments of twenty-five square meters (or 269 square feet). The buildings stand just three meters apart due to relaxed setback regulations. The lower floors receive little light or ventilation, creating health hazards, while extreme density strains the failing sanitation infrastructure.

When they first moved here, people had next to no infrastructure in these locations. Many people lost their jobs as this place was very poorly connected to most workplaces. Over time Lallubhai Compound has begun to settle. There are shrines built at road corners, small gymnasiums called *vyayamshalas* inside some of the buildings, playschools running from homes, street markets, makeshift playgrounds, and many more. People have started occupying and consolidating the place. While some community formations are informal, others are official groups and associations, registered with the Registrar of Cooperative Housing Societies as “societies” that are legal entities that can take care of the building maintenance.

Residents of Sindhu Cooperative Housing Society elected Srikhande as chairperson. A photographer who worked with the police, Srikhande leveraged his contacts, elevating his social status. His building bordered Sathe Nagar, a large slum. When Lallubhai Compound was completed, a four-meter strip of land separated the slum from the R&R buildings. A boundary wall was built along the slum’s edge. Sindhu Society, located at the end of the row, had excess land housing underground water tanks. Srikhande saw an opportunity to claim the free space between the slum wall and the water tank boundary. He wrote to the MMRDA requesting permission to raise the walls, citing concerns about drug use and nuisance from Sathe Nagar residents. Using his influence, he secured a letter from a low-level official to extend a wall. Srikhande then extended the two walls edging the slum and the water tanks and built a third wall creating a space with three walls. He then added a platform and a shrine for Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar on the third wall. Residents began gathering there for prayers. He later enclosed the space with a collapsible grill, and over a weekend—avoiding municipal scrutiny—a tin-sheet roof was installed. Tiles were laid, a door added, and water and electricity drawn from Sindhu Society. The space became a community hall, hosting weddings, birthdays, meetings, and death rituals. When questioned, Srikhande brandished his permission letter. Though its wording was ambiguous, the official seal lent it legitimacy. Higher authorities never investigated as they found it too trivial to involve themselves in this matter.

A group of artists received a grant from an art project whose brief asked to create an art work around the idea of the “public realm.” They decided to use

the funds received to create the infrastructure for a public realm in the R&R colony, where opportunities were abysmally low. One of the members of the group knew a resident of Sindhu Society and approached them. That is when they saw the shed that Srikanth and others had built. When they met the residents, however, the shed had fallen into disrepair. A recent tragic death involving a brutal railway accident, where a dismembered body was brought to the shed for the last rites, had created fear amongst the residents who chose to stay away from it. The group decided to upgrade the space and bring it back to life. They worked with the residents who had already invested a lot in the place.

The building work had to start on a Friday and end on Sunday to avoid municipal scrutiny. The rest of the work could then continue within the building skeleton. Steel sections were obtained from the largest recycling industry in Kurla, in Mumbai. Rafiqbhai, the fabricator who put the building together, had a small workshop in Kurla that largely made security grills. These grills are ubiquitous devices installed in the balconies of most apartment buildings in Mumbai for security against theft, but also for the little additional space, to store things, to grow plants, to dry clothes, etc. Rafiqbhai had never made a building before. But he knew the craft of assembling and welding steel. Long stanchions seventeen feet in length were brought to the colony in a medium sized truck. The truck had to be stopped a few meters away as it could not maneuver through the thin alleys of the R&R colony.

Multiple agencies were invited to complete the building; a mason, a carpenter, and a plumber, who all coordinated with Rafiqbhai. On the north side the steel frame that was installed had a cladding of yellow, orange, and blue PVC sheets that washed the space with a golden glow around 5 P.M. The roof was made with compressed recycled tetra packs, which sparkled with the reflected light from the two-foot yellow tubes installed all over. A blue door made by Ali, the carpenter, beacons passersby into the space and large swivel grill doors opened the space to the backyard that was always potentially a garden in the making. Loose pieces of furniture were welded together from metal sections and then clad with recycled plywood. Long plywood shelves adorned one of the walls. A mezzanine floor housed a library and a small breakout balcony. A mobile staircase was installed to be moved around for multifunctional use. Small bends in the railing allowed it to act like the backrest of a seat but also to turn around and sit, using the parapet to gaze at the space below. Here benches sometimes became railings and at other times became seating spaces. The mezzanine also doubled as a balcony space to watch films from.

As soon as R&R opened, kids from the area would make a beeline for the place after school hours. It was like a living room for them. They played, read,



Figure 4. A community art space and spatial appropriation in a resettlement colony in Mumbai.
Photo by Rupali Gupte.

and made things in this space. Rohan was a frequent visitor. One day he brought a translucent plastic box from his mother's kitchen to R&R and fixed an LED light on it. He attached some batteries to it, carefully tucking them away inside the box. He then attached a switch he managed to lift from a scooter. The LED box light was ready. He planned to use it at home as a backup light when the electricity failed. R&R had all kinds of visitors, from kids like Rohan to church organizations, to trade unions, and rap groups.

As the funds received from the art project ran out, R&R attained a life of its own. One of the partners continues to support it from their own organization. Over the years there are myriad people continuously settling the place, repairing it, claiming it.

OUTSIDE THE SRA, R&R, AND OTHER POLICY-LED HOUSING DELIVERY MODELS: THE STORY OF SUNIL AND HIS GURU

Sunil, a carpenter, lives in Nalasopara on the outskirts of Mumbai in an informally plotted settlement. He rents his house from his carpentry guru Shivram's brother, who has moved elsewhere. Sunil arrived in Mumbai from Uttar Pradesh in North India at thirteen, seeking medical aid unavailable in his village. His uncle, living with his family in a cramped Kurla slum, took him in and found him a cleaning job at a flour mill. Working late hours, Sunil soon realized

he was a burden to the family and moved to the mill, sleeping there until the owner forbade it. He then took refuge at an abandoned construction site under a small shelter. When his uncle discovered this, he was upset, prompting Sunil to plead for another job. He saved enough for his treatment and returned to his village for his sister's wedding. The wedding had exhausted his father's savings. A relative offered him work in Mumbai making sliding windows. Sunil accepted and entered the building industry. A year later, his relative introduced him to Shivram, a master carpenter working on home renovations. More than 50 percent of the settlement's residents were working in the building industry.

Before the 2000s, Mumbai's suburbs had cattle sheds, but a government directive forced their relocation. Many owners moved to Mira Bhayandar or Palghar on the outskirts of Mumbai. One such owner, Dube, bought farmland in Nalasopara and sold small plots (15' x 10', 20' x 10') to migrants seeking affordable housing. In Mumbai, 70 percent of households cannot afford homes over ₹22.5 lakhs (\$26,000 USD),¹⁰ and even the smallest house costs over ₹1 crore (\$120,000 USD).⁹ Dube's scheme provided an affordable alternative. He built roads, shared toilets, and a temple with open space for community functions. Residents constructed single-story row houses, gradually adding extra floors. The settlement, well-connected by railway, offered affordable healthcare and education.

Shivram bought a 15' x 10' plot in 2000, built a house, and later added a floor with a local mason's help. As a carpenter, he designed the interiors, using recycled furniture creatively. He installed a metal staircase, built a kitchen with storage, and crafted a wash room for his daughter-in-law. Sunil, trained by Shivram, became a skilled carpenter and considered him his guru. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Shivram returned to his village, inviting Sunil to stay in his house with his sons, treating him like family. After the pandemic, Shivram introduced Sunil to his brother, who rented him a newly added floor in the same settlement. A neighbor expanded simultaneously, sharing construction costs, and Sunil secured the rental at a subsidized rate. He then brought his family from the village to the city.

Sunil's 20'x10' home sits atop a row of houses, featuring a multipurpose space, kitchen, and balcony. He values its affordability and finds it the most peaceful place he has lived in, in Mumbai. Each evening, he sits on his balcony to catch a breath of fresh air. Currently, he owns only a TV unit he built himself, with the TV gifted by Shivram. As a carpenter, he envisions improvements: an indoor toilet, running water, storage cabinets, a wardrobe doubling as a partition, solar lights, a folding bed, a shoe rack, and a false ceiling to reduce heat.



Figure 5. House in an informal plotted development in the urban peripheries. Photo by Rupali Gupte. Drawings by Manish Shrivane.

The absence of affordable housing in the city is filled by many such ventures, where a parallel housing market seems to operate, which manages to produce housing at rates that the average laboring class can afford. There are many lessons to learn from this as to how the absurd housing gap is somehow met, although inadequately, in the city.

INHABITATION AND BEYOND

Current housing policies favor real estate, property, and financial entrepreneurs. They push people into “houses” that strip dignity and sever social networks. The first vignette, on slum redevelopment, highlights carceral conditions shaped by policy and financialized markets that impose resource-heavy housing solutions. It reveals how policy enables soft evictions—less visible, but more insidious. Similar conditions arise in rehabilitating dilapidated buildings, where developers are given incentive building rights to rehouse tenants free of cost.

The stories in this essay articulate a conceptual framework to rethink housing through “inhabitation.” The term “inhabitation” here is about the practices of home-making and a socio-visceral occupation of habitation that makes life dignified. It folds different dimensions of life, its practices, routines and rituals, its socialities and physicalities, and also its idiosyncrasies and absurdities, to help us

relocate “habitation” in an extended ecology, shifting the focus from the house to the home. The stories in the essay present the obdurate practices that work within the thickets of urban living, where inhabitation is constituted through a constellation of networks, incrementality, practices of extended occupation and appropriation, and the design of non-standard habitation created around material practices and the intimacy and experiences of bodies and their affordances.

Inhabitation, as Produced Incrementally by a Constellation of Urban Forces

The idea of inhabitation turns the housing problem on its head. Instead of a one-time, resource-heavy solution mobilizing market forces, which seem to be out of reach for the majority, inhabitation seeks to mobilize multiple urban forces, in incremental ways, in turn making life dignified. It shows us how the improvement of housing happens not by state intervention but by multiple often contradictory forces in the city. For instance, in the twenty five years of waiting for a policy to manifest, what Vishnu and Pushpa could cobble together to create dignified habitation did not come from a policy, but from a host of sources in their ecosystem, including a network of tradespeople, contractors, carpenters, masons with varied skills, materials salvaged from multiple sources, and a whole set of kinship relationships, friendships, solidarities that facilitated the making of habitation in non-standard ways. The relationship of time and inhabitation in this story speaks to the work of [Morten Nielson \(2011\)](#) whose ethnographic examination of house-building practices in periurban areas of Maputo, Mozambique argues that rather than working toward a fixed, successful endpoint, people’s efforts involve continuous internal adjustments, shaped by social and temporal contradictions. This making cannot be understood through a cartographic map or plan that requires clear definitions and attributes. What we see is the incremental nature of building as per resource availability and need. Modern ideas of planning that start from a tabula rasa idea of space and provide a one-time solution are unable to grasp and provide frameworks for this incremental development. This was also seen in the Nalasopara case, where incrementally resources were mobilized to keep updating the house and the settlement. Even in the most dire circumstances, such as the R&R colony, which is a deeply carceral space, the case of Sindhu society shows how a host of people are involved in incrementally settling the place, making it habitable. In Diamond apartments, the SRA building, the affordances are fewer and this being a newer building, we do not see much settling apart from some stretching of rules in situations like a death in the family, where people negotiate to push the boundaries of their house to make space to accommodate visitors and well-wishers. It will perhaps take a lot longer for this place to settle.

Inhabitation, Where Home Is Larger than the House

The idea of “inhabitation” unburdens the home from its “house” and “dwelling unit” connotations. The concept of inhabitation opens up a logic of living, where much of the living happens beyond the confines of the house. Vishnu and Pushpa’s story tells us that the home is much larger than the house. This is held together with friendships, solidarities, and networks, however splintered these may be. Here, spaces outside the house, the street, the welfare office, the reading room (*vachanalaya*), function as extensions of home, often using makeshift financial and legal arrangements. During festivals like Ganesh Utsav, the street becomes an event space, fostering temporary communal equilibrium. However, these solidarities often have a gendered dimension—men dominate urban spaces as festival organizers, while women participate primarily through cooking for large gatherings. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2011) advocate for women’s loitering as a form of protest and public-space reclamation. In fishing communities, women naturally occupy public spaces by selling in markets while men fish. But can cities create spatial affordances for women to inhabit spaces beyond the home? Could I, as a woman, find a shaded park space where I can nap freely with great abandon? Could Sunil, arriving from his village, access temporary housing with a bed, shower, and communal meal spaces embedded in the city’s urban culture? Cities could also provide communal kitchens, relieving women from the burden of cooking and enabling them to pursue other activities. The Bohra community in Mumbai, for instance, runs shared kitchens to ease daily household drudgery. Older housing types like Zaoba Wadi *chawl*, with its small tenements (around 30 square meters), offer generous shared spaces—corridors and bridges where women socialize, build solidarity, and enjoy liberatory solitude at the same time. However, the financialization of housing has eroded such possibilities.

In resettlement colonies, where residents have struggled for over two decades to adapt to alienating environments that severed their social and economic ties, they have transformed spaces—converting rooms into shrines, gyms, and makeshift playgrounds. The R&R library serves as an extended living room showing how relationships go beyond the nuclear family or standard household definitions used in housing shortage calculations. Similarly, Sunil’s movement across urban spaces highlights the need for diverse housing solutions—from temporary stays to rental models to communal extensions—all fostering a sense of home without requiring resource-intensive development.

Inhabitation as a Non-Standard, Visceral Spatial Experience of Dwelling

The experiential dimension is central to the idea of inhabitation. Both Henri Lefebvre, in *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (2014), and Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* (2014), point to the experiential dimensions of space. Although Bachelard argues that one needs a home to dream in, we can extend the argument to include multiple scales of inhabitation that we see in the practice of life as seen in the four vignettes, from the scale of the house, to the neighborhood and the city. We would need to pay attention to the visceral logics of how these experiences are created. What are the material properties of space that produce these experiences? Here I argue that proportions of spaces, their scales, volumes, their porosity versus contained nature, their light quality, their temperature, are all contingent on the configuration of space and their material properties. These can be configured to shape the sensory experience of vastness, smallness, intimacy, the carceral, the liberating, etc. When Sunil speaks of the balcony in his house, which gives him peace of mind, he is invoking an experiential dimension of inhabitation that is produced through non-standard designs that brings the body to the center of the experience. Or when the library in R&R is created with a double height volume with its north wall made of recycled, colored plastic sheets, which gently washes the space in the evening with an orange glow that in turn bounces off the speckled gold roof made of recycled tetra packs above, we are thinking of the poetics of inhabitation and how a space of dignity can be produced through, drawing on Bachelard, an intimacy and imminence of spatial experience. Similarly, the second vignette points to a range of non-standard design interventions like the house that bridges over the alley, the two staircases leading to an intimate space adorned with a painting and a whole range of upcycled furniture that dignifies everyday life for its inhabitants. At the same time, we see a carceral space produced by the apartment type, where functional corridors in the SRA building fail to produce social spaces and in turn create an atmosphere of alienation.

The four vignettes remind us that the solution to absurd demand supply logics may lie in conceptually reframing the housing question around questions of inhabitation and its spatial dimensions opened up by myriad home-making practices outside current policy and finance regimes. Frameworks of inhabitation make a renewed call for seekers of spatial justice—it demands urban scholars, activists, urbanists, architects, planners etc. to tune themselves to the nuances of space, the networks that generate it, its affordances, its affective dimensions, and the life spaces and experiences it produces.

ABSTRACT

The essay argues that while criticisms and celebrations of Mumbai's housing policies have occupied housing researchers, people have continued to inhabit and live life in fascinating ways. Four vignettes of home-making in this paper present the obdurate practices that work within the thickets of urban living, where inhabitation is constituted through a constellation of networks, material practices, incrementality, practices of extended occupation, making neighborhoods and city as home, and through the appropriation and design of non-standard habitation created around the intimacy and experiences of bodies and their affordances. These processes of inhabitation far exceed the limits set by programs and policies to constantly keep paving ways for living life in dignified ways. They remind us that the solution to absurd demand-supply logics may lie in conceptually reframing the housing question around questions of inhabitation and its spatial dimensions. It is within these postulations that lie clues for a spatial justice. [inhabitation; housing; transactional capacity; upgradation; slum rehabilitation; slum resettlement; poetics of space; spatial justice]

NOTES

1. See for instance the articulation of *transactional capacities* in [Gupte and Shetty \(2023\)](#), where *transactional capacity* is defined as the capacity of urban form to allow flows of bodies, commodities, ideas, money through it: higher the flow, higher the transactional capacity. A higher *transactional capacity* would mean higher accommodation of densities, higher activities, increased diversity, better security, safety, and care.
2. See, for instance, the concept of *settling* in [Gupte and Shetty \(2023\)](#) which argues that *settling* is a process by which city form evolves. As opposed to completion and permanence, it grows incrementally.
3. See [Hepzi Anthony \(2022\)](#), where she notes that “since its inception, the SRA scheme has built only 0.236 million houses” whereas, the slum population in 2001 was 7.4 million (approximately 1.4 million). Which means that the SRA has been able to provide houses only to about 16.8 percent slum households.
4. See for instance [CRIT 2007](#), 382–387.
5. Floor Space Index (FSI) is the ratio of built-up area to plot area. For example, if a plot area is 2,000 square meters and the allowed FSI is 2, then one can build up to 4,000 square meters built-up area on such a plot. In other places in India, it is also defined in percentage terms (for example 200 percent of plot area) and is called Floor Area Ratio (FAR).
6. The Maharashtra Slum Areas (Improvement, Clearance, and Redevelopment) Act of 1971 was articulated as: “An Act to make better provision for the improvement and clearance of slum areas in the State and their redevelopment and for the protection of occupiers from eviction and distress warrants” (1971, 1). According to the Maharashtra Slum Areas Act, the declaration of a slum is defined where “a competent authority is satisfied that (a) any area is or may be a source of danger to health, safety or convenience of the public of the area or of its neighborhood, by reason of the area having inadequate or no basic amenities, or being insanitary, squalid, overcrowded or otherwise or; (b) the buildings in any area used or intended to be used for human habitation are (i) in any respect, unfit for human habitation or (ii) by reasons of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such building, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities or any combination of these factors, detrimental to the health [. . .]” (21). The Act further specifies the criteria for “determining whether the buildings are unfit for human

habitation,” which include “repairs, stability, freedom from dampness, natural light and air, provision of water supply, provision for drainage and sanitary convenience, and facilities for the disposal of waste water” (22). The Act directs that “the building shall be deemed to be unfit if, and only if, it is so far defective in one or more of the said matters that it is not reasonably suitable for occupation in that condition” (22). The full act is available at https://media.sra.gov.in/sra-automation/sub-category/docs/1728392575829_9949_2.pdf

7. A ration-card is a booklet recording subsidised food provided through a public distribution system. It records names of all members in a household along with their age. Until the early 2000s, it was used as proof of identity and address in many parts of India.
8. In the state of Maharashtra, slum dwellers are protected against eviction if they have lived in the slum for a certain number of years, in which case they are entitled for a free house. These number of years is defined through a “cut-off-date,” which has become a popular term used in Mumbai to denote the date fixed with which the slum dwellers shall be entitled for a free house. As this is a politically attractive matter, various governments have every now and then established new cut-off-dates. A slum household should be able to prove that it has occupied the land and settled in the slum before such a cut-off date to be eligible for such entitlements.
9. This is extrapolated from household expenditure data published by Government of India through extensive household surveys, where the Monthly Per Capita Expenditure of the people in the 7th decile is Rs. 6710. The household size for urban Maharashtra is 4.37 persons, hence the household expenditure for people in the 7th decile would be Rs. 29,323. Considering this expenditure as proxy for income, we could conclude that household incomes for more than 70 percent people in urban Maharashtra (of which Mumbai is the largest part) is less than Rs. 30,000 per month. This income entitles them for a house loan of Rs. 1,800,000. And considering the loan amount to be 80 percent, the house cost could be a maximum of Rs. 2,250,000. The full report is available at https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Fact-sheet_HCES_2022-23.pdf
10. Household according to the census of India is a group of persons who live together and have their meals from a common kitchen or common cooking unless the exigencies of work prevent any of them from doing so.

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A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

TOWARDS REFUGE AS METHOD: Creative Practices in Dakar’s Terrain of Infrastructural Renewal

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Refuge is within me—I have a knowing of it without knowing it. As my parents, along with my brother, fled Conakry, Guinea, due to political persecution, I never directly experienced the actual physical movement of exile. I was born and raised in Berlin, Germany; I inherited refuge. At the same time, it is a lens—a way of seeing and knowing, a lived reality—that I carry with me from one shore to another. In German, the verb *übersetzen* carries the dual meaning of (1) translating and (2) crossing over to another shore by ferry. I propose this analogy to capture not only linguistic and cultural borrowings and movements, but also the inherent crossings between places, spaces, and ways of knowing. In this way, it connects to Stuart Hall’s description of diasporic identities as “routes” rather than “roots” (Hall 1990).

While this inheritance is profoundly personal, the question of refuge also constitutes what Ian Buchanan (2021) terms a problematic field: one that is rooted in historical, cultural, political, and collective processes. Refuge is not fixed; it is continuously reconfigured by people, forces, and movements. It must therefore be rethought through theoretical and creative encounters. With this

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in mind, I propose that the notion of inherited refuge resonates with the spatial formation of Dakar. The Wolof term for Senegal's capital city, *Ndakaaru*, means refuge (Ndiaye 2016; Diop and Ricou 2024). Rooted in their specific relationship to land and community, the Lebu population established the city as a space of refuge (Ndiaye 2016) in response to external oppressive forces¹—a meaning culturally revitalized by contemporary artists and foundational to my conceptualization of *refuge as method*. Over time, one may say that Dakar has continued to serve as one, particularly for cultural producers who engage with both the city's interwoven histories and contemporary urban conditions (Simone 2004).

