Spirits of displacement

Gnawa rituals and gentrification in Casablanca

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Abstract: This article analyzes the interplay between religion and urban transformations by focusing on the Moroccan Gnawa, a spiritual network of working-class musicians and ritual operators based in the old centers (the *medinas*) of most Moroccan cities, and on the gentrification in the center of Casablanca, Morocco's economic capital. Displacement and gentrification disrupt the relation with urban spaces, which is a crucial, though understudied, feature of the Gnawa brotherhood, and thus entails deep changes to their economic, social, and ritual life. Urban transformations in Casablanca mobilize religious discourses and symbols, while restricting access to spaces that allow vernacular ritual practice. Religion, however, may also provide a language to react, at least symbolically, to urban transformations.

Keywords: displacement, gentrification, Morocco, resistance, spirits

It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man.
—Leslie Silko, *Ceremony*

As pro-gentrification policies extend their influence to the whole planet, unprecedented amounts of people are displaced or threatened by displacement (Beier et al. 2022; Brickell et al. 2017; Lees et al. 2016). These policies systematically fragment the social fabric, causing disturbance to cultural practices that are important for the sociability and survival of local communities. External observers, often unaware of the importance of these practices, may consider these transformations as a contingent side effect of policies that affect the built environment or the class composition of an area (Atkinson 2000, 2015; Davidson 2009; Pull et al. 2018). A comparative analysis of urban renewal policies, especially if based on the experiences of people affected, reveals instead that the radical transformation of cosmologies and lifestyles are inherent, if not deliberate, aspects of urban change (Elliot-Cooper et al. 2020; Fullilove 2004; Pain 2018). Religion and ritual, in particular, play a role in these transformations. Religion orients the culture of planners and policy makers (Delgado 2014; Rykwert 1986; Sennett 1990; Tambiah 1976), but also structures the way vulnerable communities frame their relationships

to space (Herzfeld 2015; Orsi 1999; Pinxten and Dikomitis 2009).

By encroaching the old central city (the *medina*) of Casablanca with new developments, hotels and malls, gentrification is affecting the Gnawa, a ritual cult that aims at evoking spirits through all-night ceremonies involving music and dance. "Spirit possession cults"[1] are indicative of the interaction between religion and space; ceremonial practices such as Afro-Caribbean *candomblé*, *santería*, *voudou*, almost invariably emerge from the communal attempt to recover from the trauma of spatial dispersion after slavery, colonialism, or urbanization (Constantinides 1978; Crosson 2017; Sharp 1991; Shaw 2002). They are often practiced by impoverished groups, such as isolated migrants (e.g., *Haouka* practitioners portrayed in Rouch's *Les maitres fous* are Songhay migrants from Niger, resettled in the peripheries of Accra and Kumasi), embodying and sublimating the need for uprooted individuals to recreate communal bonds and relationships to their new spaces. These groups often depend for their subsistence on the places they came to inhabit but are also more likely to be displaced; they are also liable to suffer processes of heritagization and folklorization (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), which add another layer of phenomenological displacement to spatial dispersion. Reactions to these dynamics, however, may be framed through the cosmologies that tie them together and that connect them to the spaces they inhabit.

By observing the impact of gentrification-led displacement on Casablanca's Gnawa, I will focus on the interplay of urban transformations and religion and on how reactions to policies can assume religious terms (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Lanternari 1960; Ong 2010). Sandra Annunziata, Loretta Lees, and Carla Rivas Alonso (2018) noted that gentrification scholars are overtly attracted by confrontational and politically conscious forms of resistance; nonetheless, when dissent affects individual survival, as for Morocco's "authoritarian urbanism" (Bogaert 2018), communities may elaborate complex, ambiguous, sometimes mythical forms of

reclaiming autonomy for their everyday life. Just as authorities use religion to justify urban policies, the communities affected can frame in religious terms their cultural independence, even superiority, to the forces that confront them. "Survivability" to spatial oppression (Lees and Robinson 2021) may entail claiming alternative histories, higher sources of legitimacy, which are sometimes even intentionally invisible to outsiders (Herzfeld 2015, 2021; Scott 2009). Local reactions to displacement, thus, may take the form of "non-politicized, covert, unintentional, informal, and deliberately invisible practices of everyday life" that involve "the negotiation of ambiguity and mobilization of invisibility" (Annunziata et al. 2018: 394).

