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A Night with ʻAjib

My research almost came to a crashing end during a freezing night in February, while I was following a drifting (*tafhit*) procession in Riyadh. Drifting is the practice of using stolen cars to skid at full speed on urban highways – a high-octane gymnastics that is for cars what dressage is for prize horses. I was driving my car, a worn-out Jeep Cherokee, behind the red lights of a Toyota pickup that was careering from one side of the street to the other. Its driver, ʻAjib,[1] was skillfully playing with the steering wheel and the handbrake. My informant Rakan was pestering me to salute each skid with a flash of my headlights in a gesture of appreciation. I complied, also using my blinkers to convey what I was told were messages of enthusiasm. A zigzagging pickup followed at full speed by a flashing Jeep was not an uncommon scene in suburban Riyadh.

Soon ʻAjib turned off the main street onto one side road, and then a second. He swerved into the wrong lane and I followed, alarmed by his carelessness but determined not to lose him. "He is testing you," declared Rakan. We were headed to what some local youth call Tariq al-Baʻarin ("Dromedary Drive"), a six-lane thoroughfare in the east of Riyadh. The road's nickname came from the corrals on both sides of the street, where families kept herds of dromedaries for their enjoyment or profit. Located on the outskirts of the city, the wide thoroughfare was an ideal spot for joyriding and car drifting. ʻAjib was driving expertly through a maze of side roads so as to avoid the police patrols. I was in a mixed state of excitement and fear; this was my first night of joyriding.

1.1. Joyriding in Riyadh

At around 2 AM we pulled into a gas station on al-Ba'arin. Several police cars were cruising the road, and 'Ajib's ear was glued to his cell phone: he was collecting information and trying to catch up with the joyriders. His two friends, a heavyset, shy guy and a skinny younger boy, remained inside the pickup, staring at us with blank expressions. "*Zlayeb* (morons)," Rakan said in a shiver. "They should go out and say hello at least." The temperature had dropped and I was shivering too. "You both afraid?" asked 'Ajib. "No, we're cold." "*Ayy wallah*, this is what joyriding is all about: cold nights, wind and darkness."

'Ajib was twenty-three. Short, slim, and sturdy, he adorned his musical colloquial Arabic with masculine gesticulations. Rakan was more vocal than I and was trying to bend his standard Riyadh Arabic to the brisk pace of 'Ajib's Bedouin dialect. In spite of my efforts to speak clearly, 'Ajib's eyes widened whenever I opened my mouth, and he had me repeat every single sentence. I understood him well, but he seemed not to grasp what I was saying. Rakan later told me: "Don't forget that you are European; people aren't used to talking to you folks, and they always assume you won't understand them." The police patrols, now more frequent, reminded 'Ajib of a scene he had witnessed a few months ago. One night, a drifter had stopped next to a police car, opened his window and shouted: "Come here, *ia wir'*, you sissy, I'll give you a ride!" The boy had sped away immediately, chased maladroitly by the patrol, and managed to dodge out of sight. According to 'Ajib, joyriding was distilled in this vignette; it was about being a real man, having a good laugh and jeering at the powers that be.

'Ajib was still on his cell phone. "*Hanuti* ('undertaker') will drift a GMC Suburban in al-Quds," a residential neighborhood in the east of Riyadh. We barely had enough time to rejoice before a second phone call changed the plans: the police presence on al-Ba'arin had forced the drifters to move to another part of the city. We jumped in our cars and drove away, slowing down when crossing paths with police cars before we accelerated again, zigzagging in and out of our lane. After a twenty-minute drive along various thoroughfares, we found ourselves in a calm residential neighborhood, in the middle of an unexpected traffic jam. Still following 'Ajib, we drove around and parked on the sidewalk of Turki bin Ahmad al-Sudairi Street, an avenue six lanes wide surrounded by the high walls of luxurious villas. The drifting was about to begin.

