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Dissenting poses

Marginal youth, viral aesthetics, and affective politics in neoliberal Morocco

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Abstract: In the spring of 2014, an unprecedented wave of police raids swept over every lower-class (*sha'abi*) neighborhood across Morocco. Dubbed “Operation Tcharmil,” the raids targeted young, lower-class men that matched viral online images in which track-suit-wearing teens boastfully displayed status objects and white weapons. Drawing on the theoretical apparatus of the “affective turn,” in this article I unpack the structural and historical factors that shaped both popular reactions and policing actions toward the sudden, online visibility of a politically and economically disenfranchised group. I situate this episode within current debates about the entanglement of neoliberal disciplinary regimes and the reproduction of particular social orders, and argue that attention to such outbursts can help us revitalize and rethink existing notions of class.

Keywords: affect, margins, neoliberal, policing, selfies, Tcharmil, urban, youth

It was a late Saturday afternoon in the spring of 2014 when I was leaving the neighborhood of Hay Mohammadi after having spent the day at a local *jam'iyya* (community organization) observing the activities of their “street arts” youth club. As I stepped out onto the curb and headed for home, I noticed that an unusual level of commotion had overtaken the area. Four police vans were parked at the top of the street and policemen in riot gear were running up and down the narrower alleys that branched out from the one I was on. Surprised, I asked Samir,¹ one of the young boys I recognized from the *derb* (alleyway), what was going on. Seeming to share

my confusion, he shook his head, also staring in the direction of the police vans. “Maybe they are chasing away the street vendors?” he mused, as we continued to watch the incomprehensible presence of such a show of force. Another boy ran up and edified us: “They are picking up everyone without an ID,” he breathlessly managed to say. Trying to make light of what seemed like an unusual situation, I said I might get in trouble because I always forgot to carry my ID. The second boy answered: “No. They’re only picking up the boys. Especially the ones who have the *banda* haircuts.” What he meant was the fashionable cut all teenage boys had been getting



that year, a Mohawk style that emulated football players' haircuts and had become a signature look, first among the local Ultras (organized football supporters) then for young *sha'abi* (lower-class) men around the country (figure 1).

In the following days and months, similar raids swept every lower-class neighborhood in large cities across Morocco, drawing national media attention. An official report later claimed that a staggering 103,714 arrests had been carried out nationally in the first three months of 2014 (El Affas 2014). Officially, the action was described by the authorities as a fight against

a growing "sense of insecurity due to delinquency,"³ which was presumably getting out of hand in these neighborhoods. In the press, the timing of the state's action was linked to the intervention of King Mohammad VI a month after the armed robbery of a hair salon in an upscale neighborhood of Casablanca, followed by the mobbing of a local professional football player (Jaabouk 2014). Although the aforementioned crimes were not unprecedented and there had been no official statement from the monarch, according to speculation in the media, the King had demanded the Interior Minister increase



FIGURE 1. Young man sporting a *banda* haircut. Source: *Tchârmil* Public Facebook Group.²

efforts to ensure that citizens feel safe in their cities.⁴ Before the authorities unleashed this wave of arrests targeting male youth from precarious neighborhoods, a growing clamor of voices on online forums and Internet groups had also been demanding an end to what they described as the “war” that was raging on the streets of Casablanca, claiming that a new class of youth were threatening the everyday life of “honest citizens.” How was it that an apparent youth fad triggered not only an intense episode of public alarm but also a sweeping police operation? And what can this episode illuminate about social and political dynamics in contemporary Morocco?

This article draws on ethnographic material gathered through sixteen months of fieldwork between 2013–2014 (and shorter visits between 2016–2018) in and around Hay Mohammadi, a mythicized but maligned area of Casablanca. It is part of a broader project investigating the (re)production and spatialization of socio-economic difference in urban Morocco since colonial times, using long-term participant-observation and online ethnography that prioritizes the experience and practices of marginalized communities, while also attending to governmental and non-governmental actors. Early on in my fieldwork, I began volunteering twice a week at the above-mentioned community-based organization (CBO),⁵ and had been following the activities of their youth programs for a year when the police raids began in 2014. I did not work with the youth who were arrested during the raids or who were involved in local crime. Moulay Maarouf and Tayeb Belghazi’s (2018) work based in Rabat complements mine in this regard. Instead, my analysis here is primarily focused on the socio-cultural categories, anxieties, and debates that emerged around and were co-productive of the moral panic mobilized throughout this policing episode.