A black harlequin in a waterfront mall

On the Spring solstice of 2019 I strolled around the old medina of Casablanca with Abdellah El Asmai, an elderly man I met repeatedly in my fieldwork.[2] For me it was Easter, for him one of the last days of the ritual season of *Ch'abane*, when the Gnawa celebrate most of their rituals. During my fieldwork research I spent most days investigating relocations in the *medina* and most nights with the Gnawa, who still regard the *medina* as a relevant space for their ritual life. I generally preferred to speak with plain attendees to rituals than with the oft-interviewed Gnawa masters, who developed well-tested forms of self-representation to feed anthropologists and other tourists. Abdellah had spent his whole life among the Gnawa but never took a leading role, thus he lacked the self-confidence and obligations of the masters. I was curious to see where his afternoon tour would bring me.

To my surprise, Abdellah guided me outside the dilapidated old city, through the small park of Sidi Bousmara where an old tree lingers over a small shrine, then crossed the walls and reached the heavily developed area around the *medina*. We passed the Royal Navy, in the process of becoming a new residential complex, and reached the *Marina* waterfront development,

still under construction. The shining new buildings were empty of residents, but thousands of people flocked to the area for the inauguration day of the huge *Marina Shopping* mall. Only a few of the many family groups and couples returning to their neighborhoods held more than a couple objects inside their bags. It was unusual to be there with a Gnawa, who are more easily found busking around the small alleys and open squares of Moroccan city centers.

Abdellah seemed less annoyed than me with the invasive presence of the mall, but he was outraged at discovering that all its workers came from the countryside, while "children of the medina" got no jobs there. We sat on a stone bench behind the whitewashed towers, singular-objects architecture whirling to the sky in a spiral of balconies. After a long while I understood that we were looking for a Gnawa crew engaged to perform for the inauguration of the shopping center. We entered the crowded mall, avoided the escalator packed with visitors pointing amazed at the colorful decorations, and finally met Abdellah's friend Mohamed *Guchi* ("left-handed"). He hugged us and led us past the emergency exit, where the performers prepared the parade. The mall contracted acrobats, clowns, parkourers, and the Gnawa, who are often called to announce businesses to the public with a street performance, and to protect them with their blessings (Bruni 2018: 91).

I was introduced to master Hassan Tiger, a young Casablanca musician who had lived in Paris. The backstage rang with jokes between the workers of the mall and the performers preparing their costumes: some wore cheap carnival costumes, such as a pharaoh or Snow White. Suddenly, the Gnawa started banging their drums, and the back doors opened. They played the usual rhythm that inaugurates every ritual, chanting custom invocations as they crossed the crowd of visitors flashing their smartphones. The acrobats raised human towers in front of the luxury boutiques that most visitors probably could not afford, while the Gnawa stomped and jumped to the drums. The performance I had seen during ritual nights, when women trance and audiences drift into astonishing moments of collective effervescence, was recreated inside a symbol of the neoliberal gentrification process that was pushing the Gnawa out of the *medina*. I was happy when Abdellah suggested we leave.

We walked silently back to the *medina* and sat outside a café near the shrine of Sidi Bousmara. While we drank coffee and waited for another Gnawa master, I ventured to ask Abdellah: "Don't you find it outrageous that this spiritual music and performance is staged in a mall with clowns and acrobats?"

His answer startled me: "You don't know what acrobats and clowns are," Abdellah said. "The first circus in Europe came from Morocco. It was a brotherhood from Agadir called *Oulad Sidi Hmed w Musa*, whose members read the Qu'ran and practiced trapeze and human towers. The French were amazed and brought them to Europe as circus artists. But we know what these things are."

Religious gentrification in Casablanca

Many spaces crossed by Abdellah in our afternoon tour are invested with economic, political, and religious meanings, though the latter feature is less visible for external observers. A substantial body of scholarship investigates the social effects of urban transformations in Morocco (Arrif 2001; Balbo and Navez-Bouchanine 1995; El Kahlaoui 2018; Navez-Bouchanine 2012; Zaki 2007), within a thread of social research that highlights how the state uses both neoliberal and Keynesian policies to enforce its authority (Bogaert 2018; Chouiki 1992; Coslado et al. 2013; Rachik 1995), These authors analyze radical transformations such as the disappearance of nomadic economies, the co-optation by the state of the clergy previously financed by communities, and the shifting role of religion (Ait Mous and Ksikes 2016; El Ayadi et al. 2013; Hammoudi 1997; Rachik 2000), but they somewhat overlook the social and religious importance of space: the embeddedness of social practices into specific spatial configurations,

thus the constraints of spatial transformations on the social and religious practices of the working classes.