Against this backdrop, I ask: How can cultural producers locate, imagine, and create refuge within Dakar's urban landscape? This question stems from a long-term interest in exploring how creative and socially engaged art practices engage with urban histories while generating new imaginaries of refuge in the context of the city's ongoing infrastructural renewal. To investigate this, I introduce *refuge as method* as a conceptual and methodological tool that I am developing through my research on Dakar's creative terrain. I illuminate how creative practices in Dakar act as forms of refuge, extending endurance and transformation within the city's evolving urban landscape.

I argue that refuge as method offers an epistemic space, a way of seeing, knowing, and inhabiting the city. Dakar has long functioned as a refuge for artists and creative practitioners, who, in turn, actively transform it into spaces of refuge through their artistic and social engagements. In this essay, I draw on AbdouMaliq Simone's (2022) concept of *surrounds* and Seloua Luste Boulbina's (2019) notion of *interworld* to position refuge as method as unfolding in sites of transition, negotiation, and creative possibility. These three concepts form a triangulation: refuge as method serves as the epistemic and methodological entry point; surrounds account for the hidden, improvisational dimensions of refuge in the city; and interworld encapsulates the layered, entangled legacies shaping contemporary urban imaginaries. This framework allows for a nuanced analysis of how cultural producers and artists in Dakar materialize refuge through creative practices. Through this lens, I examine the works of two Dakarois artists, Muhsana Ali and Ibrahima Thiam, whose visual and performative practices engage with Dakar as a space of contestation, reclamation, and refuge.

SANCTUARY, SLAVERY, COLONIALISM, AND INDEPENDENCE: DAKAR'S URBAN HISTORIES

Dakar has emerged as one of the most vibrant creative cities across the globe (Grabski 2017; Mbaye and Iossifidis 2020; Ren 2021). To situate Dakar's

urban space and cultural imaginaries, it is essential to provide some historical context. Located on the Cap-Vert Peninsula along the Atlantic coast, it is a liminal space where land, ocean lives, and people intersect. Dakar is shaped by four strands of historiography: the Lebu villages, the transatlantic slave trade, colonial impositions, and Senegal's independence. As a coastal city, Dakar mirrors Édouard Glissant's (1997) concept of the *archipelago* where histories, geographies, and transformations are inherently interconnected. Dakar is a city of juxtapositions: continuous and discontinuous, local and global, as well as past, present, and future.

Historically, Dakar emerged from small Lebu fishing villages in the fifteenth century as a sanctuary—scholarly interpretations suggest its name *Ndakaaru*, evoking refuge in Lebu cosmology (Ndiaye 2016; Diop and Ricou 2024). The Gorée-Dakar zone then became a significant center of the transatlantic slave trade under Portuguese and later French influence (Diouf 1996a).² After its abolition (1848), France aggressively reconfigured Dakar into a colonial city, superimposing European urban grids atop existing coastal settlements and displacing Lebu communities (Betts 1985; Bigon 2009). In 1902, it became the capital of French West Africa, a position reinforced by colonial infrastructure like railroads and ports. The city's layout was systematically engineered in such an enduring way to facilitate and operationalize extractive interests, with a segregated urban structure that prioritized the needs of European settlers over the Lebu population—enforcing the spatial exclusion and dichotomy of Plateau (European administrative enclave) versus Médina (Indigenous containment zone) (Górny and Górna 2020; Betts 1985; Simone 2004; Bigon 2009; Diop and Ricou 2024). The French colonial administration sought to impose a Eurocentric vision of modernity on Dakar, constructing roads, ports, and administrative buildings to serve the dual purposes of controlling the population and enabling the extraction of resources in the West African territories (Bigon 2009).

With Senegal's independence in 1960, Dakar underwent a process of reconfiguration. Its urban landscape became a contested site navigating between nationalist erasure, informal reclaiming, and neoliberal restructuring (Simone 2004; Diop and Ricou 2024). Under President Léopold Sédar Senghor, the state sought to redefine itself through an emphasis on African modernity. Senghor's vision for Dakar foregrounded the architectural principle of asymmetrical parallelism (Diop and Ricou 2024), a departure from Eurocentric urban models. This vision was deeply tied to Négritude, a cultural and intellectual movement centered on Black and African ontologies and epistemologies (Senghor 1964; Diagne 2018). Yet, Senghor's cultural policies and political alliances were critiqued for

consolidating power among urban Francophone elites and perpetuating neocolonial dependency on France—a continuity of economic, military, and cultural influence (Diouf 2013).

The contestations of Senghor's politics shaped Dakar's urban identity. For instance, the scholar and public intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop challenged colonial narratives through his forensic research and seminal work on African knowledge systems and sciences from precolonial to modern times (Diop 1981; Mbaye 2016), while movements such as the prominent art collective Laboratoire Agit'Art redefined cultural expression in the 1960s and 1970s (Dixon 2015; Mbaye and Iossifidis 2020). Artist Cheikh Ndiaye recognizes these crossroads of past and present, where Western imperatives meet local meanings, needs, and interests in his reflection on Dakar's transformation after its independence. He argues:

With independence came the freedom to once again fully inhabit this city, the imperative to inscribe in our new urban designs the ancient pact between our ancestors and the spirits that had guided them here, to this benevolent green cape embraced by a blue Atlantic. Dakar. Ndakaaru. Denatured by more than a hundred years of foreign rule, our Dëkk Raw had always meant to serve as a refuge for the oppressed of all origins. (Ndiaye 2016)

Artists like Cheikh Ndiaye reactivate Dakar's identity as a refuge, deeply rooted in spiritual and historical genealogies. Yet, the city's contemporary urban renewal and the afterlives of slavery and colonialism (Hartman 2021; Pierre 2013) bring forth a spectrum of complexities.

Dakar's evolving urban fabric also reflects broader dynamics of colonial racial capitalism (Davis 2022; Koshy et al. 2022). The afterlives of slavery and colonialism (Hartman 2021; Pierre 2013; Matlon 2015) continue to regulate who benefits from Dakar's economic growth and who remains dispossessed. While the city has experienced economic expansion, particularly with fishing, and recently with the discovery of offshore oil and gas reserves, the benefits of this growth have largely accrued to a small elite, including foreign investors and the ruling class from the colonial era and beyond (Diouf 1996b). Furthermore, since the early 2000s, under the administration of former President Abdoulaye Wade, Dakar's coastline has become increasingly vulnerable to land speculation (Lesourd 2012; Cissé 2022), leading to significant environmental challenges such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and flooding (Mbow et al. 2008).

Within this framework, I argue that these ongoing dynamics—the juxtaposition of urban histories, spatial reappropriation, and creative production—position Dakar as both a creative and spectral city (Gordon 2008; Best and Ramírez 2021). This positioning raises key questions: How do the spatial and temporal dimensions of these dynamics generate Dakar’s contemporary urban experience? In what ways do they challenge conventional understandings of urban governance and cultural, creative practices (Mbaye and Pratt 2020)? Furthermore, how might these processes of reappropriation and spectrality inform broader discussions on postcolonial urban futures? It is within this context that the notions of the surrounds (Simone 2022) and the interworld (Boulbina 2019) offer analytical tools for advancing the idea of refuge as method.

REFUGE AS INFRASTRUCTURE OF POSSIBILITY

AbdouMaliq Simone’s concept of the *surrounds* and Seloua Luste Boulbina’s notion of the *interworld* offer profound insights into how historical genealogies and contemporary realities coalesce into complex urban landscapes. Both theorists explore how urban spaces and their inhabitants resist full absorption into hegemonic structures, enacting what Édouard Glissant describes as *opacity* (Glissant 2009; Edjabe, interviewed in März 2011; Edjabe, interviewed in Morris 2019). This notion refers to ways of living, narrating,³ and knowing that elude dominant frameworks.

Simone defines the *surrounds* as “the form of an untranslatable specificity but yet remain always in the multiple, of many specificities, and thus not simply reducible to ‘one thing’” (Simone 2022, 5). The surrounds are beyond capture. They enact a “possibility of propositions and the rehearsal of experimental ways of living that circumvent debilitating particular way of knowing what has happened and is happening” (Simone 2022, 5). With this in mind, I posit that they also alter the experience of being in place. The surrounds signify social and spatial dynamics that elude fixed categories, creating hidden infrastructures of life and possibility. Through this lens, I reflect on how the experience of being in place can be informed by the practices of refuge.

Simone’s concept of the surrounds highlights spaces that exist outside formal systems of governance and technical regulation. These are not merely abandoned or derelict spaces; rather, they are dynamic zones of life and experimentation, where urban residents claim and reclaim their own infrastructures. These infrastructures emerge from the necessity to survive and adapt to forces of dispossession and collective trauma. The surrounds represent a space of refuge as they operate under the radar. Most importantly, in these spaces, urban residents

create what Simone calls infrastructural effects—relational, fugitive, and temporal phenomena (Simone 2022, 11). Street economies, local spiritual practices, and community-based artistic endeavors thriving in these spaces represent an affirmation of agency in the face of displacement, exclusion, and marginalization. The infrastructures within the surrounds are sustained through cyclical rhythms, improvisation, and endurance over time.

This temporal dimension is central. Marina Vishmidt's (2017) notion of time as infrastructure leads to a process of awareness and a call for action. Infrastructure, in turn, operates based on time, sustained through repetition. This repetition becomes embedded in the everyday, and when disrupted, it reveals underlying power relations as well as historical and present-day conditions. Highlighting infrastructural patterns across spatialities and temporalities, Vishmidt gives examples such as the global financial crisis of 2008 and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, in 2014:

Think of the global financial crisis; think of the water disasters in Flint or Detroit. The transcendental repetition is abstract (capitalism, class contempt, anti-Black racism) and the infrastructural repetition is found in the material conditions of possibility (captive regulations, lead pipes, privatized governance) that sustain social relations in a particular shape over time. (Vishmidt 2017, 265)

In this sense, when infrastructure repeats, it systemically carries specific activities by functioning in the dark—unnoticed and unquestioned (Vishmidt 2017). While infrastructure is based on repetition, this repetition can extend in different directions: it may reproduce patterns of collective violence and social inequalities, or it can hold the potential to (re)create an arrangement of “a wholly different form of social life over time” (Vishmidt 2017, 266). In this regard, refuge is not just a material space but also a temporal pattern that shifts and repeats itself in response to urban conditions, potentially crafting alternative futures.

Furthermore, Seloua Luste Boulbina's (2019) idea of *interworld* provides a crucial lens for understanding the spatio-temporal complexities of postcolonial urban spaces like Dakar. Boulbina argues we inhabit a postcolonial presence that continues to shape the spatial and cultural infrastructures of cities like Dakar. This interworld manifests itself through “the suspended time of the crossing, the “devenir” (Boulbina 2019, 292). It is a mediated space, both physical and temporal. The interworld is expressed through the persistence of colonial architecture,

the lingering economic disparities rooted in colonial racial capitalism, and, at the same time, through embodied and relational practices and desires. She elaborates on this through a maritime metaphor:

In our representation, earth is to sea as certitude is to uncertainty, safety to danger—as theory, in sum, to experience. Floating suggests hesitation, doubt, indecision, the loss of bearings. Is being down-to-earth, terre-à-terre, tantamount to being prosaic? Actually, the dictionary reminds us that terre-à-terre was originally a maritime expression used to designate the act of sailing along the coast—that is, close to firm land. It's either that or the open sea. Maritime space, the open sea or ocean, is a figure for interworlds that coincide neither with a starting point nor with the end point. (Boulbina 2019, 289)

The historical legacies of refuge, slavery, colonialism, and Senegal's independence inform both the interworld and the surrounds, creating a dynamic where past and present realities co-exist in Dakar's urban landscape. Moving between these two concepts, refuge as method emerges as an epistemic practice where spatial and temporal elements are inherently entangled. While the surrounds contain fugitive infrastructures that are continuously shifting and being remade, the interworld creates a liminal space where imaginaries come into being. At this conceptual interface, refuge as method operates as a way of orienting within these shifting spaces.

CREATIVE PRACTICES AS REFUGE

Expanding on Simone's and Boulbina's theoretical frameworks, the artistic practices of Muhsana Ali and Ibrahima Thiam demonstrate how creative urban practices in Dakar function as acts of reclamation. In doing so, they perform a double motion between fugitive lines and opening as well as in the sense of sanctuary and protection. The concept of refuge as method is central here, as it highlights how art transforms spaces of exclusion into spatial praxis and maneuvering (Simone 2010). Ali and Thiam's work engages deeply with urban environments, offering new possibilities for imagining and creating spaces of refuge.

Muhsana Ali's artistic practice spans various mediums, including painting, mosaic, and public art installations. Her work is deeply rooted in themes of memory, history, spirituality, and socially engaged art practices, particularly as they relate to Africa and its diaspora. Through her art, Ali explores the complex

juncture between the past and the present, between the visible and the invisible, and between the personal and the collective.

Ali's socially engaged art practice first materialized in Abidjan. Her early project there laid the foundation for her later interventions and evolving work in Dakar, where she developed further ideas through community-based artistic infrastructures. In 1997, Ali gravitated to Côte d'Ivoire's former capital city, where she began working with street youth living in an abandoned hospital ruin and created an art exhibition in the building. The two-year project marked a significant shift in her practice, moving from traditional studio work to a long-standing socially engaged art practice that directly involved the surrounding community. The forty young boys and men she worked with had occupied a squatted, three-story building—the size of a city block—in the heart of Abidjan's downtown district. This building, abandoned and left to decay, became a temporary home and a site of social and spatial formation for these individuals, who granted Ali the permission to use the space. They allowed her into their space of refuge. Their presence greatly influenced her project. In other words, it was a presence based on reciprocity. Over two years all of the young boys and men—most of whom had experienced incarceration or addiction—became involved in the project, learning artistic skills and contributing to the space's transformation. Meanwhile the street youth exhibited the works they had developed under her supervision and served as tour guides, maintenance and security for the exhibition. At the same time, Ali had chosen a space that disrupted conventional gallery settings.

Tania Bruguera's concept of *useful art* is reflected in Ali's exhibition project, "Doors and Passageways of Return" (Bruguera, interviewed in [Nobles 2012](#)), where she transformed this derelict building into a space for artistic expression as a communal act. Drawing inspiration from her travels across Africa and studies of historical slave ports—particularly the Door of No Return at Elmina and Cape Coast Castles in Ghana, as well as on Gorée Island in Senegal—Ali's work embodies both her artistic vision and her commitment to community-based art practices. Through this project, she engages deeply with the complexities of history, memory, and identity. Inspired by her visits to historical slave ports in Ghana and Senegal, as well as Dogon architectural motifs in Mali, Ali sought to reimagine the "Door of No Return" as a portal of symbolic return.

Following her time in Côte d'Ivoire, Ali relocated to Dakar, where she continued her commitment to using art as a tool for community engagement. In Dakar, she co-founded the association *Portes et Passage du Retour* with her husband, artist Amadou Kane Sy. This organization focuses on exploring the

intersections between art, spirituality, and community building, particularly within the context of Dakar's rapidly changing urban landscape and its extensions in the rural area of Joal-Fadiouth (Ali, interview, 2024). Another key aspect of Ali's work is her focus on the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of space. In her projects, she often draws on Senegal's ancestral legacies, using symbols and motifs that resonate with the community's cultural and religious practices. This is evident in her work on the Doors and Passageways of Return exhibition project, where she explored themes of memory, spirituality, and history through the lens of the African diaspora and the afterlives of slavery (Hartman 2021). Ali seeks to reimagine and give material form to historical narratives of loss, turning them into spaces of presence, memory, and collective rehabilitation:

I already knew I wanted to do, something about doors but then when I went to visit the slave ports and encountered that door of no return, it all came together. I knew that it had to be something representing my making the return through these . . . I saw myself as this symbolic return. I came with the title Doors and Passageways of Return and produced a series of 10 interactive large-scale sculptures and installations symbolizing doors and passageways for the people who were separated through slavery. (Ali, interview, 2024)

One of Ali's most recent interventions in Dakar's public sphere is her work in the Mermoz neighborhood, where she has led the creation of the Kersa Project. This mosaic mural, which has been created in collaboration with residents, emphasizes traditional Senegalese values such as *Kersa*, which idiomatically signifies the combined concept of modesty, respect, and decency. Through this specific public art project, Ali seeks to transform neglected urban spaces into a communal site. By engaging the community, she reclaims the space from marginalization, turning it into a space of both physical and cultural refuge:

There are multiple levels of meaning. What am I actually placing there? Then they start to analyze: What is this? What is *Kersa*? Why is she putting that word here? Then, the repetition . . . Every element of a work of art, of anything, has meaning to it. The actual repetition of the word from the voices of the people has meaning. It's actually putting the word out in the atmosphere. (Ali, interview, 2024)

Ali's approach to art is deeply participatory. She involves local residents in the design and creation of her projects, ensuring that the work reflects their voices and perspectives. By involving the community, Ali creates a sense of ownership and refuge among the communities she engages with:

We were living right across from the mosque. I think I was much more sensitive about being a foreigner here and producing work in the public space. I asked for permission from my father-in-law and the family to do this work on the facade of the building, of our home. We all agreed that it should be a theme that the community would welcome. Since it's in front of the mosque, it had to be Islam. It was something that everyone welcomed and participated in. It was a form of activism in the sense that I was trying to bring to light something that we all shared. That also brought more beauty to the community. (Ali, interview, 2024)

Community members actively engage with the project, questioning and reflecting on the meanings of *Kersa*. Through her community-based projects, Ali creates refuge in both physical and metaphorical terms. Ali's *Kersa* Project is emblematic of how artistic practice generates the surrounds. In other words, it concerns urban spaces that exist beyond formal governance but alternatively thrive through relational networks of care and collective meaning-making. In this sense, Ali's practice embodies refuge as method wherein the community actively shapes its surroundings through artistic practices, turning a neglected site into a space that holds cultural and spiritual meaning. In turn, Ali's participatory art and community collaborations frame it as a method of refuge-building (Murrani 2024).

While Ali's work brings the community into dialogue with its surroundings, Ibrahima Thiam's photography offers a profound exploration of Dakar's spiritual and cultural landscapes. Thiam's images capture the subtle, often overlooked intersections of history, spiritual realms, and quotidian experiences. By delving into Senegal's coastline, his work is deeply rooted in the oral legacies and mythologies of the Lebu population, which have significantly influenced Dakar's identity. Through his photographic lens, he captures the spectral presence of sacred sites and the ways they persist amid urban transformation:

Many of these heritage elements are recent and modern. We were neither taught nor told these traditional, spiritual, and sacred stories in school. I find it important that all these narratives be integrated into the preservation of

both nature and culture. I use photography as a means to tell these missing stories within both local and universal heritage. (Thiam, interview, 2024)

Thiam's exploration of Dakar's sacred sites is a key aspect of his work. Localities such as the waters of the ancestral figure of Mame Coumba Bang in Saint-Louis and the coastal areas of Yoff are central to the spiritual life of the Lebu population. Thiam's photographs reproduce the quiet, almost ethereal atmosphere of these spaces, where the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, are blurred. In representing these sacred spaces, Thiam's work serves as a form of cultural reclamation. Thiam's photography acts as a visual archive, documenting these spaces and the practices that take place within them. This archival function is crucial in a rapidly changing city like Dakar, where the past is often at risk of being overshadowed by the push for development. Thiam's photographs also challenge the viewer to reconsider the city's urban spaces. His work invites us to see Dakar not just as a collection of buildings and streets, but as a living, breathing entity where social infrastructures of care, memory, and spirituality are constantly in dialogue:

Among the Lebu community, women serve as the primary custodians of tradition, ensuring the continuity of spiritual and healing practices such as the Ndëpp ceremony. This therapeutic dance ritual functions as a process of purification, dispossession, and communal reconnection. Rather than framing psychological distress as individual pathology, Lebu traditions recognize it as an encounter with unseen forces, requiring collective intervention. (Thiam, Interview, 2024)

Through his lens, Thiam makes visible the surrounds by highlighting those spectral and sacred spaces that persist despite urban erasure, providing unseen infrastructures of memory, power, and land. In capturing the city's sacred spaces, he highlights the ways in which these locations provide refuge—not just physical refuge, but also those that are spiritual and cultural. These spaces offer a sense of continuity as well as disruptions. His photography itself becomes a method of restoring and re-imagining refuge.

Similarly, Thiam's photography engages the concept of interworld, capturing the intersections of sacred and urban spaces in Dakar. Thiam's photographs function as a living archive of cultural memory, preserving the legacies of these sites and illuminating the often-overlooked histories that continue to shape Dakar's identity. Reflecting on these interwoven histories, Thiam explains,

“Dakar means *Ndakaaru* and *Dëkk Raw* in Wolof, which means ‘place of refuge.’ With French colonization, it was renamed Dakar” (Thiam, interview, 2024). By emphasizing this multilayered meaning, Thiam highlights how Dakar’s urban and sacred spaces are not separate but deeply entangled, forming a continuum where Dakar’s historiographies of the Lebu legacies and colonial impositions converge.

By engaging with the city’s past and present, Ali and Thiam’s works not only document urban transformation but actively participate in shaping new imaginaries of refuge and belonging. Ali’s mosaic murals situate and activate overlooked buildings that can be seen as an aesthetic infrastructure of refuge. It is an infrastructure that is maintained through collective participation and the interworld of artistic expression. This disrupts dominant narratives of urban marginalization by demonstrating that artistic interventions are not merely representational, but material and infrastructural in how they sustain alternative modes of belonging and agency. Similarly, Thiam’s photography captures the spectral persistence of Dakar’s sacred sites, resisting their epistemological voids and erasure through visual re-inscription. His repeated return to these spaces mirrors Simone’s *infrastructural effect*, which is an ongoing, iterative practice that counters the disposability of certain urban spaces. By framing the city through creative repetition, both Ali and Thiam disrupt colonial and capitalist urban sense of temporalities, asserting that refuge is not simply a spatial retreat from the city but an active means of remaking and re-enacting it.