I draw on the rich theoretical apparatus of the “affective turn” (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011) to make sense of the intensely moralizing responses elicited by the visibility of a perceived violent “other,” and the wider urban context in

which both are embedded. The “turn to affect” has allowed urban ethnographers working in places marked by violence to home in on the productive force of concepts like “threat” (see Caldeira 2000). As Brian Massumi points out, by paying attention to how a “felt reality of threat legitimates preemptive action” we can elucidate how actual facts become superseded by “affective facts of fear” (2010: 54). In Morocco, as elsewhere, the expansion and entrenchment of urban inequality has been accompanied by a proliferation of such “affective facts” across socio-economic classes. Middle and upper-class voices, their anxieties and the affective economies they mobilize have become particularly instrumental to how social fears are dealt with in Morocco. In this article I consider the interplay between these voices and the institutional popularization of neoliberal logics that shape not only official policies addressing inequality, but increasingly feed off and back into popular conservative discourses about civic rights.

I begin by situating the episode of the police raids against the background of historical and political forces responsible for the spatialization of inequality and the production of particular affects about urban lower-class areas and the communities that inhabit them. I then recount the unfolding of the police raids and reconstruct the main debates they helped to fuel. I argue that these debates are rooted in a narrative shift that promotes a reductive view of “responsibilization,” particularly with regard to the lower classes. As I elaborate below, this shift has been aided by the progressive delegitimization of social justice discourses and their replacement with agendas framed by a politically neutralizing human-rights approach as a consequence of the (incomplete) neoliberalization of Moroccan spaces and forms of governance. I use neoliberalism both in the sense of a structural force and as an ideological agenda that prescribes models for economic and socio-political subjectivities (Ganti 2014). In exploring how in this context discussions about class and associated struggles and grievances become displaced onto other markers of difference—such as embodied

ways of being in space, tastes, and education (or the perceived lack thereof)—my aim is to revitalize debates on class and its usefulness for a historical anthropology of lived neoliberalism. The unprecedented role of online spaces and “viral” images during this episode leads me to argue that online platforms are emerging as a significant discursive space through which claims about belonging are increasingly mediated and negotiated in unstable and affect-laden ways. I conclude that both the moral panic and heightened policing of young, urban lower-class male bodies as a consequence of their apparent sudden (online) visibility point to growing tensions inherent in the reproduction of local and global social orders, while also highlighting the unsettling affinity between neoliberal logics and authoritarian practices.

Situating the margins

Currently home to more than five million inhabitants living in an increasingly socially and spatially fragmented urban landscape marked by stark economic disparities (United Nations Habitat 2008: 74; see Haut Commissariat au Plan 2018), Casablanca bears little resemblance to its Hollywood aura. In the contemporary Moroccan social imaginary, the city is frequently associated with urban sprawl, pollution, a high degree of socio-economic decay and anomie, but also wealthy enclaves sporting names like *Prestigia* (Fr.) and a spirit of ruthless individualism and market liberalization connected to the city’s semi-official identity as Morocco’s commercial capital. A twenty-first-century “neoliberal metropolis” (Bahmad 2013: 17), the history of Casablanca’s development is synonymous with colonial industrial expansion and extraction of cheap labor, technocratic methods of urban planning, and attempts to control potentially volatile populations (Rabinow 1995; Rachik 2002).

Considered a mythical neighborhood in the history of Morocco, Hay Mohammadi epitomizes many of the problems deemed symptom-

atic of a global condition of urban marginality. Home to North Africa’s oldest and once largest slum, and celebrated for its dynamic labor unions that played a crucial role in the anti-colonial struggle, the neighborhood fell into disfavor during the reign of King Hassan II (1961–1999), who ushered in a period that is now commonly known as the “Years of Lead” (*Sanawāt ar-Ruṣāṣ*) due to the unprecedented brutality with which all forms of dissent were repressed (Miller 2013: 162–184). The 1965 student riots constitute a turning point in this timeline. Sparked by new education regulations meant to limit the access of an estimated 60 percent of high school students to a Baccalaureate degree, and thus a lifeline out of poverty and into the middle class, the riots began with school strikes and sit-ins and ended in city-wide unrest that brought together laborers, *bidonville* (slum) dwellers, and students. In the aftermath, union and student activists alike were forcefully disappeared and sent to secret detention centers where they were either killed or held and tortured for years. Hay Mohammadi is infamous for housing one of a few urban subterranean torture centers in the country. Militants were held mere feet away from residential quarters, while their jailers lived in modernist apartment blocks above ground (Slyomovics 2012).