In the last decades, urban interventions in Morocco aim at restructuring urban environments to mirror a version of Islam based on the power of the king. In Casablanca, the gigantic Gran Mosque Hassan II, built in the 1990s on the waterfront of the central city (Bogaert 2018: 197–203; Cattedra 2001), was erected on a platform reclaimed from the Atlantic Ocean, where were public swimming pools and water slides, echoing Qur'an 11:7: "His throne extends over water." It was financed through a system of alms presented as an endeavor to "reconfessionalise" a city perceived as secular, unfaithful, or disloyal to the king (Rachik 1995). In the early 2000s, the new monarch Mohamed VI inaugurated works to carve a 1.5km Haussmannian boulevard named *Avenue Royale* through the city center, from the mosque to the business district, threatening to displace 60,000 residents. The works resumed after a corruption scandal, and a few thousand people were already relocated to far away districts (Azar 2001; Berry-Chikhaoui 2012; Zerhouani 2001). More developments followed: a belt of corporate hotels between the new Casa Port train station and the refurbished tramway hub of Place des Nations Unies; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-UAE-Moroccan underground speedway *trémie des Almohades*, named after a Berber dynasty that ruled over North Africa and Iberia in the tenth and eleventh centuries; the largest theater and largest shopping mall in Africa—one mimicking the narrow alleys of the *medina*, the other a futuristic egg-shaped metal building called *Morocco Mall*, five miles away from the *medina*, financed by a Saudi investment group, and featuring an internal megaphone system that (unusually for Morocco) transmits the call to prayer five times a day. A silver plaque in the hall reads "By the grace of God."

The new sacred geography of the city replaces a pre-existent pattern made of shrines, sanctuaries, *qobbat* (domes), tombs, and other spaces of worship of the working classes (see Figure 1).

The Grand Mosque and the developments around the *medina* directly confront Sidi Belyout, Sidi Allal Karouani, Lalla Taja, Sidi Bousmara, small vernacular constructions mostly attended by women, at a completely different scale. The gigantic Morocco Mall stands in front of Sidi Abderrahmane, a small island populated by female soothsayers, swarming with street vendors, pushcart tea women in makeshift tents on the beach, busking Gnawa crews. The importance of these places is unquestioned, but public resources are increasingly drained by mega-projects, leaving them to decay. This neglect is not explicitly reclaimed as an attack on non-orthodox forms of Islam (Spadola 2014) as in other Muslim countries; an ambivalent relationship binds together vernacular and aristocratic rituals, and the frontiers between official and popular religion are blurred (Burke 2014; Herzfeld 2015; see Stewart 1989). It is the urban environment that reveals the unbalance between the official and the vernacular: cultural policies celebrate local religious practices, while urban policies obliterate the spaces where they are rooted.[3] One of such spaces is the *medina*, from which the Gnawa have been progressively displaced.

The Gnawa and the city

Recently listed by UNESCO as part of Morocco's "immaterial heritage", and celebrated since the 2000s in a huge festival in the coastal town of Essaouira, the Gnawa is a network of ritual operators that use songs, dance, performance and myth to create ceremonial moments of conviviality (Chlyeh 1998; Khalil 2013; Majdouli 2013; Pâques 1991; Pouchelon 2019; Sum 2011). Gnawa masters (Ar. *M'almin*, s. *m'alem*) and their disciples, almost all males, can be found playing and busking in most cities as wandering musicians; their defining feature are multisensorial ceremonies called *lilat* ("nights"), mostly in the month before Ramadan. *Lilat* last from evening to dawn, occasionally more than one night, and are almost always organized by fe-
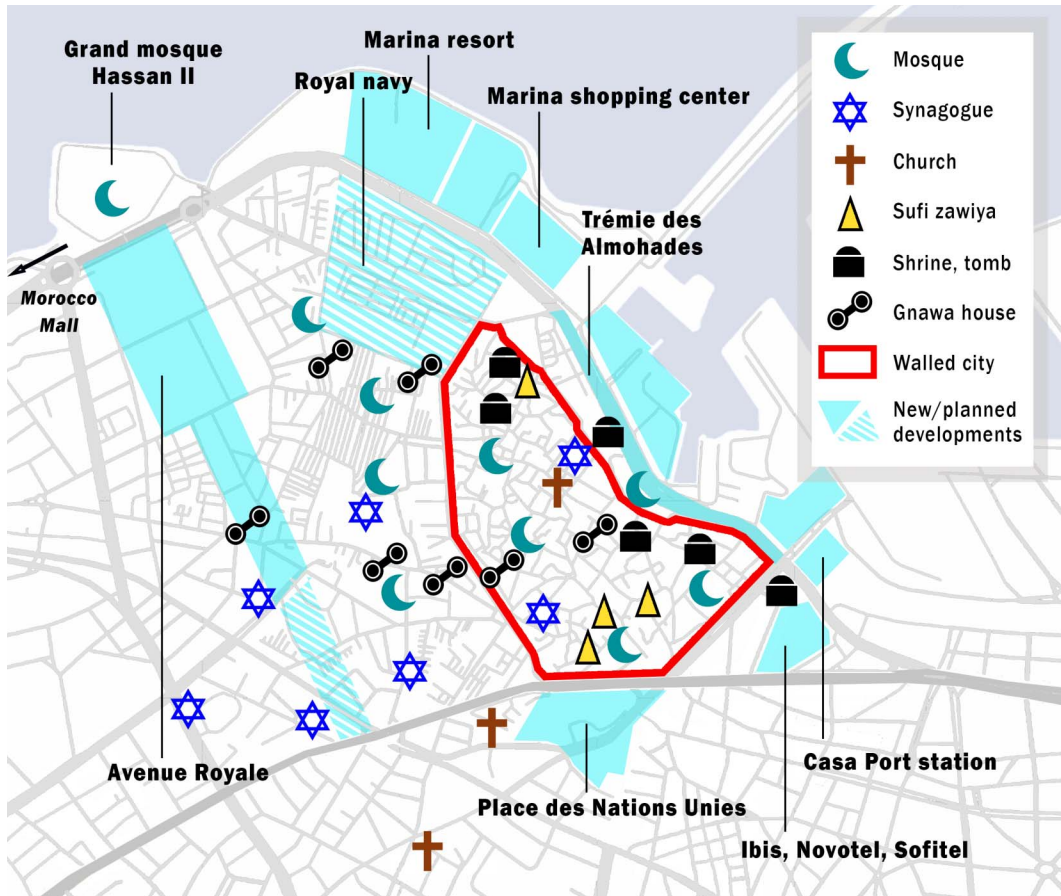
Figure 1. Worship sites and new developments in Casablanca's city center. Source: Author. Design: Giulia Barra

