ANTI-THESIS

A Tramway Called Atonement: Genealogies of Infrastructure and Emerging Political Imaginaries in Contemporary Casablanca

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This article explores the role of infrastructure in the production of post-colonial political imaginaries linked to mobility and expectations of social justice. I focus on how the building of the Casablanca tramway opened up new ways for engaging in political commentary and participation for a segment of the city that frequently lacks the direct means for accessing power. In the process, the aim is to contribute a brief account of the historical genealogies behind such projects and argue for an understanding of infrastructure as a site for the production of future aspirations and political engagement for marginalized communities.

Keywords: Morocco, infrastructure, mobility, affect, political imaginaries

Spectacular urban futures are being constructed at astounding and unprecedented rates in Morocco. In recent years, the North African Kingdom has embarked on a series of ambitious billion-euro projects to overhaul the country's infrastructure on a large scale, from the building of a high-speed train line linking Casablanca and Tangiers (LGV), to plans for the establishment of special economic zones such as Casablanca Finance City. These developments are part of a larger vision of development – the *Politique de Grands Chantiers* – initiated upon his ascent to the throne in 1999 by the current King Mohammed VI, whose aim is to place the country as the emerging economic and political powerhouse of the northwest Africa region. One such project – albeit much smaller in scale – inaugurated in December 2012, is the Casablanca tramway. Futuristic-looking, glossy red tramcars now slither silently through the city's once loud and polluted boulevards, linking some of its most destitute neighborhoods in the east to the lush, exclusive areas hugging the city's beaches to the west. As such, the new 32-kilometer line had been hailed as the lifeline that would bring modern transportation and social integration to an increasingly congested,[1] crime-ridden, and socially fragmented city.

Arriving in Casablanca to begin research a month after the opening of the tramway line, I was able to directly witness the way in which spaces and forms of mobility were impacted by the new line.[2] Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork material gathered over sixteen months during 2013-2014 with urban planners, local activists, and the inhabitants of a lower-class neighbourhood serviced by the tramway, in this article I set out to explore the role of infrastructure in the production of post-colonial political imaginaries linked to mobility and expectations of social justice. More specifically, I am interested in the way in which the Casablanca tramway opened new ways for engaging in political commentary and participation for a segment of the city that frequently lacks the direct means and channels for accessing power. In the process, my aim is to contribute a brief account of the historical genealogies behind such projects and argue for an understanding of infrastructure not only as material form, but also as a site for the production of future aspirations and political engagement for marginalized communities.

Whereas in the twentieth century the development of infrastructural projects was often studied as a marker of nationalist and modernisation agendas (Mitchell),

in recent years infrastructure has received increasing attention from anthropologists and geographers who seek to understand how the materiality of our late-capitalist world saturates "a particular politics of the present", while constantly conjuring up aspirations for the future (Appel et al.; Larkin; Miyazaki; von Schnitzler). By taking into account the ability of materials to function as what Hannah Knox has termed "the imaginative resources through which political participation is structured" (374), we can expand the field of enquiry into alternative modes of political experience and engagement outside the confines of conventionally defined arenas such as the state or official institutions.

This article also aims to contribute to the growing literature on the Middle Eastern and North African city which seeks to move beyond the established tropes of exceptionalism, Islamic and/or "dual city", or the more recent focus on "Dubaization" of urban centres in the region (El-Kazaz and Mazur 151). Illustrative of this trend is the work of Koenraad Bogaert, who looks at how new modes of governance and state spaces are produced through private-public models for urban development in the case of the Bouregreg Valley project in Rabat. Here I want to extend this work and consider how such recent infra-

structural projects like the tramway are also indicative of new kinds of political imaginations and possibilities for engagement available to ordinary people. Recent work on the development of light rail in the region, including Hanna Baumann's article in this volume, illuminates the disciplining character behind such technologies of governance. In what follows, I argue that looking at the different embodied associations and ideas spurred by the tramway for one particularly vilified community is equally important for revitalizing discussions about political participation and citizenship in the region.