The official acknowledgement of these crimes in the late 1990s and the subsequent process of truth seeking and communal and individual reconciliation (Dennerlein 2012) has led to the area’s association with a variety of affective registers (see Navaro-Yashin 2012). Inhabitants have found the opportunity to speak and reflect not only on the history of violence marking neighborhood spaces, but also on the continuities between the current state of material and social degradation and past regime actions meant to punish and ghettoize the community (Strava 2017: 333). These conditions were further exacerbated by the introduction of structural adjustment policies and market liberalization reforms in the 1980s, which led to massive job losses in local industry and a significant growth in informal activities (see Cohen

2004). So while outsiders can safely commend official commemoration efforts (oral history projects, heritage initiatives), they are less likely to consider the impact of economic reforms on the community, and frequently fault the inhabitants of the neighborhood for what they see as the degradation and involution of the area. With youth unemployment on the rise,⁶ inhabitants from Hay Mohammadi have had to contend with an image of the neighborhood that is colored by such epithets as “open air prison” or “cemented slum” (*bidonville en béton*). These maligning stereotypes were particularly re-enforced after the suicide attacks of 2003 and 2007, which targeted upscale hotels, restaurants and night clubs in the city center. Perpetrated by un(der)employed, radicalized youth from the impoverished and disenfranchised slum quarters adjacent to Hay Mohammadi, the attacks heightened state and popular discourse criminalizing lower-class areas (Cavatorta 2006). This has been accompanied by the re-emergence of a powerful popular argument linking a resurgence in Islamic extremism with “disenfranchised urban youth” (see Bayat 2007). It is thus that at the time of the raids, like in other places in the region, people between the ages of 15 and 30 constituted almost two-thirds of the neighborhood’s demographic make-up, posing both local concerns about their proper place and role in society, as well as significant educational, political and economic issues for the Moroccan state (Bogaert and Emperador 2011).

Posing dissent

At the time of the raids, it was difficult to disentangle the ideas and perceptions of those who decried a lack of safety on the streets of Casablanca and their identification of a particular typology of the male aggressor from the actual emergence of a new masculine youth subculture on the urban margins, as prevailing discourse seemed to suggest. Very soon, though, a term for designating this “new type” of male delinquent appeared. This term was Tcharmil, quickly gain-

ing in currency thanks to the eponymous police raids (officially named “Operation Tcharmil”). While it was difficult to accurately date the term’s appearance, its spread was aided by the use of online social networks for the display and circulation of photos intended to capture what appeared to be a dress-style. In colloquial Arabic, *charmoula* signifies a marinade or seasoning used for the preparation of meat. Most of my interlocutors speculated that the reason why the term *mcharmil* (someone taking on the Tcharmil style) caught on was owed to its derivation from the butcher knives employed in the preparation of *charmoula* and donned by some of the youth in the circulated photos as a way of impressing viewers (figure 2).

As the raids went on for months and both online and conventional media continued to report on them, I spoke to young men in Hay Mohammadi about how they saw the unfolding debates and panic. Youness, one of the skillful break-dancers from the neighborhood who regularly attended the “street arts” program and favored a dress style that might identify him as *mcharmil*, claimed that in his understanding Tcharmil was merely a new label for an existing fashion. The *banda* haircuts were paired with tracksuits, visible white socks sticking from brand-name sport shoes, and large gold watches.⁷ Youness concluded it was a fad and a new one would soon replace it, and thus did not take seriously the boastful self-association with crime displayed in some of the circulated photos. The general consensus seemed to be that at some point in 2013 young, mostly lower-class, men began posing in these “outfits” for photos that they would then upload to their own social media profiles or several “fan groups.”⁸ The availability and affordability of smartphones in recent years meant that youth from places like Hay Mohammadi were now also producers and not just consumers of “social photography” (see Jurgenson 2019). The aesthetic effect and look displayed in these images was far from novel in its reference to global hip-hop culture, captured in boastful display of status symbols like gold watches, “gangsta” dress styles, and hyper-



FIGURE 2. Example of a Tcharmil pose with butcher knives. Source: *Tchârmil* Public Facebook Group.

masculinized poses against derelict urban architectures (figure 3). The originally intended audience for the images seemed to mainly consist of youth from similar socio-geographical contexts—lower-class, densely populated neighborhoods on the outskirts of large cities—places that ordinary Moroccans circumvent or avoid, unless they inhabit them. With the viral spread of this selfie-meme, these spaces now extended into shared online platforms and assertively claimed their presence.