CONCLUSION

Muhsana Ali and Ibrahima Thiam’s works do more than represent refuge; they enact it. Their practices materialize refuge as method, turning the city into a space of relentless, continual negotiation, where artistic interventions become tools of both endurance and transformation. In this way, creative practice emerges as a method of spatial maneuvering, one that reclaims urban dispossession as an opportunity for collective re-imagining. Their practices demonstrate how artistic practices generate the surrounds enacting spaces beyond dominant urban governance where fugitive infrastructures emerge. Their work also reveals the interworld where colonial legacies, spiritual meanings, and contemporary urban transformations intersect. Their creative practices enact refuge as method, not merely as a response to dispossession, but also as an active process of reclaiming space, memory, and collective futures. In doing so, they show that refuge is not only about spatial formation, but also about how refuge is inherited, embodied, and thus carried across temporalities. Thus, refuge as method becomes a critical lens for rethinking our urban presences within the contested terrain of infrastructural renewal.

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the creative practices of cultural producers in Dakar, a city understood in the Lebu context as historically founded as a sanctuary (Ndakaaru), which continues to serve as a site of refuge for artists—actively reimagining and reclaiming its urban terrain. I introduce refuge as method as both a conceptual and methodological lens, developed through a dialogic process between theory and practice. The essay considers how urban histories and contemporary cultural expressions intersect in these spaces of refuge. By integrating concepts such as AbdouMaliq Simone’s surrounds and Seloua Luste Boulbina’s interworld, this essay demonstrates how two Dakarois artists Muhsana Ali and Ibrahima Thiam materialize refuge through iterative practices of sheltering, reclaiming, and re-imagining. Refuge as method unfolds not merely as a spatial and cultural formation, but also as an epistemic space that reconfigures space, memory, and collective futures amidst ongoing infrastructural renewal. [Dakar; refuge; infrastructure; renewal; urban art; epistemics]

NOTES

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1. While etymologies of Dakar/*Ndakaaru* are contested (see Bigon 2009), I prioritize interpretations resonant with Lebu worldviews and artistic practices in my study. This aligns with my methodology of co-thinking with cultural producers to reactivate spatial epistemologies of care.
2. It is worth mentioning that Gorée Island (facing Dakar) was the primary slave trade epicenter in the region under Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French successive rule. Dakar (mainland) only became prominent after the slave trade declined (post-1800s), functioning as a colonial administrative and military center (UNESCO, n.d.).
3. In terms of creating imaginaries, narrating—*le récit*—is defined and redefined by way of connecting the historiography, narratives, and discourse through the collective, the political as well as the cultural realms, based on repetition and disruption.

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A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

COASTAL CITIES IN ECUADOR: From Dispossession and Violence to Futures We Can Live With

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In this article, we attend to the ways in which Afro-Ecuadorian populations long vulnerable to multiple violences put into play historically patterned possibilities for cultivating futures in the complex contexts of marronage, differential inclusion into a new nation, and now, multiple authorities vying for control. Ecuador's coastal cities have long played a nodal role in colonial extractive processes; today, that role continues, through imperial operations in which illicit economies work to entrench, rather than interrupt, unequal political economies.¹ Moreover, these sites have become territories in dispute over the last decade, among local gangs and organizations connected to international cartels, between these

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and militarized state forces, and as ever, as sites of both great desperation and expectations. In the interstices of such conflicts, in the city of Esmeraldas and in Guayaquil, where the highest concentrations of Afro-Ecuadorians live, inhabitants draw from ambivalent histories that began with free communities of maroons negotiating their sovereignty with the Spanish Crown to imagine in and beyond their complex presents.

Now, as the importance of transnational drug networks has increased in Ecuador, so has the diversification of labor opportunities in growing illicit economies, particularly important for young men in extremely difficult conditions for sustaining their own and their families' lives. In these contexts, we seek to understand how populations in coastal cities hard hit by the rise of narcotraffic-related violence negotiate visibility and capture to carve out paths forward. In doing so, they traverse and that recreate infrastructures sustained by sounds. These affective infrastructures (Berlant 2016) connect trickster pasts to possibilities of futures in impossible circumstances.

The district of San Lorenzo, in the Esmeraldas Province bordering Colombia to the north, and the neighborhoods around the saltwater estuary of the city of Guayaquil, the largest urban area of Ecuador, are connected through their histories of dispossession, displacement, and dispute. From their inception, territories occupied by organized ex-slaves—called *palenques*—were neither subjected nor free but occupied a “not in-between” (Moten 2017) space reflected in trickster-like figures of the maroon authority Alonso de Illescas and the mythical figure of *La Tunda*. Central to the *palenques*' fugitive continuity were the infrastructures of sound that emerged from their traditions and terrains, that accompanied them and were transformed as many Esmeraldeños were expelled from their land by the extractive and export economy of nineteenth century Ecuador, settling in the saltwater estuary neighborhoods of the port city of Guayaquil. In these complex urban spaces structured by racism, where the still lagging economy has devastated large parts of the population, illicit activities and the violences that accompany them, have found fertile ground. Yet these are also sites in which residents negotiate past possibilities through affective infrastructures to create futures they can live with.

SITES OF NOT-QUITE-SOVEREIGNTY AND TRICKSTER POTENTIALITY

Our work in the two study sites stems from long-established relationships with colleagues and organizations in the coastal provinces of Esmeraldas and

Guayas, and concern over the rising rates of extreme violence and widespread insecurity in the country over the last years, particularly in coastal areas. In the short period from 2019 to 2023, Ecuador has seen an increase of 574 percent—a nearly sixfold increase—in intentional homicides, making it the most violent country in Latin America (OECD 2023, 9); in 2023, Esmeraldas was the province with the third highest homicide rate and Guayas had the second highest homicide rate.² These concerns reached a crisis point with the government’s declaration of “internal armed conflict” and of criminal organizations as terrorists in January 2024. An urgent need to understand what was happening in Ecuador’s most affected territories and to hear from people in its most militarized areas led us to travel to the small city of San Lorenzo and the port city of Guayaquil in the following months, as part of the audiovisual project Counter-Narratives of Violence.³

In San Lorenzo, in the Esmeraldas province, we worked with the *palenque* elder of the Northern Esmeraldas Communal District and the Black Women’s Movement of Northern Esmeraldas. Through her care and connections, we were able to travel through collectively owned mangrove territories and nearby rural communities, meeting people who worked in, and for the protection of, these areas threatened environmentally by industrial shrimp or palm oil farming and territorially by criminal organizations. We also engaged in exchanges with musicians, poets, ethno-educators, and luthiers, over the course of which we recorded several performances and songs. In the city of Esmeraldas, we worked with the collective Mujeres de Asfalto to organize workshops aimed at building narratives and audiovisual products to reflect on militarization, racism, and violence and the construction of desirable futures.

In Guayaquil, we worked with various community and cultural projects around the saltwater estuary where many Esmeraldeños settled when arriving from the northern province of the country. We interviewed community leaders and recorded musical pieces with the Karibu cultural center, the Cleotilde Guerrero Foundation, and the Nia Kali community organization. We were fortunate to be guided through the estuary neighborhoods and the estuary itself by colleagues and contacts, as we came to realize that it would be impossible to be in these areas controlled by gangs without their care and accompaniment. In several neighborhoods in Guayaquil, we organized workshops with children and youth where we worked with narratives on their daily lives through musical and video shorts. Neither these workshops, nor any of the fieldwork during this critical period, would have been possible without the collaboration of local artists and activists.⁴

The audiovisual methodology allowed us to escape the strictures of the written word, building spaces of interaction and collective creation with workshop participants. Young participants created short films, recording their music, hip-hop, and narratives of hopes for futures, as we sought to think through with them the relation of their experiences to their histories and contexts. It was important for us to avoid talking explicitly about the forms of violence that our interlocutors experienced, focusing instead on their concerns, reflections and aspirations. Through these methods, visits, and exchanges, we were led to the question that underlies this text, namely, how do people work with what there is in contexts of dispossession, precarity and violence to find futures they can live with?

To explore answers to this question, we slip back to the mid-sixteenth century, as one starting point in histories of disputes—over territory, mobility and sustaining life—that maintain continuities, yet are not linear and certainly not uniform. In 1553, a storm ran aground a ship en route to the Spanish colonial capital of Lima, and the thirteen Africans on board obtained ownership of themselves by fleeing. During our fieldwork, many of the people with whom we spoke mentioned Alonso de Illescas, a maroon liberator who survived the shipwreck. According to Ines Morales, the *palenquera mayor* of northern Esmeraldas, Alonso de Illescas, “was a great national hero whose main political proposal was to build *palenques* as liberated spaces, beyond the processes of slavery and colonization, seeking autonomous territories where Africans and their descendants could live and practice their freedom” (Ines Morales, interview, 2024).

The *palenque* constituted by Illescas was not the only one in Latin America. According to [Robinson \(2020\)](#), independent communities of Africans trafficked to the Americas were recognized by the colonial authorities beginning in the seventeenth century. They were called *palenques* in the Afro-Pacific region, *quilombos* in Brazil, and *cumbes* in Venezuela, and their inhabitants were known as *cimarrones* or maroons.⁵ San Basilio del Palenque, in present-day Colombia, was the first such free town in America, founded by the ex-slave Benkos Biohó in 1599 and, despite repression and violence, is the only *palenque* that survives to this day. Brazil’s Quilombo de os Palmares, another well-known maroon community, lasted from 1605 to 1695, and plays an important role in Brazilian resistance narratives ([Gonzalez 2021](#)).

If we consider that failed maritime infrastructure of the sixteenth century, in the form of shipwrecks, enabled the establishment of maroon communities in northern Esmeraldas, it is the aspirational commercial and mining infrastructure

of the seventeenth century that allowed for their official recognition by the Spanish Crown. As independent communities—not yet legalized—began settling in northern Esmeraldas, colonial conquistador companies were driven by the rumors of an alluring territory filled with gold and riches. From the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, vicerealty authorities sought to “pacify” the Esmeraldas territory, building roads and ports, seeking to increase trade between Panama and the centers of production in the Andean region. The road project that would link the Andean capital of Quito to the sea would also help commercialize the gold mining in the north of Esmeraldas (Rueda 2001).

This “pacification” was made possible by the governance of the territory by the maroon Alonso de Illescas, whose leadership was strengthened through strategies of kinship alliances and localized violence with indigenous inhabitants of the area (Olaya 2016). Despite the original resistance of these independent territories to colonial authority, their control over the area and their tactic of entrusting themselves to the King’s service through further alliances with church leaders, made them ideal intendants for indirect government.

For Sembe (2022), Illescas exemplifies a case of subsovereignty and vernacular agency, as his declared support and correspondence with the King, in which he recognized himself as a subject despite being a freed African, demonstrates his ability to construct his freedom from available resources. In Sembe’s reading, Alonso de Illescas, and more generally maroon, complexity is reflected in a capacity to subject oneself to colonial authority in order to safeguard one’s freedom. Through Illescas’ negotiations, the colonial authorities granted ex-slaves in his territory pardon for their condition of fugitives and recognized them as free. In exchange, “they offered their obedience to the King and committed themselves to collaborate in the foundation of towns, whose location should be based on the benefit they could provide to the maintenance of the road and the future ports” (Rueda 2001, 7).

Alonso de Illescas’s governance allows us to reflect on the forms of adaptability and permanence (Olaya 2016) that developed in this territory. Illescas’s story is part of the historical memory of the Afro-Ecuadorian people, a divergence allowing us to break with the monolithic idea of the plantation slave model by showing the particularities of the slave regime established in the Afro-Pacific region, forged as it was in the context of incipient mining development and its jungle terrain. In addition, Illescas’s story helps us to imagine complex and dynamic forms of sustaining life that employed strategies of alliance, deception, violence and escape, oscillating between submission and resistance (Sembe 2022), neither one nor the other and not quite the in-between.

Sembe's term "subsovereign agency" recalls Berlant's "non-sovereign relationality" in which proximity does not mean being joined or captured. Non-sovereign points to the fact that boundaries are not dissolved but are "the experience of affect," that is, the experience of being shifted but not defined, allowing for a decidedly relational agency but not independent sovereignty. These historically generated patterns are continually transformed as they are put into play, in the same way that improvised riffs generate patterns that are transformed, and as infrastructure is inscribed through movement (Berlant 2016).

Berlant describes infrastructure as "that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself" and proposes "that one task for makers of critical social form is to offer not just judgment about positions and practices in the world, but terms of transition that alter the harder and softer, tighter and looser infrastructures of sociality itself" (2016, 394). In this sense, infrastructures are what we build for future socialities, as roads or channels are built for future movement. Harder or softer, tighter or looser, these can allow for more or less movement, more or less re-invention of the social, but there will always be wayward excess. As traces of our everyday, the construction of these infrastructures is not necessarily planned or rational, nor does the infrastructure have to be material, yet the objectification it represents can be technical, affective, symbolic. These are traces that our past walks leave behind, rivets that deepen on a dirt road through which water flows when it rains, Andean paths called *coluncos* that deepen to become underground trails after multitudes of human and animal steps sink into and open up the earth.

The construction of infrastructures—armatures or dispositions both within and composing what Echeverria (1998) calls the "instrumental field" or in a semiotic sense a "code"—is always an unequal exercise. In our predetermined but not overdetermined use of infrastructure, we transform it; as the poet Antonio Machado reminds us, "*Se hace camino al andar*"—the path is made by walking it. Yet the unequal constitution of these paths imposes inequalities through their predeterminations, so that the codification of infrastructures is co-constituted with racialized geographies. An attention to affective infrastructures allows us to understand the possibilities of its excesses or escapes. It is in this sense that the archive, memory made material, is infrastructure, and allows us to walk on paths carved, through histories, through affective forms, into impossible futures.

The continued and repeated recalling of Illescas reanimate him as a contemporary trickster figure. Sembe emphasizes the ambiguity and duality of maroon strategies, focusing on Illescas's "tendency to constantly switch sides, stances and tactics, that is central to marronage [and] a defining characteristic of a trickster.

The trickster is an ambiguous presence, an embodiment of mischief that seeks to catalyze change” (2022, 595). She connects this ability to blur categories of master and slave, fugitive and servant, rebel and king’s vassal, to Afro-Caribbean tricksters such as Anansi or Esu Elegbara, all of whom operate in liminal spaces, beyond binaries, beyond capture.

Afro-Ecuadorian affective infrastructures are shaped by the recollection of other tricksters and complex characters as well. La Tunda, another character frequently mentioned by people in both contemporary San Lorenzo and Guayaquil, is another figure of remarkable complexity. On the one hand, she symbolizes freedom and resistance; on the other, she is associated with threat and danger.⁶ This duality is manifested in her appearance, which is described as both monstrous and captivating. According to Hernández:

The Tunda was a creation of our enslaved grandparents now in America; they invented fear to protect life. They made the enslaver believe that we were terrified of Tunda our liberator, they gave a new shape to these fears, giving meaning and direction to our struggles. They shaped her by her stench, one foot like a misshaped hoof, the other a child’s foot and an enormous resemblance to a loved one. When an enslaved person disappeared, he had not escaped! Surely, he was stolen away by the Tunda! To make the story credible, a protocol was elaborated for the rescue of the victim, in which weapons, prayer and a priest intervened; the bass drum sounded, the dogs barked and warned the *tunda’ d* fugitive. The deception was brilliant, but the terrible thing is that the invented fears persisted and the liberatory Tunda vanished. (Hernández 2018, 25)

Such political strategies of adaptability and permanence construct infrastructures of feeling that transgress borders of not only space but also of time. Territorialized inhabitation took advantage of the fissures of the mining slave model—of failures in the marine infrastructure and aspirations in the commercial infrastructure that upheld it—generating spaces and political organization at the margins, allowing not only survival, but also cultural reproduction. The fugitive slaves and, later on, freed blacks, thus shaped their adaptation to and appropriation of the northern Esmeraldas landscape, integrating the natural environment, their subsistence activities, and their stories into what Olaya (2016, 37) calls “Afro-descendant territories”: “Hence, the mangroves, mountains, rivers and estuaries found sites and places of collective memories, in addition to a history of common experiences.”

WORKING WITH WHAT THERE IS: *Palenques* in Music and in Movement

Attention to racialized geographies allows us to think about the ways in which racialized populations have given shape to living with what there is, in spite of systematic destruction and exploitation.⁷ Though slavery and the labor of enslaved people is a *sine qua non* condition for the existence of capitalism in all its phases, its geographies not only constructed forms of domination, but also created projects to escape from the system of slavery. *Palenques*, as such spaces of escape and flight also provided the scaffolding for affective infrastructures of cultural reproduction in which music was central to carrying its patterns through time and across territories.

To [Robinson's \(2020\)](#) reading of the material force of racism through the centrality of the slave trade in the constitution of the modern world economy, [Mbembe \(2017\)](#) adds a consideration of blackness in a continuum that moves through colonialism, slavery, apartheid, globalization to contemporary securitized neoliberalism. "To produce Blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a *body of extraction*, that is, a body entirely exposed to the will of the master, a body from which great effort is made to extract maximum profit" ([Mbembe 2017](#), 18). The historical conformation of both San Lorenzo and Guayaquil is inserted into these processes of capital accumulation that depend on the power and patterns of racialized extraction in its Afro-Pacific specificities ([Roa 2017](#)).

As mentioned above, the extractive history of the San Lorenzo district of northern Esmeraldas has its origins in the consolidation of the colonial-slave regime since the seventeenth century. By this period, the mining-slavery frontier extended from the Darien in Panama to the province of Esmeraldas in the Audiencia of Quito. This broad frontier was characterized by its extensive gold production, from the *real de minas* (i.e., places where gold was extracted) to mining districts that engaged in alluvial mining by enslaved black crews. Once the Republic of Ecuador was constituted, the gold-rich territories of northern Ecuador were granted to British creditors for the payment of the debt of independence. In this period gold mining continued and the exploitation of tagua and wood began. [María Arboleda \(2005, 107\)](#) considers that this act of the nascent Ecuadorian state would be a sign of "a pattern of abandonment and negligence to which the province would later be subjected."

From the mid-twentieth century, once the concession to British creditors ended, San Lorenzo continued to be part of Ecuador's extractive economy, as part of the banana and oil boom circuit, followed by timber extraction, shrimp, and palm oil industries, and now, illicit mining. Throughout its history, then,

violence in San Lorenzo has been a tangible structural and historical element in the loss of Afro-ancestral territory, though the forms of violence that have anchored the development of capital in the region are not always visible (Minda 2020). Contemporary connections between illegal mining and capital expansion (Teran and Scarpacci 2024) and between militarization and control over territories for investments, in what Paley (2014) terms “drug war capitalism,” shape the daily lives of Esmeraldeños. In this context, we can understand the historical continuity and relevance of “marronage as the manifestation of the African’s determination to disengage, to retreat from contact. To reconstitute the community, Black radicals took to the bush, to the mountains, to the interior” (Robinson 2020, 310).

What interests us about these Afro-descendant territories, is their potential role in the articulation of spaces of cultural and political struggle that are sometimes hidden and in the margins (Davis 1998). The *palenque*, as such a space of freedom, which persists in Afro-Ecuadorians collective memory, was built not only as a physical space, but also as a sound project, in which instruments and orality play a fundamental role. As Mayra Estévez-Trujillo notes, sound is part of processes that are at once social, cultural, political, and economic. Sound is not only material, but creates the possibilities for “conceptual and spatial situations”:

Sound is possible in the confluence of production logics and the positioning and place from which subjects act [...] constructing sonorous acts, actions or practices that supplant and construct subjectivities and universes in which there are audible and inaudible “things,” linked to the act of listening and being listened to, that shape scenarios in which different power relations are articulated. (Estévez Trujillo 2016, 14)

For the inhabitants of the *palenques*, the forest, the mountain, the jungle, were the landscapes of their shelterage. “The particularities of the mining slave model, as opposed to the plantation model, allowed maroons, freed from enslavement, to rebuild their existence and socialities using the natural resources found in the environment” (Vanín, Romero, and Ortiz in Alvarado 2022, 45). Thus, the instruments they created constituted a particular sound project based on their subsistence economy on the Pacific coast.

Miguel Quintero, creator of instruments in San Lorenzo, recounts being taught how to elaborate instruments from materials found in the mountain. This is increasingly difficult because of the felling of trees and the destruction of animal habitats, which makes it more complicated to find the right materials to make instruments such as drums, maracas, *cununos* and the *guasá*.

These days, because of logging in the forests, there is hardly any wood to make our instruments, we have to spend weeks in the mountains to find what we need. Our elders who go to the mountain and teach hunting traditions now provide us with the hides. They kill an animal for their own and their family's food, and in order not to waste the skins, they look for instrument makers to give us or sell us the fresh skin. It must be dried in the correct way, traditionally, with the ash from the fire. (Miguel Quintero, interview, 2024)

For [Hernández \(2018\)](#), music has historically been linked to maroon resistance, using sounds from drums, *bombos*, maracas, and *guasá*, using the movements of the dance, to communicate with men and women enslaved on haciendas. Music is a clear example of infrastructures created to communicate with what there is, in interaction with social processes of domination. For our present-day interlocutors in San Lorenzo, music continues to be linked to struggles for self-making. In the 1990s, as their territories were threatened by agro-industrial expansion, the northern Esmeraldas organization began to host gatherings of “music and dance in defense of territory, music and dance in defense of the environment, music and dance in defense of our identity” (Ines Morales, interview, 2024).

In spite of the persistence of collective memory and continued political-cultural struggles of Ecuadorian Afro-descendants, their sounds and stories have been incorporated into dominant narratives through the passage of time, extractive and symbolic violence, church and moral impositions and structural racism. As we saw above, the initial possibilities of the liberatory Tunda have been subsumed into a frightening figure. The possibilities of unruly communication in marimba music have been defused through its folklorization. In this sense, we must be cautious with the too-quick celebration of “collective memory.” Even as it may constitute a practice “to recover, strengthen, reposition and reconstruct existence as an ancestral right . . . to give back the word, to question the current order imposed by the State” ([Walsh and Salazar 2015](#), 83), it can also impose a monolithic understanding of resistance that allows for its capture.