male ritual operators in private houses; most attendees—sometimes over a hundred people—belong to the neighborhood, or to the customers', the organizer's, and the master's families, usually intertwined. During a *lila*, laughter and tension alternate, allowing some of the attendees—generally women—to fall into furious states of consciousness called *jdeb* ("trance"). *Jdeb* is consider beneficial if properly managed, and is attributed to the action of invisible beings called *jnoun* or *mlouk*, whom the music is intended to appease (Crapanzano 1973; Westermarck 1968).

Cherished by many for their lightheartedness, wit, and trickster-like performances, the Gnawa raise contempt among secularists and orthodox Muslims, who see them as backward or pagan. A recent ethnography dubbed them "intercessors of difference" (see Baldassarre 2005; Pouchelon 2019): unusually for Morocco, *lilat* gather people belonging to very different sectors of society, especially the marginalized and excluded. In a *lila* men and women share the same spaces; mentally ill and non-binary people are welcome; black skin complexion is considered the highest symbol of spiritual purity. The musical repertoire merges orthodox Islamic prayers, songs for Sufi saints, invocations of Western African deities, sections for female spirits, and rare but often-mentioned Jewish songs (Driver 2018; Lévy 2015; Mateo Dieste 2014). The ability of the Gnawa to transcend class barriers, ethnic affili-

ations, gender divide, and the color line, makes them more appealing to the lowest social strata than other Sufi brotherhoods that are also popular among working-class Moroccans.[4] Their songs and performances employ the trope of the black-skinned slave: the Gnawa claim roots in the forced displacement of West African people brought to Morocco in slavery in the XVI century (Becker 2020; El Hamel 2012; Ennaji 1998). A song's refrain, for example, says: *jabuna . . . ba'una*, "they brought us . . . they sold us." The historical link between Gnawa and slavery is dubious (Mateo Dieste 2022), and most Gnawa are not black-skinned; the enslaved, however, are celebrated as an image of extreme devotion, ritually reversing social hierarchy. The "spirits" that draw people into trance sublimate collective memories of social suffering (Shaw 2002), represented by the uprooting of racialized "others" to Morocco, into powerful moments of *communitas* across social barriers.

The first Gnawa crew arrived from Marrakech in the 1930s, when Casablanca was the booming economic capital of the French protectorate.[5] They played in restaurants and clubs, or performed *lilat* for locals; most of them also had working-class jobs, such as artisans or dock workers.[6] Less easy to reconstruct is the story of the female ritual operators, the *moqaddemat,* and of the women who led and participated in ceremonies, whose names testify to the heterogeneous composition of the community[7]: as today, young men and women of different origins left their families to become apprentices or ritual helpers of the Gnawa. We could hypothesize that by then there were between 20 and 50 gnawa houses, mostly concentrated in and around the 50-acres walled quarter of the *medina*—where almost 70,000 people lived in 3,500 buildings (Agence Urbaine 2016: 8). Hassan Sansi, prominent Casablanca master, recalls that in the 1970s most Gnawa lived in a part of the *medina* called *Derb Gnawa* ("street of the Gnawa"):

All the Gnawa of the old city did these street shows; they had fun, they put a car-

pet on the floor and brought the tea tray: a Gnawa gathering. So they called it Derb Gnawa….People knew that the Gnawa will be there, and they all go there. On Sundays we had to go there. People found us and watched, they danced [*jdeb*] and gave them money. If somebody wanted a Gnawa or somebody they were looking for, there was no telephone nor messaging: they came and found them on Sundays. Even if I wanted someone to work with me or something, I go to Derb Gnawa.