FIGURE 1.1. The drifting spot on Turki b. Ahmad al-Sudairi Street. Copyright © Pascal Menoret.

We stood in the middle of the gathering of seventy to eighty cars packed with young people who, restless but strikingly silent, poured out of their vehicles, walking in all directions and climbing on car roofs and streetlamps. (See Figure 1.1.) I had just started to take pictures when everybody suddenly moved to the other side of the street and massed on the traffic median. The drifters were coming. A Toyota Camry, closely followed by a Hyundai Sonata, shot out in front of us at an outrageous 140 to 150 mph. Both cars spun four or five times, their tires shrieking on the asphalt. (See Figure 1.2.) Inside each vehicle, besides the driver, three youngsters were raising their arms through the open windows toward the sky and shouting, their faces hidden by their checkered headdresses. I was astounded but tried to keep my composure in line with the blasé audience. After the two cars vanished, everybody ran to his vehicle and drove swiftly away. Our massive procession swarmed in the direction of the ring road. The police were suddenly ahead of us, stopping cars at an improvised checkpoint. We managed to escape and drove in a wide loop to catch up with the joyriding party.

FIGURE 1.2. A Honda Accord swerves in front of a crowd of admirers on the outskirts of Riyadh. Copyright © THE BEST.

As more and more cars joined in, the procession snaked its way through the sprawling city like a massive hydra, adrenaline-filled shouting peppering the blasting music and the roaring engines. I was driving inside a parade of about a hundred cars, streaming down all four lanes of the ring road at 110 mph, close enough to other vehicles to follow every emotion on their passengers' faces. Something odd happened. Carried away by the scene, I burst into laughter and shouted in Rakan's direction, "This is awesome! This is what I should have been doing all my life!" I was excited to drive fast, to break the law, to belong, even for a night, to a community of agitated young men who were defying the police in a country reputed for its harsh handling of the slightest incivility. Speed had given me a sense of invulnerability I had never experienced before.

We were speeding to catch up with the procession after another drifting show when catastrophe struck. A driver started to spin his Camry ahead of us, in the middle of a group of twenty cars moving at about 100 mph. His car began to waltz on the asphalt, sliding with a shriek while presenting its flank to us. It hit another car, hurling it onto a security rail on the left side of the freeway. The entanglement of cars, skidding fast in front of us, was so terrifying that I stepped on my brakes. Finding a way out on the right side of the road, I accelerated again to avoid triggering a pile-up.

It was too late: a powerful shock projected us toward the dashboard and then back into our seats. Still accelerating, and with my car making an alarming noise, I looked for a safe spot and pulled over away from the gigantic accident that I imagined was unfolding. The driver of the other car stopped behind me. I gazed at the highway, expecting to find a heap of cars and wounded drivers. To my bewilderment, the asphalt was empty. All the cars had sped up and avoided the accident my clumsiness should have caused.

A police patrol car soon reached us. Before he opened his window, the policeman popped a captagon (amphetamine) pellet into his Power Horse energy drink and swallowed it with a gulp. Seeing that nobody was hurt, stumbling and stuttering, obviously unable to articulate his thoughts, he unexpectedly drove away, soon followed by the other driver. Calling from his car, 'Ajib told us to fix our car and join them, but I needed the help of more than just a mechanic, and Rakan and I spent the next few hours at the hospital for a checkup.

The accident happened a year after I arrived in Riyadh. I had started my study of drifting in the preceding months, collecting articles, interviewing drifters and their fans, and trying to secure access to a group I would follow and observe. My hopes thinned out after that night, as 'Ajib became more and more elusive. Like most drifters we approached, he was on his guard, wary of the improbable duo: a French PhD student and the young Saudi professional who claimed to be researching the dynamics of joyriding. In the eyes of many, Rakan and I were spies sent by the local police to infiltrate the drifters. To 'Ajib, my gaucherie and our retreat after such a minor incident were evidence of our suspiciousness: how could he trust such a poor driver and his unfathomable friend?