Historical manifestations such as the marimba have entered state and commercial circuits, and as their institutional recognition increases, their political-economic challenges to dominant structures often decrease. Alvarado writes that the Afro-descendant identity (as is the case for Indigenous identity as well) is represented by “their” music, dance, theater, handicraft production. “At the same time that the communities are recognized and made visible, they are

used for profit and to build an institutional instrumentalization of subjectivities” (Alvarado 2022, 52). This is not only a state or dominant use of ventriloquism (Guerrero 2010), but the very binding of these subjectivities that equally fixes and instrumentalizes the making of one’s self.

Visibility, therefore, is not only straightforward legibility that helps to shape political resistance. As Hartman (2019) urges us to ask, what does it mean to be visible to whom? Her examination of the refusal of the terms of visibility of wayward black women in early twentieth-century cities of the U.S. North helps us locate in our own context those affective infrastructures that allow for movement through music that oscillates between capture and flight, past and future, San Lorenzo and Guayaquil. Insofar as this movement is made possible, such infrastructures “restitute potentials that have been subtracted by subject-centered ways of seeing, which establish specific sensory boundaries and angles of relational possibilities, and can be seen as a gesture toward the uncertain stabilities that exist in and as a result of the territorialization of space” (Simone 2022, 11).

These infrastructures of sound are sonorous dimensions of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms “infrastructures of feeling”:

In the material world, infrastructure is the basis of productivity—it accelerates some processes and slows down others, imposing particular interests, producing isolation, enabling cooperation. The infrastructure of feeling is material too, in the sense that ideology becomes material as do the actions that feelings make possible, or inhibit. The infrastructure of feeling is then a foundation of consciousness, sturdy, but not static, viscerally underlying our ability to select, to recognize possibility as we select and reselect liberating lineages—in a lifetime [and] between generations and from one generation to the next . . . What matters—what materializes—are vivid rearticulations and surprising combinations. (Gilmore 2018, 74)

It is in the articulation of these infrastructures that music’s colonization by commercialization, nationalization, or tradition can be circumvented and can become a condition of “possibility to live unbounded lives” in an escape from the many forms of carceral geographies or captured life (Gilmore cited in Camp 2017, 50).

A musician from Esmeraldas now living in Guayaquil says, “Marimba for me is life . . . I was born through marimba and will die with it” (Nadia, interview, 2024). Music in its complexity can escape its institutionalization, become

roads to travel on, and connect pasts to presents constituted through the futures that can be imagined. Art forms work differently. Writing on political theater performing at the intersection of Brazil's celebration of and violence against black bodies, Smith notes that "Performance is at once the site of black social death and the site of its redress. It is that which reproduces pain and that which ruptures it" (2016, 24). A similar polyvalent character is found in much creative work; the music played by and commented on by our interlocutors depends on tradition while resisting its capture. It transmits affects, knowledges, identities, not as institutions, but as refusals—Tina Campt also cites Moten and Harney's "refusal to be refused" and Butler and Athanassiou's "refusal to stay in one's proper place" (Campt 2017, 50). These, then, are channeled lines of flight, continuities of possibilities of escape "that provide a way for people and things to get away from having to absorb or be the bearings of . . ." (Simone 2022, 12).

Fred Moten helps us to think of the role of music in these movements:

Song is a privileged site of such improvisation, and the not-in-between signifies a collision that guarantees the ongoing presence and the irrecoverable possibility of what gets coded as conditions and foundations . . . Everything here depends upon some kind of not-in-between suspension and propulsion, a certain arrhythmia, the breakdown of the too-smooth historical trajectory of European domination and accumulative apotheosis . . . The line of that dialectic has got to be broken by another dialect; the trajectory of that narrative has got to be disrupted by some kind of lyric materiality. (Moten 2017, 10)

These lyric materialities are reflected in the sounds that Fercho Arroyo, a young music and performance artist from one of the estuary neighborhoods in Guayaquil, names:

In lots of areas of life, black people did not learn through methods, but orally. So I say to him I'll "pass you the pop" or you "pass him the pop" we "pass him the pop" we "pass him the pop." So you "pass him the pop" you "pass him the pop" and that's how he learned it. So, the way of intoning afro instruments is like onomatopoeia. So I also play with "*papa con yuca*," "*papa con yuca*" and "*toca tambor*," "*toca tambor*." It's like in the kitchen, when you're making a coconut stew, I put this, this and this in it, and that's how they pass sounds on like secrets . . . (Fercho Arroyo, interview, 2024).

Fercho is now studying dance formally, but notes that he “didn’t learn musicality by means of *five, six, seven, eight* . . . I simply have it here because I grew up with music, my whole environment was music, my dad and salsa, all kinds of music.”

We spend some time with him in the vacant paths that line the saltwater estuary behind the houses of his largely Afro-Esmeraldeño neighborhood Isla Trinitaria. He warns us to not to walk through Isla Trinitaria on our own, someone will always be watching, but he talks to the ferryman who transports people across the estuary so we can get a sense of the area lined with mangroves and water plants, that though neglected and polluted, push through the surface. A community leader of the area notes that many people from the northern part of Esmeraldas settled here precisely because of the importance of water and plants: “There is a sense of being related to nature. Our people there are close to the river, close to the mountain . . . These are old sectors where the Afro-descendant population settled. When our people arrived here, all this was mangrove” (Carlos Valencia, interview, 2024).

While the province of Esmeraldas has the highest proportions of Afro-Ecuadorians in its population, Guayaquil is the city where the greatest number of black Ecuadorians live, with over a quarter of Afro-descendants living in the port city in 2022. The arrival of the Afro-Ecuadorian population in the Guayaquil metropolis is a consequence of forced mobility and resistance, historical traces in the comings and goings of Ecuador’s Afro-descendant peoples. For decades, internal human mobility in Ecuador has been a consequence of the dispossession and insecurity faced by the population in both communal territories and in urban-popular neighborhoods. People arrive to Guayaquil from the province of Esmeraldas in the north of the country not only looking for work, but also because of the impacts of palm oil plantations, lumber companies, and mining that stretches from colonial to contemporary illicit economies, and given the difficulty of sustaining life in conditions that now include narcotrafficking violence in their northern territory. Though Guayaquil has a higher homicide rate than San Lorenzo, the northern district’s border and gang conflicts have made it the site of extreme “expressive violence” that includes public displays of mutilated bodies (Segato 2013).

VIOLENCE AND FUGITIVE FUTURES IN GUAYAQUIL

In another of Guayaquil’s mostly black estuary neighborhoods, another activist who runs a community foundation that attends especially to women,

children, and youth hoped “to assemble a *palenque*, where our children can learn.” She notes that her mother was from Esmeraldas, but she was born in Guayaquil and raised in Quito, “so I didn’t know anything. I would go to the pharmacy and ask for a pill, until an aunt told me, you need to know you are a healer.” She imagines the *palenque* a place where “girls can learn when to use rue, vinegar, oregano, lemon . . .” (Ines Santos, interview, 2024). Ines Santos’s vision for a contemporary *palenque* is in no way directed by hopes to replicate traditional culture for its own sake. As Moten says of the Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu:

The aesthetico-political (historical) encounter in Tshibumba’s work operates in a way that calls the idea of culture into question rather than merely illuminating that idea in some particular manifestation . . . Culture is a false, allegorical totality, an object given in a methodology that works in and toward the eclipse of the aesthetic and the (political/economic) historical, that means to stand in for the complexity of the social totality, that moves in relation to the articulated combination, the interinanimative autonomy, of the aesthetic and the politico-economic. (Moten 2017, 23)

As such, it is no surprise that Ines Santos continues discussing the political historical importance of cornrows for black women, a practice best documented in Colombia’s San Basilio de Palenque (Vargas 2003). Ines relates how women observed the paths to escape, lines of flight and incorporated the communication of these into their aesthetic.

The women braided their hair making maps for how to get out. And depending how the braid was made, it told you if there was a river or a direct path this way. Then you have to take this turn. And the turban served so that inside these braids, they could put grains. So, when they escaped from slavery, they could inhabit other territories with the grains that women carried in their hair covered by the turbans, to cultivate and grow our own food. (Ines Santos, interview, 2024)

Black men and women’s escape from violence as slaves resonates in Afro-descendants continued endeavors in eluding colonial, republican and contemporary violences by finding spaces not-in-between oppression and liberal freedom, exclusion and unequal inclusion, the state and criminal organizations.

Violence is a phenomenon that reproduces itself in the daily life of Afro-Ecuadorians, linking exploited bodies with extracted territories and traumatized territories with brutalized bodies (Zaragocin and Caretta 2021), often directly and without respite. In order to understand the specific potentialities of existence in devastating conditions of structural, subjective and direct violence, it is helpful to further differentiate conditions in San Lorenzo and in Guayaquil, in order to trace how diverse but connected affective infrastructures are traced and trace paths in each place, making possible experiences and responses to everyday injustices.

In San Lorenzo, violence is not always perceived as a dangerous, threatening beast, because sometimes, and perhaps more often than we acknowledge, violence is a neighbor with whom we learn to live. Such features of daily life in San Lorenzo are in large part due to the complexities of the Ecuador-Colombia border: historical socio-cultural connections across the border, illicit trade in many types trafficking and the fallout of the Colombian “peace process.”⁸ At the same time, an almost complete lack of confidence in State responsibility for keeping them safe has led northern Esmeraldeños in San Lorenzo to self-manage their collective lives, continuing to sustain themselves in and through their territories.

Recent analyses have focused on the spikes in armed and extreme violence in the Esmeraldas province. Yet studies and news reports have long shown how illegal mining, contraband, arms and drug trafficking, the presence of irregular groups, organized crime, and other phenomena undermine security and threaten life in San Lorenzo. Nevertheless, local organizations maintain access to their livelihoods, as the president of the Federation of Local Collectors of Mangrove Products (FEDARPOM) of Northern Esmeraldas notes:

One of those new [criminal] organizations that found itself on top tried to take our territory . . . When you take away the control of communities at this border, you lose territorial control. Because the territory is not controlled by the marine, nor the police, it’s controlled by the communities. We kept control of the territory through organizations, through organizational processes. (Inginio Castillo, interview, 2024)

The complex conflicts and negotiations with organized criminal groups are necessary for populations whose livelihoods continue to be the same territories in dispute. Inhabitants coexist with illicit actors not only in the mangrove, but also in the Santiago River, in communal lands and across the border with its

formal and informal trade. People fish in the same waters of the Santiago River that irregular armed groups use to traffic fuel, drugs, arms—even people—and that local inhabitants use to traffic cigarettes and other everyday commercial items through informal trade that helps them to make ends meet. The forms of sociality and organization that we described in previous sections are precisely the affective infrastructures that make coexistence with violence possible.

In the estuary neighborhoods of Guayaquil, in contrast, the “radical material heteronomy” of urban living carves other paths of possibility (Lordon 2014). We mentioned above the Guayaquil community leader Ines Santos who aspires to create contemporary *palenques* in the estuary neighborhood of Isla Trinitaria. The foundation she leads, Nia Kali (“intense purpose” in Swahili) seeks to “show children who tend to absorb everything they see and absorb in their surroundings—violence, crime, and many other conflicts—to show them that there are other paths” (Girón 2023). But the possibilities of *palenques* are completely different in Guayaquil than they are in San Lorenzo. Without the territorial relationship to natural resources of the latter, Guayaquil *palenques* would hardly be larger than a block, defined by more limited familial relations, a constricted commons circumscribed to the social.

In this context, in the absence of the possibilities of territorial subsistence, the relationship to violence is one of confrontation rather than cohabitation. This confrontation is seen in the literal patrolling of tight borders: if there is to be a group activity in a park, or if people from outside the neighborhood will visit them, community leaders must notify the gangs who will relax their strict perimeters for the time being. This constant confrontation and territorial contention is not always explicitly violent, but relies on agreements and recognition and respect of boundaries. As Jean-Francois Gayraud writes,

Violence belongs to an initial stage of affirmation and installation of mafia power, but it is not a permanent element; the reputation of dangerousness, fruit of history and myth, is enough of an origin to spread fear, and a generalized fear allows to economize and avoid the use of violence. . . . Such a measured and limited use of violence allows criminal capital to reproduce itself in a given territory and obeys . . . three criteria. It is economic, invisible and endogenous. (Gayraud 2007, 258)

In such contexts, protection rackets and recruitment sustain the economies of criminal organized groups. As work possibilities in crime continue to grow in increasingly precarious contexts and populations, an increasing number of

youth, particularly young men, are recruited into these dynamic economies. The local term for being recruited is being “captured.”

Ecuador is the Latin American country that has worst recovered from the regional economic crises of the last decade. Inequality has grown since oil prices dropped in 2014 and austerity measures were implemented accompanying a return to dependence on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2019; poverty is now 16.9 percent higher than it was six years ago (Johnston and Vasic-Lalovic 2023). Public education has suffered cuts, as have other basic public services and labor rights. Most of Ecuador’s job recovery since the pandemic is in flexible, insecure, and informal work. Salaried jobs with benefits and job security are scarce in the country, while regressive taxes have made the prices of basic goods alarmingly expensive.

Our interlocutors make clear that “captured” youth are often propelled into these groups by the need “to take care of their families” (Jimmy Simisterra, interview, 2024). Young men are especially driven by the desire to support or contribute to the family economically: “Desperate to help his mother, so that they can get by, it’s very easy for someone to come and whisper in his ear, ‘Look, I can help you earn easy money’” (Fercho Arroyo, interview, 2024). Young people might even “fall into that situation” trying to keep their neighborhoods and families from being prey to protection rackets: “So the kids, for self-defense you could say, had to form their own group over here, to get involved, to put a stop to the other group coming in” (Ines Santos, interview, 2024).

At the same time, makeshift attempts and cross-border inventions to sustain life can also be captured. The spread of illicit economies controlled by global networks and criminal organizations has meant that even popular economies are captured by the hierarchical structures of the transnational drug trade. While many women have in the past used micro-trafficking as a part of their multiple strategies to sustain themselves and their families, it is every day more difficult to remain autonomous. “We’re increasingly integrated into a chain that prevents us from being in a concrete territory. Instead, we become part of a structure in which we know the part below and not the intermediate part on upwards” (Jaqui Gallegos, interview, 2024).

Fugitive potentialities demand affective structures that open up the not-in-between liberal unequal inclusion and categorical refusal. All the community leaders with whom we spoke in these neighborhoods of Guayaquil understood clearly that the cultural activities they support are more than dance, art, song. Jimmy Sinisterra’s cultural organization began with a small group of dancers

practicing in the street, “and they liked it, they said I want to be a part, let me dance”; he sees his marimba work as preventing the recruitment of these youth into criminal organizations. Yet the very definition of participation in criminal activities closes down possibilities of liberating movement.

Ines Santos of the Nia Kali Foundation notes that the youth who are part of gangs are not allowed to join in the few municipal activities that take place in those moments that community spaces can be used. In a neighborhood soccer tournament, one group didn’t show up, so she and her volunteers suggested that they invite those watching from the borders of the field, who had been excluded by municipal rules:

And they played, then, at least this once, those four hours that they played, they cleared their minds and forgot about all the insecurity, of having to be on the defensive, that they are going to do something to someone, that someone is going to do something to them, that there is going to be a problem . . . So these are the spaces that are needed with more activities, to avoid their involvement and being captured. (Ines Santos, interview, 2024)

The categorical imperatives that bind the either-or and the in-between are likewise refused by Fercho, who is honestly incredulous when he tells us why he decided to stop taking buses, despite the huge size of the decidedly un-bike-friendly city of Guayaquil:

So I’d get on the bus. And I’ll never understand how someone can treat you like you’re not even human . . . So I got to the point that I decided I’d rather ride a bike [and] my bicycle allowed me to open my way to freedom. So, when I go by bike, it’s like the air carries me. I’m super calm. I can stop at a shop to buy a cola, I can sit on the sidewalk and the wind blows on me and I can see everything around me. (Fercho Arroyo, interview, 2024)

Such possibilities marked by “refusing to be refused” also require refusing to refuse. These are at the basis of the hopes for infrastructures that open up possibilities for such airy movement as Fercho’s.

The Batucada Popular is another group in Guayaquil that seeks to provide such affective infrastructures. Bringing together youth from the estuary and other urban-popular neighborhoods, the *batucada* is a syncopated percussion ensemble, a musical and rhythmic style that is originally Afro-Brazilian. When we

spoke with him, Billy Navarrete, director of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, detailed with clarity the complex history and current transformations in the violence and rights violations of the most vulnerable populations in Guayaquil. At the end of his incisive and devastating analysis, we asked where he saw hope for the future and he said without hesitation, “the *Batucada Popular*” (Billy Navarrete, interview, 2024).

About a hundred young people from Guayaquil neighborhoods, in which the risk of being captured by gangs is palpable, make up this space where they learn to play together in rhythm. In mixed collaborations and to the beat of raucous drumming that can express their complex lives often simplified and criminalized by securitization, these adolescents can escape being confined into categories of “good” or “bad” youth. Johanna Chevez, who leads the group and trains the drummers, opening up her house to young men and women who drift in and out for practice, to hang out, for a safe space when they need one, tells us that the idea for the group began in 2020, when she and others decided to gather women to play the drums in street protests “in dignified rage.”

And these women came with their children. And then, when it was time for them to play the drums, the mothers said, you go ahead . . . I feel that the mothers already felt it back then. Already. I feel that they had a sense already that things were going to get worse . . . And that’s why they gave them the drums. And that’s why they looked for a safe place, they had to secure it, they had to protect it. (Johanna Chevez, interview, 2024)

There is both continuity and contrast with the drumming that anchored the music and the movement in the Miguel Quinteros’s instruments made in San Lorenzo. Instead of wood and animal skins for the drums, instead of elders passing on their knowledge and their songs, the Guayaquil sounds emerge from what there is: “We didn’t have money for drums, so we used buckets . . . We broke brooms and made sticks and beat on the buckets in the back patio” (Johana Chevez, interview, 2024). Despite their differences, in both cases, drumming marks the beat of the affective infrastructures to collectively search escape from capture, built from what there is.

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People construct abolitionist geographies from what there is; shifts in perspectives connecting memories and aspirations can radically revise the notion of

what can be done with the materials available. The affective infrastructures that takes us from rural territorialized livelihoods through the movement of music to the shaping of black urban spaces seeks to find lines of flight out of historically sustained and constraining structures.

La Tunda was once the maroon woman with the disfigured leg who guided enslaved people to the *palenque*. Colonial and church hierarchies began to persuade us that she was nothing but a myth, associated with being struck physically and spiritually; in Spanish the word *tunda* also means a beating. No longer seeing La Tunda's ambivalent, trickster nature boxed her into a figure to fear, stemming escapes from haciendas and marronage as a decolonizing project.

Another mythical figure from traditional Afro-Pacific song that came up repeatedly, in the context of concerns with the increasing recruitment of young men, is the lost Torbellino (whose name translates literally as Whirlwind):

Torbellino se ha perdido	Torbellino is lost
Yo no se donde andará	Where could he be?
Ay Torbellino! Ay Torbellino!	Oh Torbellino! Oh Torbellino!
Subiendo miro pa'rriba	Going up I look up
Bajando miro pa'bajo	Going down I look down
Torbellino se ha caído	Torbellino has fallen
Todavía nadie lo ha encontrado	No one has found him
Torbellino se ha perdido	Torbellino is lost
Yo no se dónde andará	Where could he be?
Preguntale al marimbero	Ask the marimbero
Que por ahí lo anda buscando	He's out there looking for Torbellino ⁹

La Tunda may be lost like Torbellino, the marimba and the *palenque* may have been folklorized, and Alonso de Illescas is now the name of a bus company. But these trickster figures—and the possibilities of escape that they represent—are alive in the city, passing through cars and polluted streets. We can hear them in the *toca tambor, toca tambor* of the *bomba* drums. The rhythms and memories that pulse from Esmeraldas to Guayaquil—in the voices of elders recounting stories and histories to wide-eyed children, through the drums of San Lorenzo to the streets of Guayaquil—mark possibilities of tentatively tracing futures not

yet drawn. By making paths as we walk them, creating openings for future paths through infrastructures of affect and sound, the potentialities of La Tunda and Torbellino remain just beyond being found, somewhere in the smog and the crowds of black city spaces, where they make haste, make do, and make things happen in the concrete jungle.