Derb Gnawa was not an extraordinary settlement. With the exception of small groups in rural areas (Becker 2007), all Moroccan Gnawa operate in urban environments, and especially in the working-class quarters of the inner cities.[8] Casablanca's central city was designed by colonial urban planners as a Muslim zone (*medina qdima*, "old city"), surrounded by Christian and Jewish neighborhoods: the French *centreville*, which includes the quarters around the walled city, near the port and not far from colonial neighborhoods, allowed the Gnawa to not only be in touch with potential customers belonging to very different classes but also maintain some protection from the intrusions of mainstream society. The Gnawa, in fact, are still perceived as social outcasts: their families are often non-conventional, with frequent separations and reunions of masters and *moqaddemat*; they adopt disciples as their children, as well as children of previous unions, including those of the women, something uncommon in most Moroccan families. Though money is at the center of many conversations, the masters never save nor accumulate,[9] and most of them have no bank account; they depend on circuits of favors with their disciples, who help their *m'alem* with everyday activities. This gives the Gnawa an unclassifiable position in society—neither poor nor rich, or, sometimes very poor, sometimes very rich.

As a society "out of place", they elicit attraction and repulsion in their neighbors, who inter-

pret the passion for their rituals and music as an addiction, an invisible contagion. Non-Gnawa people often warned me not to eat Gnawa food, lest I could not stop attending rituals. Najat, grand-daughter of master Hajj 'Awira, told me of a neighbor who had been breastfed by her mother, a Gnawa woman; decades later she kept asking her to perform Gnawa ceremonies, as if she had become addicted. "Poor people!" she said, ironically, "We ruined their lives, may God forgive us." This distance with the rest of Moroccan society is negotiated through rootedness in the peculiar spatial frame of the *medinas*.

While the musical, subjective, spiritual, and therapeutic aspects of the Gnawa ritual have been objects of much research work, little has been written about its social, economic, and spatial aspects. As for most scholarship on religion, its invisible features were privileged over its materiality (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Morgan 2010; Spirito Santo and Tassi 2013). The Gnawa, however, is mainly a way of earning a living for poor people, not at odds with other economic activities of the working classes.[10] Gnawa operators, rather than chamans or *griots*, present themselves primarily as *workers*, members of a professional network whose routine activities include ritual celebrations. Monetary compensations are presented as gifts for a blessing, not as payments, but the activity of evoking trance is called *khdem b l-mluk* ("to work with spirits") and considered a legitimate source of income. Until recently, the Casablanca Gnawa were organized around a *lamin*, a director who overlooked conflicts and the distribution of crews. The quarter called *Derb Gnawa* recalls other quarters named from professions, as *Derb Legbas*, "plaster workers' street" (Ar. *gebs*, "plaster"). Gnawa's social organization seems more a professional corporation than a religious brotherhood (Coslado et al. 2013; Massignon 1920).

Interpreting the Gnawa as an artisanal network and the *lila* as an economic activity depending on urban space, displacement appears not only as spatial dispersal but also as the dispossession of a means of production. Studies of spirit cults and rituals (Constantinides 1978; Masquelier 2001) often focus on the *portability* of religious practices (Casselberry and McAlister 2019; Castor 2017; Csordas 2009), but the spatial features of rituals receive little attention. Like other communities of the central city, in fact, the cluster of Derb Gnawa suffered the exclusionary displacement associated with gentrification, growing housing prices, and real estate speculation.[11] Most Gnawa were not owners but renters or *zinataires* (Ar. *Zina*), permanent renters with a customary right to land use. As the renewed interest of real estate developers in the medina pushed the land and housing prices up, the complex system of land tenure that bound together owners and renters collapsed. Between 1982 and 2004 the medina shrunk from 53,000 to 47,000 people (Agence Urbaine 2016: 8); many Gnawa families were forced to leave, just when the popularity of Gnawa music increased their possibilities to travel abroad.[12] As a consequence, the Gnawa community today is scattered over a wider area, including peripheral neighborhoods such as Hay Mohammadi: these homogeneously working-class places grant less opportunities to "intercede differences" and develop economic activities. Today there are still Gnawa houses or workshops in central Casablanca, but only one Gnawa family permanently lives in *Derb Gnawa*. The departure of masters was possibly less relevant than the departure of the thousands of people who attended rituals, pushed out either by forced displacement linked to the Avenue Royale or by the displacement pressure consequent to rent increases. As put by Hassan Sansi:

> Now nothing is left. Here in Derb Gnawa people left, they left! Now the old things do not exist anymore. Now the day of Mouloud you go to Meknes, to Marrakech, to Moulay Brahim or Tamesloht, and that's all for the rituals. Abdenbi is working in Sbata, I work in the medina, the other one works in Hay Mohammadi. Each one in a different place.