1.2. Cars and Road Violence

Joyriding in Riyadh doesn't look at joyriding as an extreme manifestation of Saudi youth criminality. Rather, it looks at both drifting and its criminalization as embedded in global networks of power and knowledge. The surprising behavior of the police and Ajib's conduct pointed to an unspoken alliance between law enforcement and law breakers that could only be understood by stepping back and looking at Saudi roads, cars, and male youth in the light of the global importance of Saudi Arabia, since World War II, as a major oil exporter, commodity market, and inventor of traditions. The book explores an idea that will sound both simple and obscure: in Saudi Arabia today, road violence is a form of

political violence. And by road violence I mean not only the most visible forms of violence that are road rage or joyriding, but also the structural violence that roads, infrastructure, and the automobile system in general inflict on individuals.

Violence must have been consubstantial to the idea of road making, for Arabian Peninsula rulers have long eyed roads with suspicion. Both imam Yahya Hamid al-Din of Yemen (1869–1948) and ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Al Saʿud (1876–1953), the first Saudi king, convinced that highways were primarily used by invaders, were reluctant to have their roads asphalted.[2] In the 1940s, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz reportedly considered trucks "as enemies, like the Germans and Russians," and thought that "highways provided advantages to enemies close by, leaving his capital vulnerable to invasion."[3] The Al Saʿud didn't opt for automobile development right away. Instead, they favored railroads, which linked their rule to other train-loving states: Khedival Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. Besides, trains were less likely than trucks and cars to be the prey of the highwaymen (*quta' turuq*) who, like the infamous Rashshash al-Shaybani, terrified Najd, the central region of Arabia, until the late 1980s.

While the Al Saʿud pursued their dream of railways, the American oil company Aramco and Californian construction giant Bechtel built the first asphalt roads. Often presented as a goodwill measure demonstrating U.S. companies' care for local society, the layout of roads in Saudi Arabia was of strategic importance not only to Aramco and Bechtel but also to the U.S. federal state. Yahya Hamid al-Din and ʿAbd al-ʿAziz were right to be cautious, as both companies were "loaded with CIA" agents who gathered vital information on the Saudi territory and its populations.[4] Thanks to roads, both state power and imperial sway crept into the heart of the Arabian Peninsula.

Road building in Arabia was an ambiguous venture. In the late 1920s, when Sayyid Abu Bakr, the Singapore-born scion of an opulent South Yemeni family, "felt stuck" in his inland province of Hadhramaut, "he built himself a road, all the way from Tarim to the coastal port of al-Shihr, a hundred miles away." This new mobility was threatening as well as empowering. Was the road a way to invite the British Empire onto shore? Or an attempt by a landlocked yet wealthy polity "to break out of an impasse" and reach the ocean? Whether the outcome was the reinforcement of Sayyid Abu Bakr's political ascendance or the British colonization of the region a few years later, "it all had to do with the roads."[5] Just like South Yemeni diasporic and imperial routes, Saudi highways were taken,

from their very origin, by political ambitions, imperial greed, and global networks of expertise, capital, and power.

After World War II, the Saudi state launched ambitious transportation policies, and roads became a central site of identity making. As motoring progressed, young and old, men and women were increasingly mobile, leaving villages, small towns, and steppes for the opportunities of the big cities. With the rapid expansion of the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, thoroughfares and roundabouts were made to embody the spatial politics of the Saudi state. Like road building, the import of cars was a political and imperial business. Harry St. John Bridger Philby, the British colonial agent who became one of 'Abd al-'Aziz's advisers in 1924, made a fortune as the first Ford dealer in the country. Others followed suit. Cars, previously American and increasingly Japanese, signaled their owner's ambitions and success and were a symbol of individual freedom, technical mastery, and masculinity. The Saudis became a driving nation. Inside the cities, Egyptian, Greek, and French urban planners designed regular grids of perpendicular highways on behalf of the Al Sa'ud elite. Everything happened as though the princes wished urban development would exorcise Lord Cromer's racist remark about the Egyptians: "The European is a close reasoner . . . his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry."[6] With its south Californian regularity, overpasses, and tunnels, the new Riyadh that emerged after the 1973 oil boom was picturesque only to its Saudi users.