Infrastructural Genealogies
Commonly referred to as the country's *poumon economique* (economic lung), Casablanca was initially developed by French colonial forces as a node for trade and industry, as well as a site for the experimentation with *modern* forms of technocratic urban planning and control (Rabinow 289; Wright). Linked to the rest of the country and the world by an extensive road network and growing harbour, Casablanca was a focal point in the colonial vision that divided Morocco's territory into *utile* and *inutile* (useful and useless), based on a model of productivity that relegated the difficult-to-control Berber hinterlands of the ʿ*arubiyya* (countryside)[3] to

increasing economic precarity (Abu-Lughod; Rachik, *Ville et Pouvoirs*). In the postcolonial period, the Moroccan state went through a period known as the *Years of Lead*, when the late King Hassan II fiercely repressed political contestation (Slyomovics; Miller 162). Political scientists, anthropologists and historians have documented how during this time infrastructure played a central role in the regime's stifling of dissent. Abderahmane Rachik has referred to this approach as an extension of the French colonial era's militarization of urbanism, or *urbanisme de l'urgence*, while Susan Ossman (30) has pointed towards how during this period the building of new highways and monumental administrative infrastructure, particularly in Casablanca, was designed with a double purpose: wide Hausmannian boulevards served as riot-proof cordons around the city core, while imposing, monumental administrative buildings on the urban margins would embody and project the power and presence of the state (Rachik *Casablanca*; Bogaert *The Problem of Slums*).

One particular neighbourhood became both mythicized and vilified during this period in which infrastructure was meant to serve the powerful. Hay Mohammadi has come to be considered a paradig-matic example of the fate that befell the urban margins in the postcolonial era. Considered a laboratory for industrial and housing innovation during the colonial period (Rabinow 326), beginning in the 1960s the neighbourhood experienced a prolonged period of population growth and infrastructural dilapidation as the consequence of political neglect and the devastating impact of structural adjustment policies.[4] Home to the now closed Derb Moulay Cheriff Commissariat, one of the most infamous urban political detention and torture centres created during the *Years of Lead*, in the local popular imagination the neighbourhood is synonymous with repression and historical trauma. During the subsequent reconciliation process, the neighbourhood was designated a "priority area" and recommendations were made for a host of cultural projects with a view to "restoring dignity" to the community (El Bouih; Slyomovics; Strava). When it was announced that a significant portion of the new tramway line would pass through the heart of Hay Mohammadi, local residents began to speculate about motivations behind this decision.

Unlike similar mega-projects developed in recent years, such as the exclusive Morocco Mall or Casa Marina complexes which aim to attract a wealthy, moneyed, and cosmopolitan clientele, the official motivations cited by the authorities explicitly spoke of efforts to promote a more "socially inclusive" city, albeit without necessarily speaking to the causes behind existing exclusion (CASATRAM). This preoccupation with using the development and implementation of a *modern* transport network to create a more "socially integrated" city was repeated by a public relations representative of the tramway's managing company during an interview in late 2013 (Taib). The spokesperson emphasized from the start that the planners had wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to connect the "disadvantaged areas of the city" to the more affluent parts on the Ain Diab beachfront – where the Morocco Mall as well as other upscale hotels and shopping centres are located – but also "to hospitals, public administration and schools" (Taib). In fact, it was only during the later phases of the planning, the spokesperson confirmed, that an extension had also been added to bring the tramway to the main university campus in Casablanca's southwest. This addition to the original plans was presented as another way of providing a social service to the city's many university students.

While this public works view of infrastructure development was generally wel-

comed by marginalized communities now served by the tramway, inhabitants from Hay Mohammadi in particular saw the new means of transport as a veiled form of reparations for the ghettoization and brutal political violence suffered by these working class areas during the *Years of Lead* period. Although significantly subsidized through both public and private funding, the price of a one-way tramway ticket (6 DH or around 0.60 €) remained out of reach for many of these inhabitants. As a consequence, most people rode the tramway for special occasions, or on weekend outings to the beach, treating it as one would a special gift. While this situation changed visibly over the course of the following years, the tramway retained traces of this aura, predominantly for my informants from Hay Mohammadi.

In what follows I want to unpack the link between the tramway's materiality and the kinds of affective associations (Navaro-Yashin) and political engagements it enabled for marginalized communities. Politics here is understood in its expanded sense to mean the situated relationships and mundane processes that enabled or constrained the right to the city for a specific group of people (de Certeau; Lefebvre; Larkin; Stoler). While the tramway's presence in Hay Mohammadi was

read by inhabitants as finally bringing the community into the urban fold, the stark contrast with existing forms of transport and local infrastructure also threw into a new light the spatialization of class across the city, and allowed those of my informants on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum to comment on the elusive but very present class differences that marked Casablancan spaces.

A Tramway Called Atonement?