Proximity as a means of production

Since Casablanca developed during the French protectorate, its walled center is smaller than other Moroccan medinas and was always surrounded by the pressure of modernist urbanism. The medina, however, possesses most features of the "Islamic city" described by Janet Abu-Lughod (1987). One is the close proximity between different degrees of semi-private/ semi-public spaces. A short distance separates the open space of Bab Marrakech where the Gnawa busk in the streets, from the semi-concealed area of Derb Gnawa, whose regulars are mostly familiar with the rituals. This proximity supports social forms based on negotiations of different levels of visibility, based upon a shared understanding of rights and limits over space. These gaps should not be overlapped with European categories such as private/public, whose limits for Muslim societies have already been noticed (Dupret and Ferrié 2005), nor should uses of space be interpreted through the profane/sacred binary, of little use in the Arab world.[13] I find more useful the polarity between "off-stage" and "on-display" proposed by Andrew Shryock (2004). Some Gnawa activities, in fact, imply the deliberate exposure of bodies to the gazes of external people; others require instead spaces *concealed* from view, protected environments for ritual ceremonies. These poles reflect at different levels of the ritual space, in a pattern of "fractal recursivity" (Irvine and Gal 2000): layers of "on-display" and "off-stage" interact in the setting of the neighborhood, of the gnawa house, and even of the room that hosts a *lila*.

The ritual life of the Gnawa is based on a constant transition between these levels of intimacy. People that engage the Gnawa in the streets may then remain in touch and join a *lila*, or request a ceremony. A crew that gathers for a ritual may perform in a public square where the same assistants will mingle with tourists. During the *Njoum Gnawa* festival in Casablanca's *Sqala* belvedere, I witnessed to a public Gnawa performance that drew a woman in

the audience into a furious trance; the *moqaddemat* spontaneously offered help to appease the trance, but her husband was too afraid to accept the offer. It is very likely that the woman would later try to join a *lila*, possibly concealing it from her husband. The importance of these transitions is confirmed by the fact that every *lila* opens with the street parade called *L'ada* ("the habit"), which inaugurates the ritual by crossing the frontier between the "on-display" space of the street to the "off-stage" zone of a Gnawa house. Spiritual trance is evoked by the ritual crossing of the door, the spatial threshold of intimacy (Stavrides 2019), which connects the two polarities of the street and the house; spirits enable and represent the overcoming of borders, thus benefiting the complex urban fabric of the *medinas*, which allows the constant negotiation of visibility.

The spatial dispersal of the Gnawa community precisely affects the *proximity* between visible and concealed spaces. Researchers have announced the decay of spirit cults since the early twentieth century: Malinowski introduced Edward Westermarck's 1926 work by claiming that spirit beliefs would "soon die" as an effect of the "cold light of civilization recently poured in…by machine gun and airplane" (Westermarck 1968: ii); later, fears that the Gnawa festival would threaten the "authenticity" of the Gnawa were also exaggerated. These predictions reflect a patronizing attitude (see Ouaknine-Yekutieli 2015); spirit cults, instead, absorb and sublimate modern artifacts,[14] media technologies help the Gnawa to reach new customers (Behrend et al. 2015), and stage concerts integrate the usual Gnawa street performances (Becker 2020; Kapchan 2007, 2008; Majdouli 2013; Sum 2011; Witulski 2018). Far from a monolithic "traditional" practice threatened by modernity, the Gnawa always coped with forces such as colonialism, tourism, folklorization, and commodification (Becker 2020). Gentrification, however, separates different spatial functions and sectors of society. In the segregated colonial city (Abu-Lughod 1980; Rabinow 1989) the Gnawa carved a threshold space to overcome divisions of race,

gender, and class; gentrification reiterates the "colonial culture" of segregation (Porter 2010), isolating groups of citizens into distant enclaves. Echoing a seminal study on London, I understand the interaction between gentrification and the Gnawa as "the effect of one of the newest upon one of the oldest of our social institutions" (Young and Willmott 1954: 11); an institution producing integration clashes with an institution producing disintegration.