Urban symmetry was not just pleasing to the ruler's mind, nor was it only a gentle rebuttal of European spatial metaphors and racial assumptions. It was also a tool to organize the real estate market, which became one of the primary means of private enrichment. More and more oil money was invested in land development; royal privileges, state loans, and middle-class wages fueled real estate speculation, of which a few actors were profiteering. The straight and wide urban highways of Riyadh and Jeddah became the Saudi equivalent of Wall Street, the spatial symbol of the new landed bourgeoisie and a manifestation of heightened class warfare.

Road construction drew a geometrical grid. This abstract space unfolded its perpendicular highways on the plateau surrounding Riyadh, erasing the landscape north of the city, where hill after hill was dynamited to leave space for new subdivisions. Nature and history were pushed aside. As more and more Saudis were motoring, the use of the body receded to

the effortless operation of switches and wheels. Urban growth came with the imposition of the national costume on all Saudis, in the form of a white *thawb* and a *shmagh* (headdress) for men, a black *'abaya* and a veil for women. It also came with the general adoption of the single-family detached house, which gradually replaced the multifamily dwellings of yore. Standardization of landscape, memory, dress, dwelling, and mobility was now the norm. Forced to use cars, banned in practice from walking, their dress standardized, Saudis were intimately transformed by urbanization.

Several Saudi novelists explored in often-poignant words the abandonment of the old Riyadh after the 1973 oil boom, and the shock of moving to the new, perpendicular city.[7] Presented by the state as modernization and development, this internal exile created a space where nature and memory had receded, desolated places were ubiquitous and threatening, roads had taken over most of the city's surface, and commercial centers had become the main attraction. Space itself had "become a commodity to be sold wholesale,"[8] and roads were but the aisles of this humongous open-air market.

After the 1973 oil boom, Riyadh presented a particularly crude image of capitalist accumulation and authoritarian closure. The city had become a disciplinary space, where social and economic pressures enclosed individuals in tiny, dehumanizing routines, and where all shades of public debate were banned. During a conversation at his home – a typical concrete villa surrounded by high walls – a Saudi novelist dwelled on the pointless daily life of most Saudi males. Waking up, driving children to school, driving to and from work, driving female relatives to the supermarket, driving everybody back home, driving to friends', driving to restaurants and cafes, driving back home, going to bed: that constant mobility rarely led to a space where you could assemble with others and enter a public conversation. Roads and cars turned individuals into mere cogs in a disciplinary mechanism. The infrastructure state aimed at abolishing agency and protest, and establishing what Henri Lefebvre dubbed "the silence of the 'users':"[9] a general state of apathy and depoliticization.

The rapid movement of capital had created Riyadh's geometric street grid, gigantic suburbs and massive road system, which in turn influenced individual and collective behavior. Just like other car-based spaces, from southern France to southern California, the city was an oil-based city, an environment produced, operated, and navigated, thanks to oil. The development of Riyadh, far from being exceptional or marginal, followed the evolution of the global energy market toward the domination of oil.

Since the 1973 oil boom, it is not only petro-monarchies that derive their economies and power structure from petroleum: thanks to their dependence on the black gold, "the leading industrialized countries are also oil states."[10] The extreme road revolt of Saudi youths was thus neither exceptional nor peripheral. It was a spectacular response to the global emergence of oil-based spaces.