As such, Tcharmil was overwhelmingly defined by its viral and virtual visibility. This is not to suggest that the young men involved in or associated with Tcharmil had been invisible either on- or offline before. But as increasing socio-spatial fragmentation and “enclavization” has come to mark urban space in Morocco (Newcomb 2017: 126), and the proximity of (undesirable) social “others” can be managed by carefully maintained degrees of economic and physical barriers (see Schielke 2012: 47), young lower-class men in Casablanca are both frequently confined to their neighborhoods and must carefully curate their appearance when entering spaces that are associated with the (upper) middle classes (see Ghannam 2011). Among my young interlocutors in Hay Mohammadi, “sel-

fie” photography in general and Tcharmil poses in particular, they claimed, was a way of documenting their lives and experimenting with fashions outside of school or parental control. As Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) argue, such internal “selfie-economies” are produced by a complex entanglement of motivations that cannot be reduced to pathologizing labels like “narcissism” or straightforward rebellion. Deniz Yonucu’s (2011) and Pascal Menoret’s (2014) analyses of rebellious youth have suggested that such provocative appropriations and ostentatious displays of what the state labels delinquent behavior need to be understood as an ambivalently articulated response and affective reaction to the violence that neoliberal forces, coupled with the local presence of authoritarian regimes, inflict on young lower-class male bodies and lives. Certain Moroccan journalists reporting on the raids seemed to share this view, asking that this fad be critically read for ways it spoke to growing social inequalities in the country (Majdi 2014). Most reports in the media, however, were more inclined to describe the *mcharmilin* (plural) as engaging in acts of intimidation by displaying butcher knives and stolen goods (as was speculated about the smartphones and gold watches). Some of the photos that were circu-

lated online as illustrations of Tcharmil did appear to be connected to illegal activities such as the sale and consumption of hashish. This type of photo never featured people, but depicted exclusively an inventory of illicit and *haram* substances like cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs (figure 3). These photos, together with those in which

teenage boys posed with long butcher knives, were, however, a minority among the multitude of images depicting young boys (and occasionally girls) wearing track suits and proudly displaying status objects like smartphones, brand name clothing or sports shoes considered fashionable at the time (figure 4).



FIGURE 3. Tcharmil “still life,” in which drugs, cash, and status objects like sneakers are displayed against a Moroccan salon background. Source: *Tchârmil* Public Facebook Group.



FIGURE 4. Example of young women posing “Tcharmil style.” Source: *Tchârmil* Public Facebook Group.

According to rumors circulated through on-line groups and also recounted by my research participants, the police initially tried to have the images found on the main online Tcharmil forum removed. As Luise White has observed, rumors can “be a source of local history that reveal the passionate contradictions and anx-

ieties of specific places with specific histories” (2000: 83). Morocco’s recent history is rife with such class anxieties that have been politically and economically stoked, as public education, the main motor for social advancement in post-independence Morocco, can no longer guarantee a middle-class position in an era of shrinking

labor markets and increasing financialization of urban space (Bogaert and Emperador 2011; Cohen 2004: 68–70). Moreover, the appeal of these rumors points toward the power exerted on the social imaginary by a strategy of dealing with growing inequality by progressively obscuring or concealing those whose precarious living circumstances run counter to official discourses that paint Morocco as North Africa's aspiring economic powerhouse (Strava 2018). What eventually happened was that the raids proceeded to remove from the street young lower-class men who matched the images and give them “disciplinary haircuts” while in custody (Crétois 2014).