Sitting with Sara[5], one of my close interlocutors, one afternoon in 2013 in her family home near Hay Mohammadi's old core, which the new tramway line now skirted, she pleaded with me not to take the bus anymore, and instead use either the shared taxis or the tramway. Recounting stories about her school days, she insisted that buses were neither a clean nor a safe way to travel. Not only that, but for women, Sara went on to add, travelling on an overcrowded bus meant exposing oneself to a variety of forms of harassment.[6] Hay Mohammadi and adjacent areas have of course been and continue to be linked to the rest of Casablanca by an extensive network of public buses as well as shared taxis. The advanced state of dereliction of these other means of transport, their unpredictable schedules, the close physical contact with others (popular bus routes

were frequently so overcrowded that people had to stand on the steps), the smells and textures, and overall negative affect associated with these mobile spaces were frequently cited by both local men and women to evoke and comment on their sense of indignity and exclusion. This affect permeated frequent comments such as "not even animals *(hayawanat)* should be transported this way", or ironic talk that gave the shared taxis the moniker *taxi al-ḥubb* (love taxi) because of the way in which passengers were squeezed together (Sara).

The arrival of the tramway seemed to assuage these feelings, especially for my informants in Hay Mohammadi. Firstly, locals like Sara frequently cited the material presence of the upgraded roads along the line, the new network of street lighting, the glossy red cars, and *modern* electronic platform displays in a place like Hay Mohammadi as physical proof that the neighbourhood had been symbolically redeemed from its previous politically-motivated marginalization.[7] Secondly, the modern, light, clean and airy spaces of the tramway and the different embodied forms of mobility they fostered allowed ordinary inhabitants to comment on the well-known state of dereliction plaguing other local means of transport and articu-

late discussions about corruption and dysfunctional local administrations. One such frequent discussion focused on the fact that already in the 1970s, ideas for developing a Metro line had been proposed, but owing to a combination of local topography and structural limitations, such as the difficulty to secure funding, plans were shelved in the 1980s.[8] Alongside this failure, questions about how licenses were auctioned for the provision of bus transport led my informants to speculate that nepotism and favouritism had been used to ensure that certain bus operators received preferential treatment.

As local public transport infrastructure suffered from decades of de-funding and lack of maintenance, a common story about who could afford *not* to utilise it emerged. Similar to transformations seen elsewhere (Cass et al.), social mobility in Casablanca became increasingly associated with the ownership of private cars and the growing enclavization of the middle and upper classes (Cohen). The tramway's arrival, as stated by the local authorities, was meant to help undo this process. However, the tramway's incipient success in addressing this socio-spatial fragmentation also brought to the fore existing class tensions.

The following ethnographic vignette illustrates one way in which these dynamics played out. Later that summer Sara invited me on an outing to the beach. Similar to hundreds of other Casablancans from places like Hay Mohammadi, we embarked on the tramway early in the day in order to be able to find a seat, and travelled to the terminus in Ain Diab. As we stepped out of the soundproofed capsule that had smoothly delivered us there, we were greeted by the shimmering blue ocean framed by swaying palm trees and the overflowing bougainvillea masking the high walls of the neighbourhood villas. The tramways' terminus sat at a perpendicular angle to the wide, car-jammed boulevard running along the length of the beach promenade, or *Corniche*, but the planners had failed to install a signalled crosswalk for pedestrians.[9] As a consequence, those who arrived by tramway had to wait for a halt in the flow of traffic in order to attempt crossing the four-lane road. Mothers with prams had to make a dash for the other side while cars swerved around them, loud horns filling the air.

Echoing other opinions I had heard in Hay Mohammadi, Sara saw this planning failure as typical of the type of shoddy workmanship they had grown accustomed to from the city's authorities. A different, per-

haps unintended consequence, Sara suggested, was that it underscored the different positions inhabited by those who arrived in packed tramway cars at the beach on Sundays, and those who impatiently blared their horns at them from their private automobiles. In noting these failures of planning and their perhaps unintended effects, people like Sara appeared to find an opening for articulating the very real but often elusive realities linked to class differences that marked Casablancan urban space. Unsurprisingly, class in this case increasingly became indexed not in the mere access to infrastructures and mobility, but also in the ability to frequent particular spaces without quite literally rubbing shoulders with social *others*. Indeed, upper-class interlocutors, who were in the habit of driving to the beach on weekends, for their part claimed that since the tramway's opening the *Corniche* had been flooded with people who clogged up the traffic and made the area more *populaire* (classless, common) (Saloua).