ABSTRACT

A vertiginous rise in violence, criminal activity, and militarization in Ecuador in the last few years has hit the inhabitants of Afro-descent the hardest, particularly in Esmeraldas and Guayas, coastal provinces which are among the country's most dangerous areas. These populations have historically negotiated visibility and capture to cultivate possible futures in complex contexts of marronage, differential inclusion into a new nation, and now, multiple authorities vying for control. In this article, we argue that the stories and histories that Afro-Ecuadorians trace across time and territories, through music, sounds, and collective memories, create affective infrastructures that open paths towards vernacular and relational forms of sovereignty and agency. Through historical and traditional figures and rhythms, these infrastructures connect trickster pasts to possibilities of futures in impossible circumstances. [affective infrastructures, afro-descendant and sonorous politics, subsovereign agency, Esmeraldas, Guayaquil, Ecuador]

NOTES

1. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer who suggested making this dimension of the analysis explicit, and their suggestion to read [Zavala \(2018\)](#), whose discussion of how cultural imaginaries of narco-trafficking benefits state and imperial power converges with studies we cite that connect criminal economies to capital accumulation.
2. In 2023, the homicide rate in the Esmeraldas province was 82.87 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants; in Guayas, the rate was 85.66. Only the province of El Rios (of 24 provinces in the country) had a higher homicide rate ([OECD 2023](#)). Compare these rates to the 2021 global average of 5.8 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants ([UNODC 2023](#)).
3. The project Counter-Narratives of Violence seeks to document and communicate grassroots interpretations and responses to the current context of increased violence, in order to challenge the government and mass-media narratives that criminalize racialized and marginalized youth and securitization and militarization as a solution.
4. We would like to thank the generosity and contributions of the *palenquera mayor* Ines Morales; the artists, musicians and poets Miguel Quintero, Jackson Ayoví, Victor Arroyo, Sulia Caicedo, Amada Cortes, Jenni Nazareno, Fercho Arroyo, Olmedo Guerra; the community and cultural organizers Carlos Valencia, Jimmy Simisterra, Inés Santos and Johanna Chévez; the neighborhood and social leaders Inginio Castillo, Juanita Bone, Eugenia Castro, Maria Eugenia Delgado and her daughter Vicki; as well as the urban historian Patricia Sanchez and the important work of the CDH in Guayaquil, with particular thanks to Paul Murillo and Billy Navarrete. We would never have been able to connect and learn from so many in San Lorenzo and Guayaquil without the collaborations of our colleagues Ana Maria Morales and Marilyn Urresto, as well as the rest of the Reproduction and Violences team working on the Counter-Narratives project Lisset Coba, Cristina Vega and Juan Gonzalez Rebollo. Many of the ideas in

this article emerged from exchanges and the profound insights of these colleagues and comrades.

5. According to Arrom, *cimarrón* “is an indigenous term of Antillean origin” already in use by the first part of the 16th century (Arrom 1983). Maroonage as resistance against slavery and racism is described by Edzon León’s: “to politicize and, with it, to critically contemporize the experience of marronage linked to colonial slavery in order to recompose a political thought of the existence of the maroon that can contribute to the current political processes of the peoples of the diaspora” (León 2021, 16). Likewise, we are interested in an anti-essentialist, historicized reading of the category, such as Pedro Lebrón’s: “the mythopoetic figure of the maroon has become a central referent for thinking about urgent philosophical problems related to colonization, decolonization, anti-black violence, and ways of being and being in the world that resist and reverse processes of subjectivation rooted in the catastrophic experience of the crossing of the Atlantic” (Lebrón Ortiz 2023, 278).
6. A similar figure is the Brazilian leader Zumbi of the long-lasting maroon community Quilombo de los Palmares, which existed from 1605 until 1695, who is now remembered as a devil. “In the popular imaginary of Northeastern Brazil, Zumbi is characterized as an evil nocturnal devil who steals children away who behave badly” (Gonzalez 2021, 38).
7. We thank Cristina Vega for sharing the idea of “working with what there is,” a notion emerging from dialogues with the Laboratoria Feminist Research Space. See Pimentel et al. (2021) for a gathering of such dialogues.
8. Negotiations that led to the signing of a peace treaty between the Colombian government and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) guerrilla group created disaffected, decentralized and still armed splinter groups whose territorial conflicts are now Ecuadorian conflicts (Palma 2021), as Ecuador has transformed its main role a transit route for narcotrafficking to becoming a site for its production and storage as well, making control of its territories more contentious (Rivera-Rhon and Bravo 2020).
9. A performance of this song is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfaK-6JuO1mY>

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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 *Imat* (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. AbdouMalik 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 heterogeneous 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; Nurhusein 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): Finfinnee (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; *säfar*) 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 ኢየሁዳውያን ደቅር ብላቸው።; *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 *Tāwahedo* (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 (ሰጥና ወርቅ; *sām-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 *sām-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 *sām-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-säfar 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 ደ ሿ ኪሎ መስቀል በዓል; *Yämetshereshaw yä4kilo mäsqäl bā’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” (አንዳልኮራ የደሃ ሊጅ

ኅኝ፤ እንዳልፈራ የ ቫ ኪሎ ሊጅ ኅኝ።; *Indalkora yä däha lidsch nänge. Indalfera yä 4kilo lidsch nenne*). Indeed, this poster attracted a lot of attention from the police. The residents had become urban *däbitära* 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, politics, 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 *sigä*) 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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Capture /Connect /Shift

A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

UNSETTLING CAMP, PRISON, AND COLONY: Italy's Migrant Encampments Between Extension and Capture

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EXTENDING *SUMUD*

December 11, 2023, Apulian Tavoliere (southeastern Italy): On the day of the first global strike for Gaza, when I was supposed to write (or better still, hand in!) a first draft of this piece, I instead found myself accompanying some West African residents from the ever-expanding shantytown of Borgo Mezzanone in a protest that demanded a solution to the encampment's water shortages. In preparing press statements and social media accounts,¹ I and my (white Italian) comrades sought to elaborate on the possible links between the two struggles, which, however seemingly disproportionate, speak of common oppositions to currents of colonial, racialized, and militarized segregation, and to the extractions they make possible and rely on. The fact of finding ourselves at the fenced edge of a militarized asylum-seeker reception center, with aggressive, armed soldiers descending from an armored vehicle, and equally armed law-enforcement operatives from different corps as our first interlocutors, certainly elicits analogies and evokes recursions. While the intensity of the necropolitical forces of capture at play may appear incommensurable across geographies, how

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to quantify and compare is an impossible (and even immoral) question that, I argue, misses the point: we are facing iterations in different combinations, recursions in varying degrees.

Here I take up, again, the challenge of articulating these struggles and their targets one to the other in an effort to foster and multiply liberatory potential, as I sought to do with others after that protest—without necessarily anticipating explicit recognitions and overt solidarities, or mourning their absence. For of course, as per what Houria Bouteldja has recently named “the knot of the false unity of the damned of the Earth,” one cannot expect Blacks/Africans (*Noirs/Africains*, her terms) to engage in solidarity with Palestinians given the almost generalized oblivion to the former’s own plights (which also include mass-scale genocides), “the absence of reciprocity in anticolonial solidarity and the place of Blacks in the hierarchy of dignities” (Bouteldja 2023; translation mine). And yet, talk of and concern for Palestine did sometimes emerge from unsolicited conversations I entertained with shantytown dwellers in the days preceding and following the protest. Concomitantly, the feeling of being robbed of one’s resources and recourses, in Africa as much as in Europe, surfaced once again through the recent cuts to the encampment’s supply of running water and accompanied the frustration of not being able to fully express and realize one’s potential—indeed of not being able to have a place one can call home, neither here nor there. Awareness of the sheer disproportion between the labor provided, the resources and surplus extracted, and the returns was underscored by what I translate as an anticolonial sentiment: an acute sense of the colonial matrix of dwellers’ struggles, never missing among the protesters I and others accompanied in that forsaken corner of southern Italy, one freezing morning like many others. It is this consciousness that grounds my efforts at creating analytical connections across geographies and temporalities, thereby addressing some of the imbalances, erasures and disjunctures noted by Bouteldja.

Campization, with its carceral undersides, might be one (admittedly clumsy) moniker for these processes of capture that cut across borders of different sorts and varying intensities: the one that I can help untangle, hopefully as a small contribution towards its undoing—an undoing which powerfully if often surreptitiously happens already, every day, in the “extensions” (Simone 2020, 2024; Simone et al. 2023) to those militarized-humanitarian camps, across latitudes, from Borgo Mezzanone to Gaza, and more generally Palestine and its diaspora, however ludicrous the connection may feel at first. If, with Nasser Abourahme, the camp “is materially and politically installed at the center of the *ongoing* history of colonial struggle in Palestine” (2025, 2; emphasis in the original), this centrality

extends, in more senses than one, at planetary scales. Abourahme himself identifies conditions of landlessness and displacement as paradigmatic of global politics today, achieved and dealt with by way of mass encampment in “networked sites of legal abandonment, temporal suspension, and disciplinary transformation [...] only shades removed from the carceral” (2025, 165). I believe what Abourahme calls encampment is better captured by the notion of *campization*—for encampment’s substantive and agentive qualities can range from sheer containment to at least partial autonomy (see Peano 2021a, 2024a, cf. *infra*). Encampment is a forever contested terrain of and for struggle, often waged by means of extension.

Indeed, extension—that “prolongation of life—which anti-blackness acts to foreclose” and which “gives way to an accentuation of ‘life’s priorities’—its wayward, open-ended trajectories and dispositions,” as Simone (2023) puts it—is what *campization* is up against, and has been for centuries. Encampment extensions such as Borgo Mezzanone’s *ghetto* (as its West African dwellers call it and all the spaces of this sort) are those which resist—and exceed—the evacuation of home from housing, that the camp seeks to enforce by turning housing into warehousing, and people into numbers: disposable, interchangeable, fungible (cf. Tadiar 2021). Extensions’ modes of life and relationality are provisionally grounded on temporariness, movement and interconnection. “The extensions are at the fulcrum of an intensive and oscillating process of unsettling and resettling anchored in a systemic process of depletion and devaluation” (Simone 2024, 369–371). Such oscillation invests and perturbs the chimerical “Home” itself, replete with its own violent extractions and exclusions (Lancione 2023). Hence extension also implies going “beyond inhabitation,” i.e., beyond what is normally expected of residency, in what Simone’s conceptual work has further specified as “the surrounds”: “spaces, times, and practices within and beyond capture” where “detachment from the predominant forms of accumulation and dispossession” is ever shifting, ephemeral, and undefinable (Simone 2022, viii).

In the effort to relate struggles happening in different contexts of colonial, racializing *campization*, and thereby enhancing all, here I seek to make extension resonate and articulate with what Palestinians (and others enduring Israeli colonization) have termed *sumud*: perseverance, steadfastness in the building and rebuilding of lives and spaces, even through their undoing, despite colonial displacement and its various forms and degrees of violence; a refusal of the colonizer’s terms and a constant re-making of the self-in-common. It is an assemblage of multiplex, emergent and open-ended, collective and relational, de-individualizing and undefinable practices outside the space of normalized politics, when the latter fails or ceases to be possible (Meari 2014). Likewise, protest in the

extension takes many forms, from the organized and singular, event-like, to the everyday. (“Blackness here extends itself across uncertainties, finds its solidarities in both visible struggle and more indiscernible ways of being together, dependent on tacit recognitions and coordinations,” writes [Simone \[2023\]](#)).

Given the implicit solidarities and evanescent acknowledgments that more often than not characterize it, extension is also a form of fugitivity. And indeed, in the extensions I am familiar with, self-organized, direct action is sporadic and often hard to achieve, especially of late, though invigorating and necessary at times given the forces one is subjected to. It took months before we could gather enough of ourselves to face the soldiers and the police at the camp’s gates. But after that protest in December, at least for a few months the water tanks in the *ghetto* were again filled every day, as they used to be the previous summer. No mention was made, by those in charge, of fixing the pipelines that had earlier provisioned the settlement and mysteriously stopped working. Yet, being able to rely on a daily supply was an improvement, if compared to returning home after a day’s work in the farms to find the tanks empty and having to do without a shower, or to wrestle with fellow shanty dwellers to fill a 10-l jerrycan worth of water to cook and wash with for three days. However, the threat of institutional abandonment always lurks, and attention must be kept sharp to make sure that the hard-won, bare minimum of infrastructural support is not progressively, surreptitiously withdrawn, as it happened again at the beginning of 2024. Another similar protest had to happen the following May so as to ensure daily water provision up until the time of writing.

In Italy, from southernmost Sicily to Piedmont, at the extreme northwestern end of the country, *ghettos* have grown in number and size, especially since the early 2010s, together with other forms of encampment, with the same people often circulating between them. From self-constructed settlements made of wooden, plastic, asbestos and cardboard shacks and, increasingly, of brickwork and corrugated-iron structures, or abandoned and then re-occupied, derelict buildings (often with no facilities) to institutionally managed container or tent camps, an archipelago has formed housing migrants—predominantly from across West Africa, and less frequently from Northern and Eastern Africa, Eastern Europe, and South Asia—many of whom are employed in agriculture. These are forever dynamic spaces, whose proliferation follows oscillatory rather than linear trajectories—the *ghetto* may turn into a camp and vice-versa, in a never-ending process that entails violent erasures. While often represented as suspended in a timeless state of emergency, frozen in an eternal present or stuck in “backwardness” (like many of the districts they are part of), *Made-in-Italy* encampments are highly fluid places with complex histories.

Furthermore, if at a first glance the encampment archipelago's capturing mode may appear merely as the spatial effect of zoning and containment produced by agribusiness in its articulations with the border regime, and hence recent in its genealogy, it in fact bears the traces of multiple pasts, which affect the present in different ways. It is on those recursions that I want to focus. Like labor recruitment and organization, worker accommodation in such encampments also responds to logics of racialized and ethnicized segregation, resulting from the intersection between longstanding forms of colonial violence and processes that have unfolded in the last four decades: most notably, a logistics-driven restructuring away from individual farms, which gave way to production districts and corporate distribution platforms along global supply chains, outsourcing several aspects of the farming cycle that in turn heavily modified the very nature of the work. The globalization of agribusiness thus spurred a race to the bottom, enforced by means of heavy reliance on international migrant labor, disciplined and governed through ever more restrictive, criminalizing policies (for a thorough discussion of these processes, see [Peano 2020, 2021a, 2024a](#)).

Yet, if all such encampments play a role in channeling labor and/as migrant mobility for Italian agribusiness, they most often lie not only within, but also beyond capture. Indeed, the *ghetto* (as much as other encampment forms) is many things at the same time—it has a labor-camp function ([Peano 2024a](#)), acting as a reservoir of cheap workforce and a space of containment, abjection, abandonment, but it is also an autonomous infrastructure of reproduction and fugitivity, and thus an extension—where these dimensions coexist in perpetual tension. The encampment extensions—of which Borgo Mezzanone's *ghetto* is today the foremost instance on Italian territory—are, among other things, nodes in an intricate, ephemeral network along multiple, fractured and ever-shifting, underground migration routes spanning from West Africa to the English Channel, tracing neither linear directions nor coherent trajectories ([Peano 2021a](#)). Across geographies, *ghettos* index places to make friends and enemies (one potentially and quickly turning into the other, and back); to find work; to buy food and clothing, but also alcohol, narcotics, and cheap sex—where other opportunities, threats and/or harms of various sorts (where it may be difficult to tell one from the other) can arise at every turn, suddenly but not quite surprisingly: the unexpected is normal here.

These spaces of circulation imply a “profusion of itineraries, multiple times, disjointed places and ways of doing things [...] in an attempt to be attuned to the shifting templates of opportunity, a willingness to upend entrapment in the normative confines of a human form” ([Simone 2020, 1140](#))—in this case the

diminished humanity of camp inhabitation, and more generally of segregated differential inclusion by means of migration governance and racism in all its many guises. Living in the *ghettos-as-extensions* is for many preferable to inhabiting sanitized and warehoused camp spaces, however more equipped with basic amenities the latter might be, at least in their early days. From the military-humanitarian asylum complex to institutional labor camps—peddled as the “solution” to rid Italy’s agro-industrial enclaves of unsanitary, unruly *ghettos*—the carceral qualities of camps are exceedingly clear to those destined for such spaces. Curfew hours; few if any chances to cook one’s food; a ban on external visitors and on tinkering with buildings according to their inhabitants’ needs, creativity and fancies; bureaucratic barriers based on immigration and work status; poor and ever-decaying infrastructure, and multiple forms of surveillance (all ultimately premised on institutional racism) are the cipher of camps, if often circumvented by way of extension.

The specter of the prison haunting labor/humanitarian camps, and migrant/Black/colonized lives in general, further points to the fact that, if the notion of *campization* may capture some of the stakes in this extending struggle, the camp is never just that: perseverance and extension happen in the face of complex and morphing concretions of power. As I will show in the remainder of this essay, the stratifications of forms of capture that have resulted into today’s segregation techniques lie at the intersection of prison, camp, settler colony, and special economic zone. All these (ultimately impossible, ideal-typical) structures, at once material, affective, and symbolic, have been the weapons of a proactive and reactive war against extension that recurs throughout the ever-unfolding history of enclosure and primitive accumulation. In the becoming-capitalist of Italian agriculture, settler colony, prison, and camp (in different combinations) have been idealized and designed as antidotes against the horror projected onto slums-as-extensions by the powers that be.

The urbanization and *campization* of those made into a landless, dispossessed class by metamorphosing systems of property, modes of production and forms of extraction and control reverberates across continents throughout the contemporary era, affecting patterns of mobility and un/settlement from Africa to Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. We do not face simple repetitions, but we’re up against eerie recursions of the attempt to channel, stifle, and bridle movement—to curtail extension. As in many other readings, from this perspective also the Palestine-Israel context can prove paradigmatic, condensing the violence of processes of colonial accumulation and dispossession in distilled form. If Zionist settler colonialism is indeed a version of processes of enclosure (Fields 2017), an analysis of the ways in which the latter have unfolded in the history of Italian

agroculturalism returns, I believe, a pattern of spatial capture that relied on projects of settler colonialism streaked with carceral and military dimensions, which in turn resonate widely across time and space. Prison discipline (including the systematic torture that *sumud* resists against) and camp biopolitics are the necessary undersides upon which settler colonialism grafts itself as violent affirmation. If there is no place like occupied Palestine, the latter is everywhere in myriad shards and exploded forms.

In order to extend *sumud*, a more attentive look at what happens in extensions closer to another impossible “home-land” is in order. In the next section, I focus predominantly on encampments located across different parts of Tavoliere (the flatlands roughly comprised within the district of Foggia, in northern Apulia), and of the Plain of Gioia Tauro, at the southernmost tip of the Italian peninsula, in the region of Calabria. These are some of the most important nodes in the archipelago of encampments scattered across Italian territory (and beyond), where centuries-long processes of capture and extension have left significant, if largely unacknowledged marks on the landscape. Taking cue from those, and starting from my own thirteen-year-long solidary engagement in today’s encampments, I seek to further excavate the (anti)colonial matrix of contemporary struggles.

THE MULTIPLE PASTS OF TODAY’S ENCAMPMENT ARCHIPELAGO

Springing from the ruins of projects of settler colonization, land reclamation, penal reform, and military concentration that unfolded throughout the contemporary era, today’s encampments bear witness to the ongoing saliency of spatial techniques for the government of mobility, but also to their failures and to various forms of resistance and fugitivity. In its materiality, the spatial dimension immediately summons non-linear temporal recursions, as perceptible stratifications of containment forms are engraved on agribusiness enclaves’ landscapes, where abandoned or repurposed ruins and rubble, as much as newly built spaces and places, reverberate (cf. [Navaro et al. 2021](#)) an always racialized violence. Here I am concerned with the active, ongoing making—and unmaking—of encampments, as processes that have played a central role in the development of “*Made in Italy*”—branded agrifood production, and which are inserted into the very construction of Italy itself as a physical and imagined national space that strongly identifies with its many (and constantly growing) flagship foods. I therefore re-frame such branding as a territorialized index of layered and fabricated, material, affective and symbolic mechanisms of racialization, exploitation and differential inclusion, underscored by colonial logics and met by various forms of resistance, recalcitrance, flight, and refusal.

Since the late eighteenth century, a process of racialization, expulsion, criminalization, and capture of mobile populations and landless peasants set off across southern Italy (then the Kingdom of Naples, which would become part of the newly established Kingdom of Italy in 1861). An international discourse had emerged, as part of the development of “scientific racism,” that assigned Italy’s Mezzogiorno—the southern part of the country—the status of a hybrid, exotic, and savage land straddling the civilizational divide between Europe and Africa. The drive to de-feudalize land and increase productivity by means of rationalization, that had in private property its central tenet, underscored it. Enlightened scholars’ and policymakers’ incipient demonization of nomadic, transhumant pastoralism, which for centuries had been the principal economic activity of many parts of central and southern Italy, including Tavoliere, also fed into such representations, depicting shepherds as uncivilized brutes—the likes of “Hottentots” or “Tartars”—and the space itself as an inhospitable, desert wasteland. These quintessentially colonial tropes formed the ideological backbone to processes of expulsion and capture, and would remain at the center of propaganda into the Fascist era (1922–1943) and beyond—although racist ideology as a whole evolved across this period, if always crossed by different pseudo-scientific currents.²

Mexico: Sovereign Excisions, Recursive Enclosures, and Trespasses in Militarized Spaces

Borgo Mezzanone’s *ghetto*, like others, has continued to expand in size and intricacy despite periodical fires as well as threats of eviction and partial demolitions—collectively averted (but for the occasional bulldozing of old military-structures-turned-bars-and-brothels) through mass demonstrations or acts of passive resistance. Its human and non-human, fleshy, vital, and immaterial infrastructures have become ever more imbricated, knotty, and sophisticated, if ever precarious and even deadly at times. Like other *ghettos*, but in more accentuated form, this is now a refuge for those the military-humanitarian, camp-based system of migration management has made undocumented, and whose energies it partly diverted to cheap, just-in-time farm labor, but also for those that cannot and will not be pressed to the service of extraction—the abject and/as the stubbornly recalcitrant, who live off the informal petty trade of various goods and services, the charity and benevolence of fellow denizens, or plain theft.

Today’s *ghetto* extends along what was originally one of the many airstrips built by U.S. forces in the heart of Tavoliere during WWII, in February 1944—then expanded after the end of the conflict (Iacomino 2006), when bunkers

connected by a network of underground tunnels were built. After unsuccessful proposals to turn it into a NATO base and much later into a cargo airport, the airfield underwent decades of partial abandonment. Since 1999 caravans first, and later containers were laid out alongside one of its runways by the Ministry for Internal Affairs to house asylum seekers, first from Kosovo—at a time when the air base was employed as support for NATO’s “humanitarian” airstrikes against former Yugoslavia/Serbia—then from the Horn of Africa and West Africa. In 2005, the large asylum-seeker reception center (*Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo*, or CARA), that all migrants simply call “camp,” was formally established after plans to convert the air-base buildings into an administrative-detention center for the undocumented were scrapped. Nevertheless, a carceral dimension lurks beneath the surface of humanitarian care, exposing their necessary complementarity.