Aesthetics and/as neoliberal affective politics

Newspapers, weekly magazines, TV news, and Internet sites maintained a regular cycle of reporting on both the arrests as well as their justification for months to follow. The authors of some of the online articles wondered whether this phenomenon was indeed all that new and not just another passing trend. Several commentators in a dedicated online group cautioned against reifying it as a “gang movement” when it appeared to be just a fashion.⁹ An opinion piece in the French-language weekly *TelQuel* cautioned against the criminalization of an entire group of already disadvantaged young people,¹⁰ and, after one young man who had been summarily detained during one of the police raids committed suicide while in custody, the president of the National Centre for the Study of Human Rights and Democracy (CEDHD) stepped in to plead for “a more reasoned response” on the part of the authorities (Strava 2018). Speaking with former political detainee and human rights activist Fatna El Bouih about the raids, she echoed commentators in the press who reminded the public that such arbitrary measures of enforcing security were reminiscent of the dreaded, repressive era of the “Years of Lead,” and should therefore be reconsidered.¹¹

The arrests nevertheless continued unabated, while the conversations I followed in the online discussion forum “March against insecurity [in Casablanca],” the largest dedicated to middle-class voices concerned with a purported rise in criminality, derided the idea of human rights violations and quickly devolved into calls for harsh punitive measures, with some suggesting re-opening secret detention centers for the *mcharmilin*. This common claim put forth that those who took on the style should expect repercussions, demonstrating what Stuart Elden calls “a disturbing faith in the efficacy of state violence” to address a sudden outburst of public disturbance (2011). A small number of commentators in the same forum suggested that the socio-political root-causes behind the emergence of this “youth subculture” should be considered, but a considerably larger number dismissed their arguments as *une foutaise* (nonsense). As the group reached 21,000 members at the peak of the police raids, a frequent commenter wrote: “One must stop finding excuses [for these acts] (the economy, politics, education, poverty). Citizenship is not only about rights, but also responsibilities.”¹² In the same thread, others proposed retaliatory measures against anyone matching the Tcharmil description: “We should not wait until they [*mcharmilin*] attack you and then we arrest them. Too bad for those who wear a suspicious haircut or dress [style]. There is a price to pay. In any case if this brings some peace to the citizen it is not bad.”¹³

The aesthetics of Tcharmil—captured through gritty, low-quality phone images, and the association with counterfeit merchandise—further aided in this “othering” by not lending itself easily to middle-class appropriation. Instead, the Tcharmil youth were quickly presented with a foil: the Kilimini child. A popular culture term in circulation for much longer than Tcharmil, the origins and precise etymology of Kilimini are also blurred. One of my long-time interlocutors claimed that it was derived from the mispronunciation of the French [*Qu'est-ce*] *qu'il/elle est mignon(e)* meaning “isn't he/she sweet,” an exclamation that was ostensibly associated with

middle-class children who behaved according to social norms, but also used as a way of mocking middle-class affectations or those who were seen to lack “street-smarts.” Other interlocutors from Hay Mohammadi agreed on this etymology, stressing that Kilimini youth had early bedtimes, never used swear words, spoke good French, and dressed in a clean, “proper” fashion. Implied, but not stated, was the fact that in order to be a Kilimini child, one needed to be part of a middle-class family with the socio-economic means to provide such things as French education and clean, fashionable clothes. Claiming to bridge this dichotomy, another online group was constituted: “Anticharmil or the incitation to reading.” According to its founders, the group attempted to go beyond opposing a Kilimini stereotype in its response to the Tcharmil aesthetic.¹⁴ In reaction to the photos of sports shoes, gold watches and illegal substances, the Anticharmil encouraged Moroccan youth to take and circulate photos of their books, or themselves reading. In an open letter, illustrated with an image of a young woman surrounded by book covers in Arabic and French (figure 5), the creators of the group called for a halt to the stigmatization and criminalization of urban youth

(Azzami 2014). The words of the letter appeared to carry less affective weight than the images accompanying it, and the solidarity march proposed under the banner “We are all Moroccan youth” never took place. The contrast posed by the images of aspirational-looking, cultured youth against those of presumably crass if not outright delinquent, tracksuit-wearing teenagers potently demonstrated the social performativity of the medium, but also its susceptibility to index reductive readings of difference.