Commenting on the seemingly mundane difference between public transport users and car owners allowed my lower class informants to articulate thoughts on two levels. By pointing to the way in which the transport and planning authorities had

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failed to install a crosswalk, ordinary inhabitants had a way of participating in discussions about the local politics of technical expertise and its ability to provide safe and equal access to urban spaces for all. At the same time, it also helped them articulate thoughts about the spatialization of existing social distinctions in the city. As a local graphic designer observed to me, during the past decades Casablanca's middle and upper classes had progressively retreated into wealthy villa enclaves along the *Corniche*. But the tramway had now brought to them those they were retreating from. The mobility and proximity of social *others* was thus perceived as disturbing to the taken-for-granted social order (McCallum), and suggested the presence of a tacit struggle over not only material but also symbolic resources, such as the prestige of frequenting previously exclusive urban areas.

Conclusion

It has become commonplace to speak of infrastructures as becoming visible only in moments of breakdown or rupture (Elyachar). But what if working infrastructures can make visible ruptures and breakdowns in local social fabrics? We might then find equally salient moments of what might be deemed proper functioning and look at what we can learn from studying infrastructures that appear to succeed on both a social and technical level. In this article, I have argued that the new Casablanca tramway can do just that, by helping us examine how its incipient success indexed and spoke to existing social difference and historical trauma.

Read by my informants in Hay Mohammadi as a belated form of reparations, the tramway brought into relief existing social fragmentation, but it also opened up new avenues for speaking about social and political participation. As a new, clean and safe, if not very economic means of transport, the tramway became much more than just a new way of travelling in the city. Standing in for a foretaste of what the future might hold for all Casablancans, the tramway's apparent success in promoting a more socially inclusive urban experience as well as its materiality became crucial for the way in which conversations and ideas about urban citizenship could now be framed and illustrated.

In spite of its small failures of planning, the inhabitants at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum traversed by the tramway embraced it as a veiled form of reparations and as a way of fashioning new forms of political participation and broadly formulating claims for social justice. Drawing on these interpretations, I conclude that we should read this new infrastructure as social justice not in the sense that it unequivocally achieved it. Rather, infrastructural projects like the tramway allowed those who saw themselves as the victims of past state neglect and repression to formulate their grievances in the language of social justice, a language that has been progressively delegitimized by neoliberal discourses that have led to the de-politicization of local struggles.

As such, the Casablanca tramway serves as a salient example of how infrastructures, their materiality, and their ability to function as sites for the political (Nolte 443) by indexing certain ideas and affective associations can open up new ways of engaging with the post-colonial, contemporary city. In an age increasingly marked by the precarization of already vulnerable urban communities, infrastructure might help articulate a new language of political participation and social recognition.

Notes

[1] A common refrain heard during my fieldwork was that a private car was not a means of transport but a luxury. Even so, it was estimated that out of a total 3 million vehicles registered nation-wide, half were in circulation in Casablanca (Sabib).

[2] The research that this article is based on was funded by a Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork grant (2013-2014) and a UK ESRC grant (2011-2015).

[3] The term ʿarubiyya derives from Moroccan dialect and is used in previous publications in its local meaning of rural, belonging to the countryside (Ossman, "Fashioning Casablanca").

[4] In 2013 – 2014 Hay Mohammadi's population was estimated at 140,000 people, inhabiting a surface of 4.2 square kilometres – a density of 33.33 inhabitants per square kilometre. As a comparison, the Anfa neighbourhood abutting Ain Diab, had a density of 6.5. For a statistical look at Casablanca's different neighbourhoods see *Annuaire Statistique Regional du* Grand Casablanca 2014.

[5] With the exception of public representatives, the names of my interlocutors have been changed in order to protect their privacy and identity.

[6] Despite these associations, it goes without saying that a large number of Casablancans continued to employ and rely on buses, which were cheaper, for their daily commutes and movements across the sprawling city.

[7] An alternative reading might suggest that instead of atonement, the tramway could be a form of appeasement and a clever pre-emptive stifling of potential dissent, reminiscent of the emergency urbanism techniques of the past. An interesting comparison to this would be the Cities without Slums (VSB) program. Further work, beyond the scope of this paper, would be required to test this hypothesis.

[8] These plans were unearthed once more in 2013 when the Casablanca City Council announced plans to build an aerial Metro, only to retract that decision once more due to concerns over technical and financial feasibility (El Affas).

[9] The situation remained unchanged during a visit in March 2017.

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