With the inauguration of the CARA, those first asylum-seeker ware-housing facilities, installed in previous years and progressively left to their own devices, were excised from the official camp by means of a newly built fence (cf. [Campesi 2014](#)). This is “Mexico,” as in a stroke of genius some of its original founders baptized the shantytown sprawling outside the asylum-seeker camp near the Fascist-era settler hamlet of Borgo Mezzanone. It is that which sits beyond the (stubbornly porous, forever broken into) border, materialized here as the camp’s fence—cut open again and again, after every attempt at fixing and strengthening it. And it is also that which, just like the American Mexico (or indeed Palestine), was originally enclosed within the same border and then excised from it by a sovereign act of war,³ rehearsed over and again by means of renewed attempts to wall off undocumented migrants conceived as invaders, in what [Ghassan Hage \(2016\)](#) has defined as the generalization of a settler-colonial ethos of besiegement. The internal fence in “Mexico” supposedly separates the camp—a space for the legal denial of citizenship rights by way of (humanitarian) enemy politics—from its now illegalized underside, turned into an extension. Yet, it is often impossible to tell the two apart: a recursive process of illegalization within the fuzzy bounds of the camp itself makes it a particularly ambivalent space, oscillating between extension and capture.

In 2005 the eviction of the now illegalized inhabitants of the emerging *ghetto* was threatened and successfully resisted. In 2008, “Mexico’s” denizens also obtained the addition of further prefabricated structures, to meet the needs of the ever-growing population of rejected asylum seekers who were being progressively expelled from the official camp. Adjacent to the CARA’s fenced perimeter and to the main airstrip where containers had been placed and then

abandoned, the large shantytown has sprawled in the past decade, also as a result of the (partial) eviction of the *Grand Ghetto*, a couple dozen kilometers to the north (of which more later). It extends on land formally controlled by the Ministry of Defense, littered with the rubble of military installations themselves enclosed by another porous fence delimiting the former airfield perimeter, at the intersection between three different administrative units—the municipalities of Foggia, Manfredonia, and Orta Nova. Such liminality is indeed a characteristic of several *ghettos*, their capacity to extend perhaps aided by the collision between different jurisdictions.

Following the (only partially and temporarily successful) reduction of arrivals along the central Mediterranean route that started in 2017, the Italian government has been planning to reconvert the CARA into a camp reserved for regularly employed migrant farm laborers. Renewed bilateral agreements between Italy and Libya (and other African countries), and more generally an intensification of pushbacks and other “deterrence” measures—making the Mediterranean one of the most lethal, militarized migration routes in the world—led to a significant reduction in the number of “guests,” as asylum seekers are called in official language. The projected dismantling of the CARA that was announced as a consequence of its partial emptying, however, is yet to come. In the meantime, during the COVID-19 pandemic, new containers were installed to host quarantined West African migrants from across the district, according to a differential, racialized logic of disease containment. A corruption scandal (the latest in a series involving the camp) invested the regional government officials in charge of the operation, for whose bid they received under-the-table kickbacks (Spagnolo 2022). Recently, these latest modules were repurposed to house a few unofficial dwellers of the decaying prefabricated structures located inside the CARA’s perimeter, and others living in the shantytown, in a topography where legality and illegality are thoroughly blurred (cf. Peano 2024a). Exception here seems to be the name of operations of rule and capture.

Yet extension exceeds also the neat spatiotemporal contours of wartime military foundations. Just beyond the now leaky airbase enclosure, which encompasses an area of several square kilometers (including the shantytown itself), the ruined remnants of (largely failed) interwar projects of land reclamation and peasant resettlement have themselves become the living spaces for migrants employed in the farming industry. The nearby hamlet of Borgo Mezzanone itself was founded, in 1935, as part of the grand scheme that the Fascist regime had come to conceive as an “integral” project—encompassing agrarian and social (read, repressive and eugenics-streaked) dimensions. Its target was the landless

(and land-hungry) peasantry, perceived as potentially dangerous, that across Tavoliere had progressively concentrated in what were described as “slum-like” agro-towns. The Fascist drive to ruralize and thus disperse such population led to repeated attempts at apportioning plots of land, complete with settler-colonial houses scattered across the largely uninhabited, malaria-infested countryside. In 1926 *Masseria La Scrofola*, the large estate encompassing what would become the military airport, was donated by its owner, Marquis De Piccolellis, to the would-be charitable foundation bearing his name and formally established according to his testamentary will a couple of years after his death, in 1928. Taking advantage of the Fascist regime’s incentives for the allotment of land to be apportioned out to sharecroppers, in the 1930s the foundation began the construction of twenty colonial houses, most of which remained unfinished and uninhabited, while the plots have been rented out to farmers to this day, as a source of revenue for the charity, forever under special administration due to corruption and bankruptcy.⁴ Many of these ruined buildings are currently inhabited, in extension mode, by Eastern-European farm workers (Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2. A settler-colonial house built by the Fondazione De Piccolellis (FDP), at the time of its construction (Figure 1) and now (Figure 2). Figure 1, courtesy of the Archivio Fondazione De Piccolellis. Figure 2, by Chiara Busca, reproduced with permission.

However, some exceptions such as the De Piccolellis Foundation aside, the Fascist regime's attempt at coopting landlords into collaborating in the reclamation effort (without estranging their crucial political support) largely fell on deaf ears. Hence, the largest swathe of land included in the grandiose "integral" scheme was eventually to be managed by the Great-War veterans' organization (*Opera Nazionale Combattenti*, ONC), which survived the demise of Fascism in 1943 and the establishment of the Republic in 1946. Not only were veterans (at least in the Fascist government's proclamations) to figure among the main beneficiaries of the scheme, in an attempt to fulfill one of the regime's core promises (decisive for their rise to power), and put an end to the decades-old agrarian question that had plagued Italy since before its unification in 1861. Integral reclamation (*bonifica integrale*) itself was anointed in military rhetoric, dubbed by Mussolini as Fascists' "favourite war," waged with the plough but underscored by the sword, belying truly imperialistic ambitions that encompassed internal as much as overseas colonial spaces and traced their ideal origins to Ancient Rome. But if Fascism's settler-colonial ambitions had themselves come to acquire an explicitly martial character, the imprint of such projects on Tavoliere has deeper genealogies, that today surface through some of its other extensions.

Campagna: Settler Colonization as Serial Failure

Together with the *Grand Ghetto*, Borgo Tretitoli (known also as "*campagna*"⁵ by its inhabitants, and sometimes called "Ghana house" or "Ghana ghetto" due to the prevailing nationality among its inhabitants) is one of the oldest surviving migrant encampments in the Apulian Tavoliere. According to its original residents, it was established at some point in the 1990s. It is also the one that changed the least through the decades. Located in the southern part of the provincial district of Foggia, not far from the large agro-town of Cerignola, it is nested in a rural *borgata* (a hamlet) established in the 1950s as part of the Agrarian Reform.

For centuries a stopping station for transhumant shepherds (*posta*), part of the Kingdom of Naples' royal demesne, already in 1831 the estate of which it was part (called *Feudo di Torre Alemanna*) was earmarked to host one of two settler colonies to re-house the inhabitants of the nearby salt marshes, then part of the municipality of Barletta. The salt-extraction establishment was the property of the crown, infested by malaria, and inhabited by poor salt-pan workers (*salinari*) and smugglers who lived in *pagliaie*—straw huts that were common abodes for landless peasants and which would be repeatedly flagged, throughout the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century, across several regions,



Figure 3. San Ferdinando's coat of arms, sporting a *pagliaia*.

Figure 4. The picture of a *pagliaia*, contained in Rosario Labadessa's private album titled "My work for the colonization of Tavoliere, 1936–1938," currently held at Foggia's provincial library, Magna Capitana. Labadessa was a Fascist MP, commissioner of Foggia's Reclamation Consortium and cadre of the National Veterans' Association, in charge of reclamation in Tavoliere. The caption reads: "Tavernola's colonists started to work their land before they had a house." Once again, paradoxically, a project of reclamation fostered the proliferation of those very dwellings it was supposed to replace.

as unsanitary and in need of destruction. Several commentators alleged that the inhabitants of the marshes had to be disciplined by attaching them to the land, where they should dedicate themselves to the supposedly uplifting labor of agriculture.⁶

For reasons that remain unclear, however, in 1839 the Bourbonic Crown ultimately scrapped the settlement project at *Torre Alemanna*, while moving forward with the construction of the other planned colony, San Ferdinando—a village that took the name of its founder, King Ferdinand II (Defacendis 2011, Di Cicco 1977, Labadessa 1933, Piazzolla 1985). It was not until 1847 that settler families were selected from the nearby salt marshes. Issues such as the lack of housing and of means sustenance, indebtedness, officials' corruption, and disease marred the experiment. Despite the initial aims, houses were provided to a restricted elite of professionals only, whilst colonists were once again forced to build huts (*pagliaie*) with straw and canes. These became so tightly associated with the new settlement as to paradoxically figure in its coat of arms when it was finally proclaimed a municipality (*Comune*) in 1899 (Figure 3).

After the alienation of Tavoliere's land that began during the Napoleonic interlude (1807–1815) and was completed with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, Tretitoli became one of the core farms (*masserie*) of the Pavoncelli family estate. Hailing from Cerignola, in the earlier part of the nineteenth

century the Pavoncellis had amassed great wealth as ruthless wheat traders, to then acquire vast agrarian estates, in the order of tens of thousands of hectares, across different regions of Italy. On their lands, they successfully undertook the intensive cultivation of wheat as well as implanting vineyards and promoting the most advanced farming techniques for several other crops, which they achieved thanks to sharecropping arrangements that demanded improvement work of tenants. Already in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Pavoncellis aimed to organize the life of their farmer dependents in every detail—from religious practice to schooling and consumption.

In 1931, exactly a century after the first settlement plan was hypothesized at Torre Alemanna, the politically well-connected Pavoncellis (from whose family hailed government ministers and members of parliament, who also controlled the agrarian bloc's organizations and sat on several financial enterprises' boards) sought to take advantage of the grand "integral reclamation" (*bonifica integrale*) project promoted by Fascism to reconvert Tretitoli into a settler colony. By the Pavoncellis' intentions, this should be managed according to sharecropping principles that would prove advantageous to the property. Yet, for reasons that also remain unclear in archival and secondary sources, the plan would again never see the light of day, much like the whole "integral reclamation" scheme across Tavoliere.⁷

In the same period, meanwhile, the heirs of the 1847 Bourbonic colony of San Ferdinando were the object of yet other experiments and relocations. In 1927, in nearby Margherita di Savoia, the Electrical Company for Reclamation and Irrigation (*Società Elettrica per la Bonifica e l'Irrigazione*) established an experimental farm initially relying on sharecroppers from neighboring San Ferdinando. Starting from 1932, the S. Chiara complex (formerly a convent) would be settled by fourteen landless peasant families from the northeastern Veneto region, each counting fifteen to twenty members (some returning from the colonization campaigns in northern and eastern Africa). Settlers were first employed in reclamation works and subsequently allocated their own pieces of land, totaling 200 hectares, on which the first attempts at horticulture were made. These included the growing of tomato—that starting from the late 1970s would become Tavoliere's "red gold", whose harvest employs to this day tens of thousands of migrant workers every year. In 1935 and 1937, respectively, people from San Ferdinando would also be resettled in the newly founded reclamation *borgate* of La Serpe (today Borgo Mezzanone) and Tavernola, where in many cases they once again had to build *pagliaie* as their abodes (cf. Figure 2).⁸ Almost a century later, in 2021, after the last descendants of the first colonists at Santa Chiara were finally forced



Figures 5 and 6. The part of azienda S. Chiara where today Ghanaian workers from Tretitoli live.
Photographs by Irene Peano.

out of the estate by the current property, some Ghanaian workers previously living in Borgo Tretitoli settled there and are employed as farmhands on nearby land (Figures 5 and 6).

In the late 1950s, *masseria* Tretitoli was confiscated from the Pavoncellis by the agencies implementing the Agrarian Reform and, more than a century

since the initial project had been conceived, finally parceled out into small plots given out to tenants. Most of the houses built during the reform—which were not equipped with connections to the electrical grid nor to a water supply and sewage system, just like those built during the Fascist-era reclamation, across Tavoliere and beyond—were never inhabited by its beneficiaries, whose heirs however maintain control over them and in many cases charge rent to the occupiers (sometimes to be paid in kind by means of free labor).

Grand Ghetto: Echoes of Fugitivity

Like other encampments in this archipelago (including Tretitoli), what its inhabitants call the “Grand Ghetto” began as a seasonal dwelling to then become progressively more permanent. Also similarly to Borgo Tretitoli, this *ghetto* took shape starting from the semi-abandoned premises of an Agrarian-Reform era settlement, carved out of a 544-hectare estate originally named Torretta Antonacci, confiscated from Neapolitan Princess Ippolita Cattaneo (Figures 7 and 8).⁹ In 2018, the USB union (*Unione Sindacale di Base*) planted a plaque marking the place’s original name at one end of the settlement, alleging it is a more “dignified” toponym than the term *ghetto*, which in their reading is tainted by racist undertones. I beg to differ.

The self-assigned appellation of the shantytowns where West African migrants live is, according to my interlocutors, drawn from Jamaican English via its Ghanaian and more generally West African assimilation. Across these geographies, the term *ghetto* denotes a place (or a gathering) on the margins of or outside the law, with obvious reference to Black Atlantic imaginaries, marking these as spaces of fugitivity. Black-Atlantic, Caribbean, and North American connections also manifest in references to some or other version of Rastafarianism and more generally to Jamaican culture (linked to the awareness of living in “Babylon”), or in the scathingly and bitterly ironic nicknames some such *ghettos* or squatted buildings are given. “Washington,” located about a kilometer from the core of the Grand Ghetto, was thus named because it consisted of a large, derelict, white farmhouse, possibly built in the eighteenth or nineteenth century and demolished in the early 2010s. Its quietness and remoteness were in stark contrast to the buzzing atmosphere of the Grand Ghetto, which according to some of the older residents also used to be named “New York,” capturing its urban vibe. Other *ghettos* are or used to be known as “the White House” (a disused dairy factory in the outskirts of Foggia, painted white) and “Guantánamo” (an informal tent city in Saluzzo, Piedmont, dismantled in 2017). And of course there is “Mexico.”

In other cases, parts of the *ghettos* are named after African geographical markers, such as *Bamako*—a section of the Grand Ghetto inhabited mainly by Malian people—or the previously mentioned Ghana House. Here, toponyms signal the eccentricity of the *ghettos* to Italian national borders. Yet, while the term *ghetto* clearly bears North American, Black geographical referents dating back to the early twentieth century, its genealogies can lead all the way to fourteenth-century Venice, where the original Jewish *geto* was established (cf. [Hutchinson and Haynes 2012](#)), summoning the (mostly eclipsed) Mediterranean prehistories of modern, racialized containment (cf. [Peano 2023](#)). In all cases, the *ghettos*' extensive quality is explicitly foregrounded. In their ambivalence and sharp irony, these vernacular topographic markers certainly bear more potential to subvert the grip of projects of capture than the names through which the latter were crystallized across the centuries.

But the reverberations of fugitivity in places like the Grand Ghetto extend even beyond the Black Atlantic or its Euro-Mediterranean precursors and after-lives, being inherent to settler colonial reclamation and reform projects, which carried heavily disciplinary undersides. In Italy, the 1950s Agrarian Reform materialized as the Republican State's attempt to quell the wave of land occupations and protests (often repressed in a bloodbath) that had resurfaced since the downfall of Fascism, during which time they had been illegalized and violently suppressed. Tavoliere, in fact, had been the stage for one of the most significant, longer-term, and successful landless-peasant struggles, that began in the late nineteenth century and that Fascism rose to extinguish with the support of the agrarian bloc ([Snowden 1986](#), [Rinaldi and Sobrero 2004](#)). It is in this context that the need to "ruralize" landless masses acquired even greater strength. Yet, if the post-war, Republican Reform on the one hand traced a line of continuity with previous projects of reclamation-as-settler-colonization, purged of their most explicitly racist content, on the other it represented the epilogue of a long trajectory of ruralist policies, which in Italy had marked economic and social planning since the dawn of the contemporary era. Funded by means of U.S. Marshall Plan reconstruction funds, the Reform expressed more the ruling elites' attempt to appease peasant demands with brazenly inadequate measures than a real investment in small-property landholding agriculture, at a time when economic policy was sharply turning to industrial investment, which also required the labor power of southern peasants and their offspring ([D'Antone 1990](#), [Ginsborg 1990](#)).



Figures 7 and 8. The Grand Ghetto in 2017 (with Agrarian Reform prefabricated houses now demolished). Photos courtesy of R. Catapano.

Just like Tretitoli and many of the Fascist reclamation-era colonial houses, abandoned at the first chance, the settlement at Torretta Antonacci was never really a living space for the beneficiaries of the Reform, many of whom in fact migrated out of the region in search of more remunerative jobs in northern factories during the 1960s' industrial boom. In parallel with organized peasant protest, mass out-migration has characterized this area in waves across the contemporary period and up to the present, making for a core cause of the agrarian bloc and its political representatives' concern. Tavoliere and its district capital, Foggia, have long been famed as a place that most seek to escape from. "*Fuggi da Foggia!*" (Fly from Foggia!) is the centuries-old intimation that musically captures this sentiment, widespread among early contemporary-era travelers and relayed, for example, in the eighteenth-century journal published by Abbot Longano (Ventura 1987), one among the several reformist intellectuals that at the time advocated the intensification of agricultural production in Tavoliere and across the then Kingdom of Naples. Here, flight was evoked as the elites' gut reaction to the horror elicited by what was represented as a desolate, malaria-infested, empty land, dotted by insalubrious towns populated by indolent, dirty, poor, and treacherous men, and debauched women. As mentioned, such widespread discourses were the ideological terrain on which the perceived need for reclamation

and ruralization germinated. On the other hand, the equally entrenched, recalcitrant refusal of landless peasants to be ruralized away from agro-towns into isolated settler-colonial houses, evident since the first projects were set in motion in the late eighteenth century, recurs in today's migrants' tendency to cluster in urban-like *ghettos*.

Like Tretitoli, today as at its foundation the Grand Ghetto also lacks any connection to an electrical grid, water supply or sewage system. It is said to have been established after the evacuation of an abandoned sugar plant nearby (built in the 1960s and closed some thirty years later), where migrant farm workers had found refuge during harvest times. The former factory is now a biomass power plant, temporarily confiscated by the judiciary in 2017 for supposed environmental violations. As with all *ghettos*, this also developed into a space of leisure, with bars, restaurants, and "connection houses" (mostly Nigerian-run brothels), as well as clothing, barber, and food stores (sometimes also offering other services, like photocopying). Electrical power is increasingly supplied by solar panels installed by inhabitants on the shacks' roofs.

But unlike Borgo Tretitoli, the Grand Ghetto has undergone heavy mutations through the last two decades, which, besides mere expansion, were also the consequence of heavy state intervention. A partial eviction was enforced in 2017 by means of a large-scale police operation, during which a fire erupted due to unascertained causes (but which some inhabitants attributed to the police). The blaze killed two residents in their sleep (Mamadou Konate and Nouhou Doumbia) and destroyed a large portion of the shantytown—the one that, according to the authorities, lay on land belonging to the Regional Government of Apulia. A new encampment, where shacks have been partially substituted by caravans and now brick-and-mortar houses, developed on nearby grounds, while in 2019 the regional authorities established first a tent and then a container camp, now largely unmaintained, in the section that had been razed to the ground after the fire. The tent camp was partially swept away by a gale in 2020. More Reform-era houses, inhabited by seasonal workers, were demolished during this period.

In a twist of bitter irony, the rural settlements built as alleged solutions to the problems of unruly urbanization today materialize another result of the same processes of expulsion that drove earlier urbanization. The sparse, isolated settler-colonial farmhouses of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reclamation and reform projects, deserted by their supposed beneficiaries, have been turned into urban-like spaces in their own right—into a version of those slums that so preoccupied reformers in earlier times, and that are still represented as a

biopolitical threat today (cf. [Peano 2021b, 2024b](#)). Yet, to fully grasp the importance of fugitivity away from the discipline of settler-colonial schemes, the more evidently carceral dimensions of projects of reclamation and settlement must also be addressed.

San Ferdinando: Carcerality and Blackness Resurface

In addition to settler colonies, contemporary-era reformers pushed for the establishment of penal colonies across different parts of Italy to employ convicts in dangerous drainage and land reclamation works. Already in 1781, Marquis Domenico Grimaldi printed a “Plan to usefully employ convicts and with their labor ensure and increase wheat harvests in Apulia and in other provinces of the Kingdom” ([Grimaldi 1781](#), my translation). The Marquis belonged to a patrician family of Genoese origins, that several centuries previously had resettled to Seminara, in the Plain of Gioia Tauro (now part of the Calabria Region, at the southernmost tip of the Italian peninsula), where he had introduced capitalist innovations to his land estates, besides being a member of several agronomical academies internationally ([Venturi 1962](#)). In his tract, Grimaldi reflected on the differences between American slave plantations and cultivated lands in the Kingdom of Naples. Notwithstanding the laziness, feeble-mindedness, and proneness to suicide of African slaves in the Americas, he asserted, and even considering their high prices and the significant costs of their trans-Atlantic shipping (also in terms of lives lost), in Grimaldi’s mind the wondrous fecundity of American soils, uncultivated for millennia, outweighed the disadvantages derived from employing such workers. On the contrary, not only did the Kingdom’s land not give comparable yields, but convict labor had been demonstrated to be less productive than “free” wage work.