The growing availability in recent years and intensified use of new media technologies and platforms has led to a vast and global proliferation of grassroots movements, forms of contestation, and alternative political engagement. Kerstin Schankweiler’s analysis of what she broadly calls “selfie protests” and the ways in which these make use of a “body-driven [iconography] to trigger a sense of anxiety when beheld by the viewer” and thus provoke a reaction (2017), is salient in the case of Tcharmil. Crucially, the use of digital technology and the immediacy of interaction facilitated by social platforms and new media, helped not only to visualize the phenomenon for those who had never set foot in neighborhoods like Hay Mo-



FIGURE 5. The image headlining the “Anti-Tcharmil” manifesto. Source: fr.le360.ma

hammad. The affordances of this medium for excessive, ostentatious, and mimicked forms of display also worked to dislodge the subject and image from the socio-historical context of their production. To those “outside” the particular aesthetic economy of Tcharmil and for the authorities, this aspect enabled the reading of *mcharmilin* youth as agents of an actual, homogeneous subculture, one reductively understood as solely connoted with criminality and perceived through a narrow, morally conservative register about the impending dangers of youthful delinquency. By considering all of the photographic poses to belong to and index a radically new, and hence “other,” youth gang presence, the authorities could harness their affective power and unleash a sweeping operation, without having to deal with prolonged evidence gathering and due process, thus illustrating what Masumi calls the “conditional logic” of affectively legitimated preemptive acts (2010: 55). Shored up by a gaze that saw lower-class male bodies and practices as undeserving unless proven otherwise, the preemptive tactics of the Tcharmil raids produced their own target.

In her work on the construction of white injury and attitudes of fear in the face of asylum seekers in the United States, Sara Ahmed (2004) proposed the concept of “affective economies” as a way of theorizing the modalities through which certain images appear to mobilize intense emotional responses to certain groups, while also contributing to the reinforcement of particular ideas about that group’s identity. Ahmed demonstrates how it is the very ambiguity or lack of an individualized identity of the feared “other” that is both produced by and productive of such economies of hate: “Such figures of hate circulate, and indeed accumulate affective value, precisely because they do not have a fixed referent” (2004: 123). The reductive reading of the Tcharmil image as the marker of an anonymous threatening mass of humanity, which denied lower-class youth their individuality, became the currency in which the particular affective economy of alarmed Casablancans traded. Those who toyed with the image of *mcharmilin*

as youthful, tacit appropriation, and experimentation with what might be read as an assertion of “rough masculinity indexing working-class values and forms of sociability” (Wacquant 2009: 205) became subject to the correctional gaze of local elites and the state, inviting their own “othering.” I suggest that the reactions and fervor with which the Tcharmil selfies were mobilized both on- and offline need to be considered as indicative of the struggle over the policing and definition of forms of belonging and ultimately “citizenship” in a neoliberalizing Morocco. These forms, as Lauren Berlant poignantly shows, are increasingly shaped by affective economies and aesthetic reactions of “aspirational normativity” (2011: 164). The Tcharmil raids remind us, however, that collective readings and appropriations of such aspirations (expressed as consumer desires) can be strongly classed and aestheticized. As such, the performance and display of different forms of cultural capital, its consumption, and the class affects associated with each played a central role in the way the Tcharmil phenomenon was visualized, articulated and dealt with by authorities and middle classes in Casablanca. The valuing by the urban lower-classes of material possessions and status objects such as watches, motorcycles, or brand-name clothing was vilified for potential links to criminal activity or judged as lack of taste and education. This ironically allowed those who already possessed such desirable commodities to turn to books as a sign of distinction and civic responsibility (see Bourdieu 1987).

“Responsibilizing” lower-class youth

During the police raids, it was difficult to remain a detached observer of the on-going debates and criminalization of those associated with the Tcharmil look. On the one hand, someone from an upscale neighborhood could have described as *mcharmil* many of the teenage boys I knew from the “street arts” program and had grown fond of over the year. They were incredibly tal-

ented and skilled break-dancers, but could also spend afternoons hanging out on street corners neglecting their homework, occasionally engaged in petty theft for fun (see Wacquant 2009: 205), and were extremely proud of their Nike Air Max shoes. On the other hand, several of my adult interlocutors in Hay Mohammadi believed that urban peripheries were indeed experiencing a loitering and delinquency problem, unrelated to the Tcharmil fad. Mr. B., the director of the *jam'iyya* where I regularly attended the youth program, a strong advocate for entrepreneurial solutions and empowerment discourse, was one of the local community leaders who subscribed to this view: "Between one café and another café you find a café. The youth (*drari*) waste their time watching football and TV channels from the Gulf [states] that rot their brains. When they are not doing that, they loiter in the street (*fi zang'a*) doing nothing, throwing away their lives." In the context of Morocco, where mundane household chores are intensely gendered and very seldom counted as economically productive (see Ait Mouss 2011), un- or under-employed men, and young able-bodied men in particular, are increasingly likely to be seen as bodies to be disciplined and rendered productive by the gaze of neoliberalizing actors and institutions.¹⁵