In the late 1960s, Western experts still looked at Saudi Arabia as an exotic, far-flung locale they had to accompany on the path of development and "modernization." This view was already anachronistic. After 1945, the country proved crucial to the creation of the global oil trade, and to the functioning of U.S. hegemony. Post–World War II globalization didn't result from the gradual integration of bilateral markets, but followed the postwar shift from coal to oil as the fuel for the reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan, and the prosperity of the region that came to be called "the West." With their American- and European-owned oil companies, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf oil producers were an important node in a "neo-triangular trade": U.S. and European capital and security were invested in oil exploration and production, while cheap Gulf crude fueled European and Japanese growth and kept world oil prices low, which in turn contributed to U.S. hegemony.[11] After the 1973 oil boom and the gradual nationalization of Aramco, there was no longer any metropolitan center from the vantage point of which Saudi Arabia could be considered as a periphery. Riyadh had become an important node of the global trade in energy and one of the world's main crossroads of cash and human flows.

How do the inhabitants of Riyadh cope with the pressures of these global networks of power, trade, and expertise? Are they prisoners of disciplining routines? Do they let state and market actors silence them without revolting? Because political parties, trade unions, and independent organizations are prohibited, is the political public sphere restricted to the princes and their clients? Is there no place in Saudi Arabia for popular forms of protest and expression? If "class struggle is inscribed in space"[12] but demonstrations, sit-ins, and strikes are banned, what spatial form can that struggle take?

1.3. The Emergence of a Plebeian Public Sphere

The idea that road violence was a public policy came back full force when the state decided that only men were allowed to drive. When in 1990 the Interior Ministry banned women from driving, it was not only to protect

the fairer sex from the vision of such eloquent bumper stickers as "Your Sister Rides With Me" (*ukhtek rakba ma'i*). Nor was it just to uphold the controversial religious principle of the "impediment of the pretexts" (*sidd al-zhara'i'*), which prevented believers from engaging in any behavior that, although not sinful in itself, could lead to sin. In other words, it was not only to prevent women from undermining the conservative fabric of society by selecting "their own mates," which state officials thought would happen if they were "free to drive."[13]

The Interior Ministry banned female driving in reaction to a demonstration of forty-seven women who drove down Riyadh's 'Ulayya Avenue on November 6, 1990 – in the midst of the U.S.-led Operation Desert Storm. They demanded more rights for women, including the right to drive: although not yet banned by law, female driving, deemed socially unacceptable, was common only in rural areas. The forty-seven protestors contributed to politicizing urban spaces. If "social order" was established through "the control of traffic," it was possible to wage a revolt by ways of "traffic jams, illegal parking, multiple crashes, collisions" – or women taking the wheel.[14] Gender struggle, just like class struggle, was inscribed in the car-based spaces of the city. If roads and cars were tools of policing and market discipline, could they also lead to the emergence of an alternative public sphere? Could car traffic be politicized?

Joyriding in Riyadh develops Jürgen Habermas's notion of a "*plebeian* public sphere,"[15] which he leaves aside in his study of the public sphere, to focus instead on the "bourgeois," "educated classes," and the "public use of their reason." Working on eighteenth-century France, Arlette Farge showed that the elites did not have a monopoly on political expression, and that everyday Parisians were just as vocal and opinionated as the bourgeois. On the streets of the capital, average people couched their concerns and their revolt in "subversive words" that were spied on and reported by the state police. Their opinions "were denied by a government which, at the same time, was observing them continually," thus creating the very police archives that now testify to their relevance. This "chaotic anthill of disconnected information," gossip, and rumors gradually gave birth, in the second half of the eighteenth century, to "something firm and solid: quite simply, the right to know and to judge, the right to expect the king to divulge his secrets," and a dominant "feeling that [popular] political knowledge was legitimate."[16] Slowly burrowing through absolutism, everyday attitudes prepared the way for the landslide of 1789.

In this book, I analyze joyriding as an emerging plebeian public sphere. I examine the everyday attitudes of those Saudis who are not part of a