This urban dynamic, however, did not affect ritual participation.[15] During the last ritual season I attended before the COVID-19 outbreak, up to five *lilat* were celebrated in a single night, with hundreds of attendees, including many young disciples and fans, though mostly in peripheral neighborhood, as far away as 20 kms from the *medina*. Meanwhile, heritagization and the UNESCO protection drew increasing numbers of Moroccans to "on-display" Gnawa performances, though visible spaces of streets and squares were replaced by the mediatic arenas of festivals, concerts, TV, and YouTube. As in other contexts (Al-Sabouni 2016; Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu 2008), both polarities grew; what was severed is *proximity*, the interaction between them, guaranteed by the physical space of the medina, which is becoming looser. The street and the house drift increasingly apart, and the permeability between them wanes.

Cutting out access to the means of production of streets and houses, gentrification increases dependency from the new means of production of festivals and show business. One of the consequences of this drift, to my eyes, is gender balance. While the displayed part is the monopoly of male masters and disciples, the transition to the intimate spaces of ritual belongs to *moqaddemat*, who guarantee the connection between the visible presence of Gnawa crews in the city and the requests from neighbors and customers. *Moqaddemat* held the keys to the success or failure of masters, who rely on them to work; but as the gap between streets and houses widens, this threshold figure loses ground. Many young men are attracted to the Gnawa in the hope of entering the boards of fes-

tivals, but less and less young women pursue the career of the *moqaddema*. Some *moqaddemat* are recently trying to enter the mediasphere through documentary movies or webpages, but the elder *moqaddemat* strive to earn a living. It is significant that several young Gnawa women are pursuing commercial success by refusing the unfashionable role of the female priestess and presenting themselves as *masters*, a role traditionally played by men, which grants easier access to festivals and concerts.[16] This interesting attempt to challenge gender roles elicits enthusiastic approval among Europeans concerned in "saving" Muslim women (see Abu-Lughod 2015; Ahmed 1992), but it may also be seen as a reaction to a patriarchal drift that places all emphasis on the more acceptable masculine figure of the *master*, obliterating the crucial roles of women as priestess, soothsayers, organizers of rituals, and crossers of thresholds.

Conclusions

The Casablanca Gnawa community seems to be suffering from both a physical and a phenomenological displacement: not only an eviction from the city but also an eviction from the way the city is used and interpreted (Davidson and Lees 2010; Zhang and He 2018). These transformations, however, seem to elicit neither grief nor direct confrontation. Abdellah's answer to my indignation in the shopping mall hints at the idea that the Gnawa are confronting spatial constraints by appealing to completely different semantic spheres than those generally mobilized against forced removal.

Most Casablanca Gnawa, for example, seem to express appreciation for the urban transformations, without acknowledging the connection to the distress suffered by their vulnerable members, clear to my eyes, and made evident in conversations with Gnawa women. Even old masters who condemn the commodification of Gnawa never put it in relation with spatial transformations. Before engaging in research work, I assumed that the Gnawa would use the

trope of the mythical displacement of the West African slaves to express the "pain of moving, moving, moving" caused by gentrification (Watt 2018)—also because, in my interviews with people evicted in Casablanca, I often recognized expressions that recalled the Gnawa refrain *jabuna . . . ba'una*, "they brought us . . . they sold us" (Guarino and Portelli 2021; Portelli and Lees 2018). I also imagined that this trope was used to refer to the new constraints imposed by transnational migration. None of my informants, however, seemed to connect the mythical diaspora to these new displacements, which seem to be framed in completely different terms.

This absence speaks to the peculiar construction of the Gnawa, which seems not to work through the explicit condemnation of the violence suffered and its perpetrators. By sublimating slavery in a mythical image of spiritual purity, the Gnawa manage *not to acknowledge* the violence they suffered and to assert the continuity of their social structure. The Gnawa often use a language of admiration and flattery to address political and economic powers, such as the king, the State, the military, the colonizers, the European. While some observers of the Gnawa highlight their countercultural and even rebellious ethos (Aidi 2014), others remark on their explicit loyalty to the state (Claisse 2003). In fact, the Gnawa seem to cope with oppression and injustice by implicitly claiming a legitimacy that is higher than the powers that govern them. This acknowledgment should not bring us to justify spatial disruption but rather to acknowledge the immense power of the discursive strategies through which communities manage to survive it. As in Michael Herzfeld's *subversive archaism* (2021), marginalized people can confront oppression by claiming identities that are purer, thus more powerful, than those of their oppressors.

Edward P. Thompson (1963) showed that struggles over representation and self-representation are a crucial part of class struggle and can prelude to battles over materiality. The symbolic demolition of a place, of its inhabitants, of its culture, is always the first step to material destruction. By refusing to accept the humiliation of forced displacement, such as they rejected and sublimated slavery, Casablanca's Gnawa create a "spiritual citizenship" (Castor 2017) that connects vulnerable people across divisions, refusing submission through the ritual mastery of submission itself. As struggles against land grabbing, extraction of value from places and bodies, and repression of dissent, are voiced by growing sectors of the world population, it is important to acknowledge strategies of "survivability" to systemic oppression performed by the urban poor (Annunziata et al. 2018).