Still, Grimaldi’s pamphlet expressed a widely shared sentiment among the Enlightened elites and intellectuals of his time, according to whom the thousands of convicts locked behind the prison bars of the Kingdom of Naples should be put to work so as to alleviate public coffers of their maintenance. Such utilitarian drive was indeed that same that invested agricultural production, with an aim to make it more effective, intensive and profitable. Grimaldi reached the conclusion that convict labor should be employed to “arrange the economy of the Kingdom’s waters, of which we now ignore the true usage and the true, wondrous advantages” (1781, 8; my translation). This was also the orientation of the Kingdom of Naples’ “Plan for justice reform in the provinces, by the Justice Secretary,” Giuseppe Maria Galanti, drawn up in 1795 but never adopted (cited in [Ambron 2006](#)). From then onwards, proliferating land-reclamation and hydraulic-drainage projects often encouraged the use of convict labor, and plans

for workers' accommodation in more or less temporary structures followed suit. Employing convict labor for such projects, in the eyes of their proponents, would have the advantage of avoiding competition and a race to the bottom against free workers—for convicts would be toiling on fallow, marshy land, performing highly perilous, often deadly tasks due to the high incidence of malaria.

Thus, in the 1840s, during the so-called Scientists' Meetings that were held across several Italian cities to debate—among other issues—economic development in a capitalist sense, agrarian penal colonies were further theorized as an instrument to force the “non-industrious poor” to work in reclamation projects. This would keep in check the mass exodus of dispossessed peasants from newly enclosed lands, then underway, in a country where agriculture would constitute the principle economic activity until well into the twentieth century (Melossi 1981). Throughout the nineteenth century, several agricultural penal colonies, often aimed at reclamation projects, would be realized (Di Pasquale 2019; Gibson 2015, 2019; Gibson and Poerio 2018; Puddu 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2023)—some of which are still operational today. Accommodation for convicts invariably consisted of communal barracks, in many cases imagined as temporary and usually arranged in circular shape for the purpose of surveillance. In some instances, convicts were expected to turn into settlers after having redeemed themselves by means of reclamation work, once again pointing to the porosity characterizing settler and penal colony.

In the Plain of Gioia Tauro, home to Marquis Grimaldi and many of his estates, and today littered with a number of encampments where West African farm workers live, an early experiment at reclamation testifies to particularly eloquent recursions. The Industrial Zone located between the municipalities of San Ferdinando and Rosarno—initially intended as a complement to the Port of Gioia Tauro, built in the 1970s but largely deserted of economic activities—in the 2010s became the site of two encampments. A container camp was established in 2010, and after a few years largely left to its inhabitants' own devices until their final eviction and subsequent relocation to another prefabricated camp structure just outside the town of Rosarno, in April 2024. Nearby, since 2012 a series of successive tent cities each rapidly turned into shantytowns by virtue of institutional abandonment as much as of dwellers' reappropriation, to then be razed to the ground at least four times and rebuilt until their latest, still standing incarnation. Meant as “emergency” solutions in the wake of a large and heavily mediatized revolt counterposing West African farmworkers and the local population, which had erupted in early 2010 as a reaction against the physical attacks periodically endured by the migrants, they should have been replaced by more stable solutions that never quite materialized as envisioned. Besides the

prefabricated village where some of the inhabitants of the former container camp were eventually resettled 14 years later, a complex of five three-story buildings remains empty to this day, after more than five years since its completion. Both were erected and left uninhabited for years, undergoing pillage and occupation by Italian citizens and interruptions in their construction due to suspected infiltrations by the local mafia cartels. Other informal encampments and one more official camp, recently built and only belatedly inaugurated in 2024 but still partially empty, are located in other areas of the Plain.

On the very same land that today hosts the dryport Industrial Zone where tent and container camps were erected, a reclamation project, initiated in 1818, led to the construction of a whole new village. Again named San Ferdinando in honor of the King, just like in Tavoliere, it was the fruit of the labor of dozens of convicts. The latter were leased by the crown of Naples to Marquis (General) Vito Nunziante, who also recruited peasants from nearby localities for the reclamation and settlement of the area. Convict laborers were first housed in a derelict Saracen tower, and later in what would be defined by Nunziante's heir, Ferdinando, in 1929 as "a perfect African Village" made, once again, of pagliaia, which in his book Ferdinando called "tokuls of a rather picturesque character" (Nunziante 1929, 77–78; see Figure 9). The supposed connections between southern Italian peasants and Africa made for a great deal of speculation by nineteenth-century anthropology, and formed the basis for racialist thinking and class-based anti-southern discrimination which the Nunziantes readily embraced and that are not dispelled in the present.¹⁰ In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italy, "tokuls" or "tukuls" were imagined to be the traditional dwellings in the Horn of Africa, then in the process of being invaded by Italian troops as part of the country's colonial ambition. In particular, it was Italian architects in the colonies that essentialized, and even actively invented, *tukul* as the quintessential "native" housing type in Eritrea and more broadly in what then was Italian East Africa (Fuller 2006, 83). In a reverse feedback loop, the *tukul* then became a paragon, a material analogy for the slums sprawling in metropolitan Italy,

described with an exotic vocabulary that assimilated them to more 'primitive' dwellings abroad [...]. In Rome in the early twentieth century they were sometimes called '*villaggi abissini*' ('Abyssinian villages'), evoking the cluster of rectangular or circular houses and huts in Italian-occupied Eritrea [...] of which pictures had been reproduced in contemporary illustrated magazines. [...] In Milan after 1950 the areas of migrant housing, sometimes self-built, on what was then the north and north-east periphery of the city, were called *coree* ('Koreas'), a term that emerged shortly after

the Korean War of 1950–1953 and apparently derived from the fact that the established residents of the surrounding areas saw the migrants, most of whom came from poor areas of northeast or southern Italy or from Yugoslavia, as ‘like exiles, refugees, like people who had lost a war.’ (Forgacs 2014, 32)

Pier Paolo Pasolini himself referred in 1958 to “shacks like those in Bedouin towns” on the edge of Rome (Forgacs 2014, fn45), and another “Korea” was identified in 1950s Rosarno itself, in the “Case Nuove” (new houses) neighborhood, inhabited by “blackfeet,” as the children of poor peasants were called (Chirico and Magro, cited in Campesi 2015, 12). Again, colonial wars and their racist presuppositions encoded the spaces of inhabitation of the poor, this time in the negative—rather than as the positive settler-colonial antidotes of reclamation projects we encountered earlier.

After a fire that in 1894 destroyed a good portion of the “African” settlement at San Ferdinando, in one year Marquis Vito’s grandson built two hundred cottages to house the growing population, in a bid to maintain the family’s grip on the land and its resources, which lasted into the twentieth century.

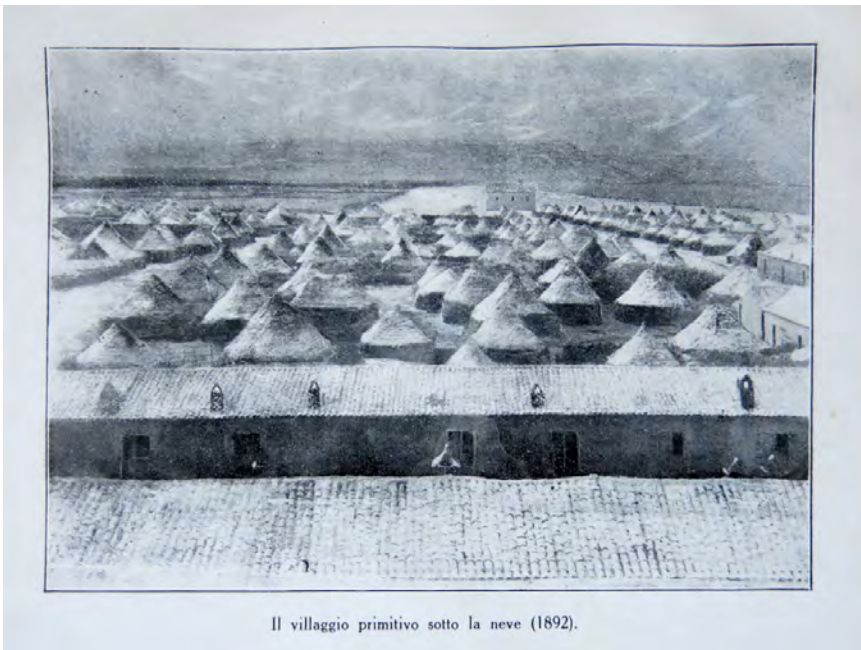
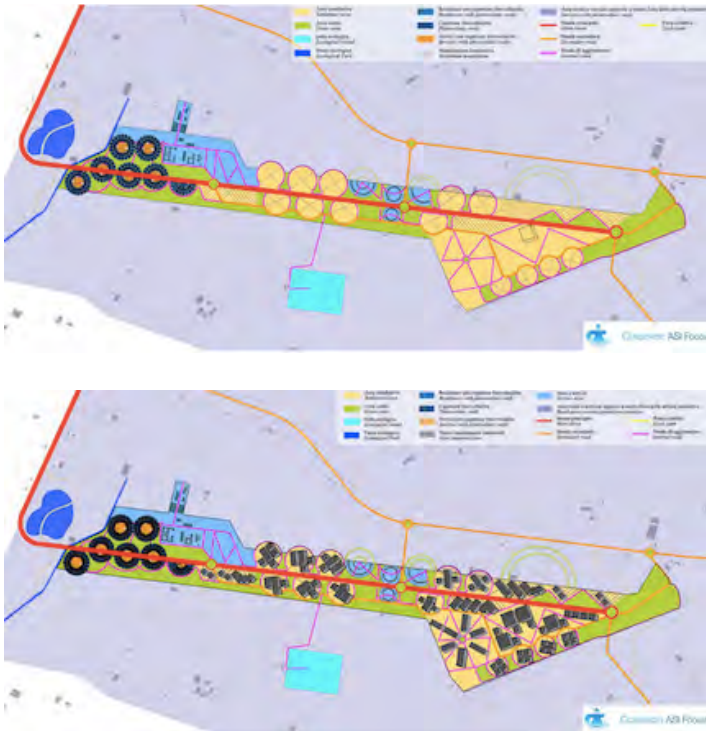
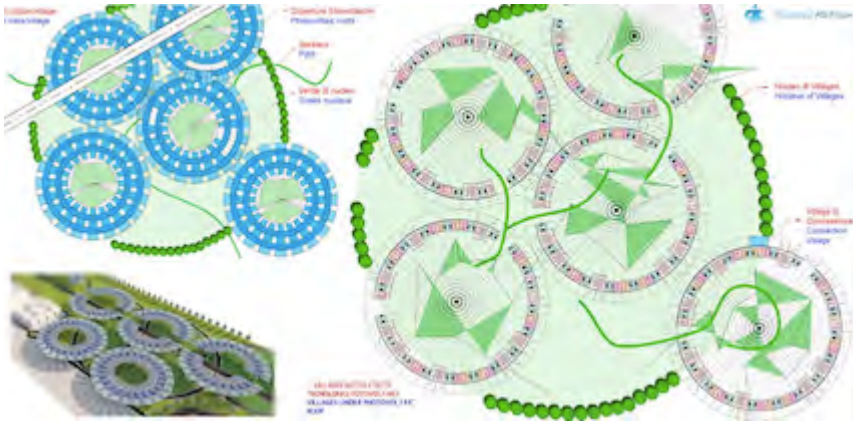


Figure 9. “The primitive village under the snow” (1892), depicted in Ferdinando Nunziante’s 1929 book on the village of San Ferdinando, founded by his great-grandfather.

In yet another recursive loop, today the labor camps turned self-constructed shantytowns, located in the periphery of the village of San Ferdinando, are inhabited by “real Africans,” who have been periodically threatened by (often deadly) fires that paved the way to resettlement into an allegedly safer and certainly securitized and heavily surveilled camp in 2018. The latter then turned into a shantytown once again—not before a fire caused by short-circuiting electrical wires took the life of Noumou Sylla in March 2019. Agglomerations of shacks, just like camps themselves, here as in other districts, are sometimes naturalized as “Africans” habitual living places, just as *pagliaie* were considered as Africanized southern shepherds’ and peasants’ natural abodes in earlier times. Plans for further resettlements of the latest camp-turned-shantytown located in San Ferdinando’s deserted Industrial Zone, that were recently discussed by the regional council of Calabria, explicitly referred to the constructions-to-be as “a sort of African village, with prefabricated structures arranged in a circle within a series of communal open spaces” (Pantano 2022). Similarly, a project for the requalification of “Mexico,” the sprawling shantytown surrounding the



Figures 10 and 11. Consorzio ASI Foggia, “Il Ghetto di Mezzanone e il suo recupero come Area produttiva territoriale” [(The Ghetto of Mezzanone and its rehabilitation as territorial productive Area)], Urbanpromo Design Conference 2020. Note the circular shapes representing workers’ living spaces.



Figures 12 and 13. Consorzio ASI Foggia, “Il Ghetto di Mezzanone e il suo recupero come Area produttiva territoriale” [The Ghetto of Mezzanone and its rehabilitation as territorial productive Area], Urbanpromo Design Conference 2020. Note the circular shapes representing workers’ living spaces.

asylum-seeker reception center of Borgo Mezzanone, in the district of Foggia, presented in the fall of 2020 at the prestigious Urbanpromo design conference, took inspiration from “African constructions,” in the words of its creator (personal communication with the author, October 2021; see Figures 10–13).

BEYOND RECURSIVE LOOPS

I started this essay gesturing to one of today’s most acute global struggles, one that keeps much of the world holding its breath, to suggest one way to extend its forms of perseverance and thereby also to invigorate others, within apparently less severe conflicts: exploring the reverberations of forms of colonial—racist, carceral, and military—violence across seemingly heterogeneous contexts, and the possible connections between purportedly distant currents of

resistance to it. The serial deferrals and irresolutions, on which the renewed efforts at enclosure and capture I have retraced have rested, in forever recursive mode, are witness to powers of perseverance I proposed could be read and inhabited through the notion of extension. Decentering predominant narratives that depict present-day encampments on the basis of pacified histories (when not of sheer denials of historicity) and spectacularizations of misery with distancing effects, to which academic discourse itself is not immune, and beckoning to the force of extension and perseverance, is I hope a small step in this same extending direction.

The temporal dimension proves crucial in this decentering exercise: if, as Abourahme argues, “settler colonialism everywhere is a particularly, even peculiarly, fraught struggle over time” (2025, 2), and the camp “a reminder of the always-unfinished work of repression” (15), the structurally unaccomplished projects I have sketched here testify to this constitutive incompleteness as temporal deferral, undoing any attempt to establish purified myths of origin and to thus overcome the need to settle. Not only did the eminently colonial crusade against nomadism, in contemporary Italy as much as in Palestine and elsewhere, rely on the encampment as its target, but also as its means, signaling an intolerable but ultimately unassailable impermanence. In the southern Italian context, the *pagliaia*, the slum and the agro-town, and today the *ghetto* are the encampment extensions against which *campization* has been pitted as solution, in different forms that have ranged from the penal to the settler colony and the militarized camp, where one form blurs into the other in varying shades. Furthermore, just like in Palestine, it was the very settler-colonial project that in many instances engendered the displacement and unsettlement it was meant to be up against (witness the recursive use of *pagliaia* by putative beneficiaries of settler-colonial schemes), thus simultaneously reinforcing and undermining itself by relying on a variety of forms of containment that straddled distinctions between penal, military, and settler forms of *campization*.

On the other hand, crucial differences of course obtain between other contexts and the one I have focused on, and between current encampment forms and their past reverberations. On Italian territory *natives* and *settlers* were not categorically incompatible subjects, but rather imagined as successive developmental stages in a process of moral and biopolitical reform and citizen-making, whereby the racialized southern Italian peasant/shepherd or criminal (often made to coincide into the same person) would be transformed into the heroic, virtuous, and pugnacious (but still docile and exploitable), racially improved settler—at best an indebted sharecropper, when not a waged worker. Here, the project was one of “settling natives” rather than nativizing settlers as in other

canonical forms of settler colonization. Natives' racialization did not, for the most part, imply immutability; rather, the settler project was always also a project of racial improvement, whether by means of labor alone or of miscegenation too—as during Fascism, when northern and southern peasants were supposed to mix by means of settler colonial schemes (as in the case of S. Chiara in Tavoliere), and thereby improve the “stock.” Present-day encamped migrants, on the contrary, are hardly imagined as tomorrow's settlers, if not in residual forms—where their proper place is represented as the camp in one shape or other—and thus, for the most part, confined to the role of post-colonial natives-in-displacement. Yet, their stubborn, extensive excess against *campization* points, I would argue, to the spectral survival of the settler-colonial project in its displacing and enclosing violence, across geographies and temporalities—a project we cannot but aim to resist against.

ABSTRACT

Starting from the struggles of migrants living in Italian agribusiness's encampment archipelago, this essay retraces the colonial matrix of contemporary processes of capture and seeks to connect them to other currents of anti-colonial resistance in the present—most notably those of Palestine. What I call campization sits at the center of such conflicts, across multiple geographies and in varying intensities. Yet, by means of a genealogical method I show how, throughout the contemporary history of Italian agrocapitalism, the camp as a colonial technique of capture has been intrinsically connected to other spatial dispositifs such as the penal and settler colony, where all are imbued by military and racializing logics. At the same time, I highlight how encampments have also been “extensions” in the sense that AbdouMaliq Simone and others have attributed to the notion, as a constantly oscillating form of unsettling and resettling that I make resonate with Palestinians' sumud—perseverance in the building and rebuilding of lives and spaces, through and beyond their undoing. [agrocapitalism; campization; recursion; fugitivity; sumud]

NOTES

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1. See the social-media accounts of Campagne in Lotta (<https://campagneinlotta.org/borgo-mezzanone-fg-basta-prese-in-giro-vogliamo-risposte-sullacqua-subito/>); Facebook: Comitato Lavoratori delle Campagne; X: @Campagneinlotta; Instagram: @campagneinlotta; Tiktok: @documentipertutt.

2. See Moe (2002); Melchiorre Delfico (1788a, 1788b), cited in Ventura (2013, 14); Giuseppe Palmieri (1789, 1792), cited in Ventura (2013, 16, 126–27); and Mercurio (1989). See also the short film released by the Fascist regime’s Istituto Nazionale Luce, *La bonifica del Tavoliere* (1940), accessible at <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000084076/1/la-bonifica-del-tavoliere.html>. For the overseas equivalents of these discourses in colonized Libya, see Hom (2019).
3. I am of course referring to the colonization process that culminated in the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846, when U.S. troops finally succeeded in annexing what are now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California—territories that had hitherto (or until shortly before, as in the case of Texas) belonged to the Mexican state, since its independence. The fencing of the new U.S.-Mexico border started shortly afterwards, and has been renewed and upgraded at different stages up until the present day (see Anzaldúa 1987).
4. Cf. the Archive of Fondazione De Piccolellis, Foggia. It is likely that other plots, or portions of the estate, were requisitioned for the construction of the airport in late 1943, but I have been unable to find traces of such a process, and more generally of the construction of the airport itself. For details on the history of land reclamation in Tavoliere, see Bevilacqua (1988). For a history of Borgo Mezzanone, see D’Alessandro (2002); Mercurio et al. (1993). Cf. also Peano (2021b, 2024b) with respect to both and with reference to the overall Fascist project of *bonifica integrale*.
5. Literally “countryside” in Italian. The toponym probably derives from the name of the nearest train station, *Cerignola Campagna*.
6. On the history of Tretitoli from the earlier part of the nineteenth century until the 1950s Agrarian Reform, I am relying mainly on information gathered from the State Archives in Foggia (including the private archive of the Pavoncelli Family), Bari, and Naples, as well as on Cioffi (1984). On the project of resettlement at Torre Alemanna, see Labadessa (1933); Russo (1986).
7. Cf. the Pavoncellis’ private archive, held in the State Archives at Foggia, and Cioffi (1984), Cioffi and Bufano (1988), Nardella et al. (1999), Pasimeni (1978), Sereni (1939).
8. On Azienda S. Chiara, see Pantanelli (1929), Barone (1986), and cf. Peano (2021b, 2024b). On the resettlement of colonists from San Ferdinando, see Piemontese (2010).
9. Cf. Central State Archives, Rome, and information gathered at the Ente Riforma e Sviluppo Agrario di Puglia, Foggia.
10. For this and more generally the whole paragraph, I am drawing also on the Nunziantes’ private archive, held in Naples’ State Archives.

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Capture /Connect /Shift

A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

DWELLING IN RELATION: Infrastructure, Refusal, Repair

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This series offers a theoretical and methodological reconsideration of relationality as it unfolds within racial capitalism, infrastructure, and global geographies. Rather than treating infrastructure as a neutral conduit for connection or development, the contributions expose how it functions as a racialized ordering system that produces, stabilizes, and legitimizes uneven life chances. Across diverse case studies, from Dakar to Algiers, and from the toxic maritime circuits of the Mediterranean to fugitive zones in Nairobi, the essays chart the geosocial itineraries through which relationality is not only enabled but conscripted into regimes of extraction, dispossession, and capture. These are not incidental complications, but structural effects.

Relationality here is not simply a principle of mutual recognition, but a historically and materially embedded condition that sustains and opens possibilities for alternative modes of connection even amidst domination. Through a shared and varied attention to infrastructure, the contributors show how ports, roadways, housing schemes, and surveillance corridors are not merely the backdrop to social life. They are sites where relational norms are organized, enacted,

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and contested. The articles together insist that relationality is neither inherently liberatory nor always redemptive. Instead, it must be read as an ambivalent and ethically fraught condition, shaped by the very infrastructures that attempt to constrain, regulate, and sometimes obliterate the forms of life that persist within them.

While the editorial framing of the collection emphasizes improvisation, ambience, and emergent connectivity, often drawing from aesthetic and affective registers, I engage these themes through a reparative lens that centers ethical accountability and the limits of relational life under capture. Where the collection gestures toward opacity and refusal as tactical or atmospheric disruptions, I approach them as sites of ethical negotiation and epistemic disorientation. My concern is not to displace these framings, but to extend them, asking what becomes possible when we center practices that do not seek to escape injury but to endure and reassemble life beyond its terms.