This view has been progressively institutionalized, beginning in the 1980s, and aided by a series of reforms that gradually dismantled and defunded social-support structures across the country as the direct consequence of the structural adjustment and liberalization reforms imposed by the IMF and the World Bank (Cohen 2004). Among other significant changes in economic and labor market policies, human-rights-based discourse and the NGO model came to complement and, in places, replace public welfare provisioning. While a variety of associational forms preceded and survived this transformation—from Islamic charities focused on the collection and distribution of alms to trade unions and civil rights organizations—the emergence of the NGO model in the late 1990s, supported by international development agen-

cies and funds, signified a radical shift not only in the distribution of money and power across the third sector but also in the logics and practices aimed at addressing inequality (see Bayat 2013; Clément 1995).

In this new ideological landscape, the language of social justice that had been central to previous contestation movements (Desrues 2012) became progressively delegitimized and replaced by the mantra of "responsibilization" (Hache 2007). This logic operates in two ways: on the one hand, it functions to shift the burden of socio-economic security from the state to individuals as autonomous, rational actors; on the other, it becomes the field on which a politics of morality that stigmatizes and blames the poor for their own predicament¹⁶ has gained increasing political currency (see Hache 2007). As Mr. B.'s comments illustrate, this shift has led to a narrow political conception of individual morality and action based on behaviorist notions that have produced an idea of the "self that is in theory detached from its historical and social conditions" (Hache 2007: 18) and whose actions are considered "the simple sum . . . of free will" (Wacquant 2009: 10). By 2014, this language had not only gained significant purchase among the Moroccan authorities and local elites, but had also become firmly institutionalized through a vast array of third sector programs. Echoing what Mike Davis has called the "NGO-ization of impoverished urban communities" (2007: 77–82), this transformation was significantly aided by the political and social climate following the suicide attacks of May 2003. In their aftermath, the Moroccan state, with the help of international donors, was able to consolidate this shift to "responsibilization" by drawing on the increasingly popular trope of Islamic radicalization, and redoubled its efforts supporting NGOs that focused on rendering urban delinquency and forms of loitering not only undesirable but as symptomatic of radical criminality.

On Casablanca's margins, this has meant the growing presence of NGOs and CBOs, such as the one directed by Mr. B. whose programs I attended, focused on helping "youth

at risk” through activities that employ “street arts” and the language of “children’s rights” as a way of combating the pernicious influences of the street, and preemptively “de-radicalizing” disenfranchised youth.¹⁷ When their rebelliousness was not channeled into sanitized artistic pursuits, lower-class youth were “responsibilized” through a variety of public privately funded programs and activities meant to incorporate them into vocational training schemes or develop their “entrepreneurial” skill sets (see Paciello et al. 2016).¹⁸ As Susanna Trnka and Catherine Trundle (2014) point out, this limited conception of responsibility does not do justice to the many other available forms and meanings that local communities may enact on the basis of other logics and within a variety of potentially competing frameworks. Indeed, in Hay Mohammadi, neoliberal ideas about self-reliance co-existed with daily responsibilities to give and receive care, be it of kin or neighbors, in an ongoing effort to make precarious lives livable (Strava 2017). For example, the same young men who could be seen aimlessly loitering on street corners were also occasionally called upon to look after younger siblings or help single mothers with various chores, and encouraged to attend Friday prayer once they reached their teens. But as Yasmine Berriane’s work (2010, 2016) has shown, the official treatment of socio-economic inequality in Morocco as a question of (limited) “empowerment” (see Bono 2013) has led to the exponential growth of state-approved organizations running a variety of programs that promote discourses centered on values like “self-sufficiency” and “personal accountability.”