By subverting the narrative and the imaginaries that support oppression, ritual practices like the Gnawa provide important insights to imagine layers of meaning superior to those of the oppressors. Forms may differ from those we are used to in Europe or North America—but, as Thompson (1963: 13) writes, "Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won."

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Notes

1. I will avoid this definition, whose Christian implications complicate the understanding of the ritual.
2. Real names are employed in this article (with informants' consent, and approval from institutional ethic review), since it also aims at contributing to the oral history of Casablanca's Gnawa.
3. In Essaouira, the Gnawa are outpriced from the center, and the sanctuary of Sidi Magdoul (where the first Gnawa festival was held) was fenced off to build a residential estate. According to the king's advisor André Azoulai, the foreclosure was promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.
4. Gnawa share features and repertoire with the Sufi groups Jillala, 'Issawa, Hamadsha (Brunel 1926; Crapanzano 1973), but lacking written tradition and a founding saint, their Sufi affiliation is dubious.
5. Historical reconstruction based on interviews with Abdenbi El Gadari, Hassan Sansi, Najat Chikai, Hasna Telmi, Bâ Bensalem Zriaa, Antonio Baldassarre; conversations with Khalil Mounji, Abderrazzak Telmi, and the late Said Oughassel Benthami. The original names have been kept, with consent of the people interviewed; this policy was granted IRB approval.
6. The first Casablanca *m'alem*, Lahcen "Derb", was followed by *m'almin* Hajj Awira and Mohamed Zourhbat "Sam", one of the most famous Gnawa musicians of all times. In the 1960s came Abdelkader Benthami and Hmida Boussou; then Allal Aglaou, Abdenbi El Gadari, all from Marrakech, and Abderrahmane Kirouch "Paco" from Essaouira, part of the mythical band *Nass El-Ghiwane*. Sam was a carpenter; Boussou a tanner; another master, Arkaoui, carried imported goods from the port with horses.
7. Some names, such as Khadduj bent Msoud, are typical of slave descendants; others, such as Latifa Bennani, show aristocratic (sharifian) descent.
8. Such as Bab Aylan in Marrakech, home of *m'almin* Hmida Boussou and L'ayachi Bakbou; Essaouira's medina, where lived Mahmoud Guenia (1951–2015); Tangiers's medina hosts Abdellah El Gourd's *Dar Gnawa* club. There

is a *derb Gnawa* also in Ksar Kbir, where lives *m'alem* Bâ Miloud. The urban character distinguishes the Gnawa from the Sufi brotherhoods 'Aissawa, Hamadsha and Jillala, whose sanctuaries are also in the countryside. On Tangiers, see Alami 2021.

9. According to the late Essaouira master Mohamed Dardar, in the song *Zid el Mal* ("add more money") money is a metaphor for spiritual knowledge (as in Graeber's insight on the sacred origin of currency).
10. Most scholars of Gnawa focused on a single master or crew. In my work I compared groups in Casablanca, Essaouira, Marrakech, Rabat, Tetuan, Ksar Kbir, Larache, Tangiers, Marseille, Barcelona, Rome, Bologna, Brussels, and New York (on Gnawa diaspora: Sechehaye and Weisser 2018).
11. See Dalila Ennadre's movie *El Batalett: Femmes of the medina* (2000).
12. Hmida Boussou's son Hassan moved to Paris; Abdelkader Benthami's son Sa'id, to Madrid; he returned to Casablanca in the 2000s and passed away in 2021, after catching COVID-19 in a *lila*. On European Gnawa, see the recent CDs *Jola – Hidden Gnawa Music in Brussels* (Muziekpublique, 2020) edited by Hélène Sechehaye, and *Gnawa Rumi – Musica diasporica marocchina in Italia* (Nota, 2022) edited by Hélène Sechehaye and Stefano Portelli.
13. Kapchan (2007: 38) remarked that the *lila* ritual is public, even if not open to everybody.
14. Ethnomusicologist Antonio Baldassarre recalls that when the first electric amp entered a *lila*, the Gnawa feared spirits would disapprove.
15. Such as happened with Apulian *pizzica tarantata* (Italy), annihilated by urbanization and industrialization.
16. Two female Gnawa bands are Essaouira's *Bnate Gania* and Casablanca's *Bnat Timbuktu*, led by Asma' Hamzaoui, daughter of a Casablanca master and *moqaddema* originally based in the *medina*.

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