DWELLING

Infrastructure is often perceived as a neutral material facilitator of both literal and figurative economic and social development and conveyance. However, infrastructures organize and order modern life, producing geographies and built environments that are too often extractive, racialized, and dispossessive. As we see in the foregoing essays, infrastructure has operated as both a mechanism of accumulation and a means of regulating relational life across settler, (post)colonial, and imperial histories. These are active formations that produce the very conditions under which Black and Indigenous communities are rendered productively available for state and private enterprise through capture, containment, banishment, and removal (Roy 2017). Even after the programs and policies that produced them have moved on to reterritorialize other spaces for accumulation, infrastructures' remaining material presence persists in the ongoing and uneven coordination of marginalized life.

Infrastructure is often presented as a solution to seemingly innate societal and geographic problems such as access and disconnection. But property regimes, drainage projects, and logistical networks of concrete, steel, and cable too often only offer solutions by naturalizing possession, erasing forms of life and relation, and concealing the coercive processes through which land and labor are made extractable. N.D.B. Connolly, in analyzing the development of the highway system in Miami, argued that "infrastructure relied on seemingly exceptional shows of white power, such as lynching or forced conscription," and further that "violence helped hold in place the daily racial indignities upon which

American capitalism and its many forms of segregation stood” (2014, 52). The city, as the product of infrastructural development, he shows, functions as an overlapping formation of produced exclusion through environmental harm, disinvestment, and juridical control.

What the papers in this collection demonstrate is that within spaces made by infrastructure, which often first become so by being labeled as abandoned or forgotten, blighted or beyond repair, there persist forms of resourcefulness that do not, or possibly cannot, seek to undo the infrastructural order through confrontation alone but work through its gaps, fissures, and contradictions. Provisional, adaptive practices and situated knowledges emerge as historically and politically grounded strategies of persistence rather than romanticized alternatives. They index a relationship to space premised on survival and collective inhabitation. These counter-practices complicate any easy opposition between domination and liberation. They invite a more nuanced reading of infrastructure not only as a site of harm but also as a terrain of negotiating political possibility under constraint. Rather than relying on a politics of intention, this view centers the structural afterlives of extraction and the ways they shape life chances unevenly across racialized geographies. The challenge is to account for these conditions without reducing them to either victimhood or resistance, but instead attending to the complex relations that sustain life in the midst of imposed order, which is offered across the papers as varied practices and ethics of refusal.

This charting leads to a central query of how to reckon with relational life under racial capitalism, as both a moral and structural condition. The infrastructures that bind lives together are also those that sort, expose, exploit, and discard (Cowen 2014). To theorize relationality in these contexts requires a frank account of how connections are built, whether through solidarity or harm, because we learn that both can occlude and can become complicit. Ethics in this sense are about the arduous labor of accounting for one’s embeddedness in fraught relations. Such a framing acknowledges that even the most well-intentioned forms of solidarity may obscure voice, legitimacy, and risk. The issue calls for an ethics that acknowledges these gradients of implication, insisting that no relation is free from history’s sediment, where structures accumulate, persist, and constrain the possibilities of the present (Koselleck 2018).

A concept of relationality emerges that demands more than recognition of interconnectedness. It requires sustained inquiry into how relations are historically produced, whose lives are sustained or diminished through them, and what responsibilities are generated (Strathern 2020). Drawing on critiques of epistemologies of ignorance and the politics of articulation, relationality in the issue

becomes a diagnostic practice. It is less an endpoint than a method of critical inhabitation, refusing easy alliances and foreclosures and tracing its often-difficult-to-navigate contours instead. Relationality here is a mode of attunement entailing a commitment to making visible what relations can often conceal and resisting the lure of superficial consensus. Such an approach calls for reflexivity as method, capable of discerning how communities can persist through shared space, institutional language, and collective projects.

Importantly, the collection challenges the presumption that the limits of relationality are to be lamented. Limits should be seen as ethical opportunities, thresholds that mark when a relation must be withdrawn, reconfigured, or held accountable. These are not abstract moral lines but are drawn concretely through the histories of extraction, environmental violence, and racial surveillance the issue so carefully details. The articles demonstrate that to sustain the promise of relationality, one must also affirm the necessity of rupture and withdrawal. Not all relations should be maintained. There are ties that must be broken to preserve the possibility of something better, if not always more. The courage to sever, disengage, and pause a relation to examine its terms represents acts that are just as vital to ethical life as connection. This recognition opens a space for new questions. These questions refuse easy resolution but underscore the gravity of thinking relationally under conditions where attachment can be both vital and corrosive.

The collection's contributors join my own scholarly encouragement to move beyond the reactive grammar of resistance and toward a more anticipatory and speculative mode of engagement with space and sociality. While the political grammar of resistance continues to be vital, the essays demonstrate that an overreliance on dialectical oppositions such as capture versus escape or oppression versus liberation risks reifying the conditions it seeks to unsettle. Instead, there is an elsewhere, a sometimes-speculative site for dwelling, that emerges as a spatial mode of political being and belonging that is proactive, imaginative, and attuned to the generative possibilities embedded within structurally constrained worlds.

This reorientation is crucial. Dwelling, in the contexts explored here, is not only an improvisational response to the failures of infrastructure or governance. It is an affirmative claim on space and time. In dwelling, relation-building practices cannot wait for repair to be granted or for injuries to be acknowledged. They emerge as investments in different ways of living and relating that do not rely on harm for their meaning. This mirrors my own assertion that Black place-making and kinship must be understood as practices of satisfaction, not

lack. They are anchored not in redress alone but in the everyday labor of composing lives that are adequate to desire. Speculative dwelling as a form of repair to requires ethical anchoring in the effort to remain in place, in relation, and to orient toward the not-yet without depending on a politics of grievance to justify that movement.

These chapters offer ethnographic evidence of such practices and theories for understanding how speculation operates as a method. These are not merely tactics of endurance or refusal. They are world-building initiatives that creatively and carefully reconfigure relational life. To dwell is to repair to a horizon not determined by violence. The examples offered in this volume show us that spatial acts, however provisional or fragile, can constitute forms of political life that are not legible through injury or resistance alone. These acts are not departures from struggle but refusals to let struggle dictate the entirety of existence. In this way, dwelling affirms the ethical and political necessity of living otherwise. What emerges is not a fantasy of escape but a grounded, situated practice of composition that arises from the specificity of lived experience, particularly in urban landscapes marked by dispossession and racialized neglect. In this framework, dwelling becomes a site of world-making, of improvisation entangled with the material and affective constraints of daily survival (Simone 2018).

Across the volume, examples drawn from Dakar, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa reveal how dwelling is reconfigured through practices of spatial appropriation, informal infrastructure, and collective experimentation. These are not merely tactics of coping but strategies of prefiguration that assemble livable futures in the present. Central to this mode of engagement are acts that are committed to something more than survival, to be centered in practices of anticipation that make relations possible. Anticipation, to be clear, is not teleological prediction, not an elsewhere that is an afterlife, but a disposition toward cultivating what can and should be, even and especially in the absence of guarantees. Anticipation is a refusal to let constraint be the exclusive terrain on which Black life is theorized, fostering practices that insist on the legitimacy of dreaming otherwise, even when the material conditions of life appear to foreclose such possibilities.

REFUSAL

Against the established functioning of infrastructure, the contributors defy linear temporality and normative understandings of development. The work of Danielle Beaujon in colonial Algiers, for instance, reveals how architectures of control also yield unforeseen openings for radical spatial refusal. This resonates with Simpson (2014), who demonstrates how sovereignty and nationhood are

expressed in ways that diverge from the narrow expectations of the settler state and its legal frameworks. Sabine Mohamed's account of urban life in Ethiopia underscores how development projects become sites for counter-logics, where state surveillance and dispossession are met with affective economies and alternative spatial rhythms. Their practices instantiate a politics that recognizes refuge as always contingent. Yet this contingency is not a weakness. As the essays show, it offers a condition under which ethical and political imaginations exceed the repressive indifference of neoliberal governance, its demands of marginalized subjects, and its infrastructures designed to regulate, constrain, or erase. Instead, the slow, iterative labor of making life possible under duress in scenes of careful inhabitation, of dwelling otherwise, quietly and insistently lays the groundwork for the full possibility of fashioning new forms of relationality.

The collection offers treatments on capture and refusal against both the discrete moral categories and overlapping, co-constitutive practices embedded in racial capitalism's structural and affective arrangements (Robinson 2000). Rather than reinforcing a moral taxonomy that separates complicity from refusal, or harm from repair, the articles foreground the entangled nature of these modes of relational life. The geographies explored here, from Somali coastlines riddled with toxic dumping to the infrastructural densities of Nairobi's "Shackle City," unsettle any presumption that relational ethics develop along clear lines of opposition. Instead, they demand a conceptual vocabulary that holds together coercion and creativity, constraint and improvisation, harm and shelter.

In Wangui Kimari's framing, capture is an external imposition and a socially produced environment, or what she calls the condition of "enshacklement." This term names both the material constriction of movement and the affective saturation of everyday life by infrastructural violence. Yet what is notable in her analysis is the persistence of capture and the ways it gives rise to unexpected forms of relationality. Within zones marked by surveillance, hyper-policing, and deprivation, residents cultivate informal networks, resource-sharing circuits, and counterpublics, defying their immobility. Here, capture is not passively endured. It becomes a relational condition through which new social configurations emerge, that are tenuous, fraught, but vital.

Similarly, Dua, Ben-Yehoyada, and Carnì attend to maritime geographies where toxic waste disposal routes trace the uneven topographies of environmental harm. In this context, refusal is not performed through overt confrontation but through deliberate ambiguity and withdrawal. Actors navigate global circuits of extraction without becoming fully legible to them, through silence and strategic non-disclosure functioning as technologies of resistance, enabling, or in other words, opacity.

Building on Édouard Glissant's (1997) notion of opacity as a necessary refusal of colonial transparency, the issue extends that insight to interrogate opacity's ethical instability. Opacity protects against the kinds of extractive visibility represented through the politics and technologies of surveillance (Browne 2015), while simultaneously masking complicities and rendering accountability elusive. As illustrated in the analysis of maritime waste routes, opacity becomes a vehicle for deferral, obfuscation, and the reproduction of racialized violence. The contributors offer opacity as a critical tool which they refuse to treat as inherently subversive. Instead, opacity emerges as a site of ethical negotiation, a terrain where the politics of visibility and concealment are deeply entangled. By charting these entanglements, the issue cautions against celebratory readings of opacity that would evacuate it of its moral ambivalence. In this light, opacity becomes a tactic whose effects depend on positionality, access, and power.

Refusal, then, is not always spectacular. It often takes the form of ambiguity, delay, or the redirection of attention, in turn frustrating the expectations of global governance and humanitarian oversight.

Refusal in this collection is deeply contextual and often layered with ambivalence. Rather than offering clean breaks from systems of harm, refusal negotiates compromised landscapes to manage exposure and exercise autonomy, however fleetingly. Speaking, withholding, and redirection then become critical acts of ethical navigation, a calculus of relational risk undertaken by communities subject to structural harm. Refusal thus recalibrates the terms of engagement under conditions where no position is wholly outside the reach of violence.

This layered interplay between capture and refusal has compelled me to return to my own ethnographic work in *Scammer's Yard* (Lewis 2020), and more recently, in the related article "Ambivalent Refusals" (Lewis 2025) where I confronted the limits of access, recognition, and analytical authority when researching Jamaican lottery scammers. As I explored in the latter, their refusal to grant me proximity, framed around the impossibility of my knowing their experience of "sufferation," was not just a rebuke of my social position or class privilege. It was a refusal of my capacity to know them through the epistemological apparatus I brought into the field. What I experienced was not only an interpersonal impasse but an epistemic critique enacted through everyday practice. Their refusal was not resistance in the conventional sense; it was an insistence on the right to remain opaque, unintelligible, and unincorporated within the terms I might offer as analysis. In this sense, opacity became not merely a relational position but an ethical modality, a political and intimate border, a refusal to allow their interior lives to be rendered legible by the grammar of ethnographic inquiry.

In the paper (Lewis 2025), I offered a reading of this dynamic not as a failure of ethnography, or anthropology per se, but as a productive rupture that disorients the assumed trajectory of knowledge. What if refusal is not simply the negation of participation but a form of world-making that exceeds the epistemic reach of disciplinary norms? This becomes especially clear when considering the capture infrastructures operating in material and conceptual terms. Just as Nairobi's "Shackle City" delineates conditions of spatial immobilization and resource scarcity, fieldwork's epistemic space can become a site of enshacklement, where subjects are expected to perform recognizability for scholarly legibility. In this sense, refusal is the practice of remaining opaque within a system that demands clarity and of living against the flattening impulses of representation and the imperial demands of comprehension.

Thus, the entanglement of capture and refusal must not only be read as a descriptive dyad but as a methodological challenge to the ethical pretenses of scholarly inquiry. The scammers' refusal of my recognition was a refusal of capture, but it was also a call for me to operate differently, to recognize for myself my inability to seek understanding where none was granted or desired. This is perhaps the most necessary and challenging lesson for those who study the afterlives of colonial domination: that understanding, when conditioned by refusal, must begin with relinquishing our entitlement to know and for the desire to be not known among those dwelling in the sites of our inquiries.

What I have come to accept is that there is no shortage of intimacy in refusal. Rather, refusal engenders intimacy in the honoring of boundaries, the dignifying of distance, and the acceptance that some aspects of Black life remain beyond our grasp. Refusal, thus, is not an uncomplicated remedy to the damages of capture. Instead, it is as an ethical practice that emerges from and is shaped by conditions of vulnerability, precarity, and often complicity, entangled with the very infrastructures it seeks to reorient.

In the Somali context, community responses to the environmental afterlives of toxic waste are forms of refusal that are both protective and incomplete. They involve collective labor to manage exposure and strategies of endurance that register the limits of what can be done. These forms do not restore equilibrium, but hold together lives that are otherwise threatened by abandonment. Ultimately, the entwinement of capture and refusal reframes the ethics of relationality as more than a matter of coherence or consistency but of responsiveness to the complexity of the lived contradictions that shape our attempts to live and relate otherwise.

REPAIR

The sense of dwelling articulated throughout the volume, particularly in the introductory contribution, aligns with and extends my rethinking of repair beyond injury and instead as an active movement toward cultivating new forms of Black life. I have proposed a shift from understanding repair as a response to harm toward a conception of repair that turns toward the possibilities that lie beyond reparation. That move, which I call “repair to,” signals this forward-oriented movement grounded in care, intentionality, and the assembling of conditions not structured by injury. The speculative and reflective engagements described in these articles echo this sensibility. The terms of suffering do not confine them. Instead, they reflect commitments to building presence, coherence, and relation in ways that exceed the metrics of damage and the protocols of recognition. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, geographic constraints are not absolute barriers. Instead, they are conditions that influence how people make use of available resources to create their own space in the world (Gilmore 2008, 36).

While the collection does not explicitly engage the frameworks of reparations or repair, it nonetheless contributes to the broader conceptual landscape in which such discourses might be rethought. Rather than grounding its analysis in frameworks of injury and redress, the volume tracks how relational forms emerge, persist, and sometimes fracture under infrastructural, ecological, and racial duress. Its focus is not on compensatory justice or the politics of restoration, but on how life is inhabited and assembled amid regimes of abandonment and capture. In this sense, it orients us toward the atmospheric conditions under which reparative imaginaries, as world-making that exists outside of state-sanctioned structures (Stanley 2021), might arise, even if the language of repair remains absent.

This absence is instructive, as it stands as an invitation to reconsider what constitutes repair and where it might be located. Across the volume, we encounter practices that do not announce themselves as reparative but that nonetheless suggest a commitment to sustaining life amidst degradation. These are infrastructural improvisations, speculative dwellings, and forms of collective inhabitation that refuse the terms of their enclosure without necessarily promising escape. They are neither aimed at restoration, nor do they seek to reverse harm. Instead, they register ways of relating that endure and ways of building presence that do not await recognition.

Opacity, once again, becomes central to this conceptualization. It enables a form of repair that does not require full transparency or total recognition.

Rather than demanding confession, clarity, or narrative closure, opacity permits the maintenance of relations marked by uncertainty, contradiction, and asymmetry. Doing so opens a space for ethical engagements that are not premised on agreement or resolution but on shared inhabitation of difficulty. In this reading, opacity is not a refusal to relate but a modality through which relation is sustained under conditions of fragility. This conceptual shift is exemplified in the speculative and anticipatory practices documented throughout the volume.

In this regard, the collection converges with my own argument that repair should not be understood as a return to a prelapsarian state of wholeness. Instead, I have argued for a reparative orientation that begins from the recognition that harm cannot always be undone, and that relational life persists in the wake of this recognition. What I call “repair to” names this anticipatory movement, not a reaction to injury, but a commitment to otherwise building Black place-making and kinship practices that refuse to be tethered to antiblack violence as their primary referent.

The collection’s attention to speculative and grounded practices of dwelling resonates with this orientation. In its refusal to treat damage as the sole terrain of analysis, it opens space for thinking repair beyond restitution, as an everyday and often fugitive engagement with the possible.

I argue in “Black Life Beyond Injury” (Lewis 2024) that Black relationality must be apprehended not through its ruptures alone, but through the affirmative forms of belonging and presence it continually generates. Repair thus marks a shift from the grammar of aftermath to a politics of tending to life, relation, and space as grounds from which new terms for existence emerge. What I argue for, and what continues to motivate my thinking, is that repair must not be tethered to a liberal teleology of restoration. Instead, it must be grounded in the generative capacities of Black life itself, capacities that do not require antiblackness as their animating force.

The risk in using injury as the structuring logic of reparative analysis is that it licenses a grammar of accounting that cannot imagine a world other than the one already constituted by violence. What I attempt to do with relational repair is interrupt that narrative inheritance to create discursive and political space for Black life to be recognized in its own terms. That intervention has been difficult, particularly because even the most radical formulations of abolition and Black ecological thought often return to resistance as their organizing principle.

While politically necessary, I remain cautious of how such frameworks risk maintaining a recursive relationship to injury that is ultimately exhausting. As I argued in the article, precisely this exhaustion impairs our ability to locate and

support the nascent infrastructures of repair already present within Black life. Whether in the cooperative labor of community gardening collectives, the intimate ethics of elder care networks, or the spatial acts of staying and inhabiting otherwise, I have found fragments of a reparative imagination that do not simply rebound from harm but chart a future unburdened by it. The problem is that our analytic habits often make these fragments illegible or, at best, secondary to the spectacle of racial violence. This is why I have emphasized narrative suspension in both my ethnographic and theoretical work, deliberately holding open moments that gesture toward repair without requiring them to resolve or redeem the conditions from which they emerged.

Therefore, these gestures as they appear in the collection do not cohere into a theory of repair, nor do they attempt to, but they mark the sites where such a theory might be grounded. They show that repair, if it is to mean anything beyond harm-driven redress, must be in the provisional, the relational, the spatial, and the collective. It must be understood not as a program or an endpoint, but as a practice of composing life amid what remains unresolved. In the absence of theorizing repair directly, the volume makes room for a more situated, less romantic account. It is an account attuned to the ambivalent, often contradictory efforts to live otherwise within the infrastructures that constrain and enable relation.

What emerges is a situated ethics of persistence. The collection, perhaps inadvertently, gestures toward this by showing how social life is not merely what survives the wreckage, but what remakes the terms of inhabitation within it. It is precisely in this remaking, in the ongoing negotiation of proximity, responsibility, and refusal, that we might locate the groundwork for a reparative politics not structured by recognition but by relation. This is repair, not as return, but as reaching. It is a reaching toward each other, toward otherwise, toward the unfinished labor of composing livable worlds.

This extended vision of repair does not displace demands for restitution, but it insists that such demands are insufficient on their own. Equally important is the cultivation of ethical orientations and social forms that are not exhausted by the histories of grievance or constrained by the idioms of harm. Repair, in this sense, is a practice of world-building amid brokenness, not a cure for it, because as the issue makes clear, we have no guarantees against the repetition of harm. So, the contributions' quiet refusal to supply final answers might be read, then, not as a theoretical omission, but as a gesture toward a more open, more exacting reparative horizon in which life is not restored but reassembled anew.

Such a horizon does not offer comfort, but it does offer possibility. It asks that we engage relationality not for the sake of redemption, but in acknowledgment of our shared implication in structures that harm even as they connect. It also invites us to sit with the incompleteness of our own analytic frameworks. In this sense, repair must remain conceptually unstable, a term under continual revision, because its ethical charge resides in its refusal to settle. The volume's power lies, then, not in advancing a singular theory of repair, but in refusing to foreclose the conditions under which reparative thinking might emerge.

To dwell, which is to remain open to the minor, the improvised, and the unfinished, is to take seriously the claim that life is already generating the terms of its own repair, even if we lack the language to fully name it. The task, then, is not to provide that language in advance, but to create the conceptual and political space where it might be heard. That is the work of repair, not to master damage, but to sustain the fragile conditions under which something otherwise might still be lived.

CONCLUSION

If this collection offers no clear resolution, it is because resolution would betray the conditions under which its insights emerge: conditions marked by ambivalence, constraint, and the fragile improvisations of life under duress. The critical force of the essays lies not in offering a theory of repair or a map of resistance, but in holding open the space where relational life continues despite, and often through, its capture. To remain with this persistence requires a politics that does not presume coherence, a method that does not demand transparency, and an ethics that accepts refusal as a practice of becoming. What we encounter across these contributions are not answers but orientations toward inhabitation regardless of if our futures remain structurally unguaranteed. It is in this refusal to resolve that the work of repair becomes most exacting and most necessary; as a demand to build with and from what persists rather than an expectation of wholeness.

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