I argue that it was the growing entrenchment of these ideas that lent critical weight to the affective reactions aimed at Tcharmil youth. Capitalist societies have developed the tendency to respond to non-productive forms of being-in-the-street in two ways: either “stigmatize it within an ideology of unemployment or taking it up into itself to make it profitable” through regulated and approved forms of consumption and leisure (Buck-Morss 1986: 112–113). In

the case of Hay Mohammadi, non-productive forms of “hanging out” in the street were stigmatized twice: once as the marker of unemployment or troublesome youth, and a second time criticized as an excessive form of lower-class leisure principally associated with street sociality or the much frequented and male-dominated coffeehouse. As a growing body of literature also attests, within increasingly precarious urban landscapes, morally and politically conservative ideas about time and the way bodies mark it—that is by engaging (or not) in socially and politically sanctioned forms of labor—have been recuperated by neoliberal logics and reinforced as *the* measure of one’s moral and social worth, which those confined to different forms of boredom and waiting must constantly address (see Elliot 2016; Mains 2007). According to this logic, “all time is a potential ‘investment’ in one’s future” (van Oort 2015), and the failure to capitalize on this resource even in a context of scarce opportunities is seen as a fundamental demonstration of irresponsibility.

Conclusion

Media panics are prone to act as smoke screens deflecting conversations that would be more dangerous to those in authority (Hall 1978). Despite the heightened collective alarm that was expressed in online forums, it soon became clear that Tcharmil was far from being a vast, organized crime phenomenon. The minor drug dealers and the relatively small sums of money that were reported as confiscated during the police raids indicated a fragmented scene of street violence and petty crime on the urban fringe. Not quite a subculture and certainly not an organized movement, I suggest that the young *mcharmlin* boys of Morocco’s urban margins appeared to be threatening to the socio-political order, not because they had engaged in a direct form of collective protest, but for what Bayat calls “collective presence” (2013: 111). The visibility and online presence of dispersed, atomized individuals proved more destabilizing than

the actions of an organized movement, because they triggered the neoliberal affects of local middle-classes and elites, whose anxieties had been fed by decades of eroded education and employment opportunities, as well as the elusive and tantalizing promises of globalization (see Montgomery 2019; Wacquant 2009: 4). The oft-rehearsed refrain from online discussion forums, echoed by political actors and authorities, claimed that the uneducated could not be granted rights before they knew how to also assume responsibilities, something the *mcharmlin* were found to be severely lacking. Comments about the need to harshly discipline the lower-class male body illustrated this “zero-tolerance” mindset that saw citizenship as a right and privilege to be granted only to those who could “affect” deservingness. Overall, the unfolding of these conversations, taken together with the progressive institutionalization of third-sector initiatives aimed at “responsibilizing” lower-class youth and their practices, are indicative of the entrenching of hegemonic orders that find it productive and legitimate to draw on a growingly popular and established logic of disciplining and policing. Aided by conservative public opinion in a city marked by stark inequality and already mired in petty crime for decades, Moroccan authorities were and continue to be able to target the disenfranchised with excessive punitive measures, without having to acknowledge the structural and historical causes of local poverty and crime.

In my attempt to unpack the significance of the historical, spatial, and aesthetic dimensions that became wedded in the key articulations accompanying this moment of “punitive” outburst, I have found it productive to draw on the conceptual tools provided by the “affective turn.” By ethnographically starting from the real and discursive spaces and dynamics that allowed “feelings of insecurity” to trump discussions of actual lived socio-economic precarity, it became possible to discern the importance of an incongruous assemblage of histories of political repression, derelict urban spaces, erratic policing, and the everyday lived experiences

of urban life in a growingly unequal city. In a first instance, setting my account and reading of the ethnographic episode of the Tcharmil raids against this background of historical, spatial and political transformations, I argue that the popularization of particular logics about who can make (specific) claims to urban space, and ideas relating to disciplining those identified as “(ir)responsible poor” need to be seen as part of a longer history of authoritarian rule and liberal economic practice. By highlighting the strong currents of historical continuity that run below the surface of contemporary institutions, logics, and practices, it becomes apparent that disciplining practices are not only historically (re)produced through complex and contingent socio-political processes, but also strongly amenable to being recycled and re-used.

Second, I propose that by considering how affective economies are increasingly becoming a crucial conduit for the re-production and mobilization of neoliberal logics and institutions, we are better able to critically reexamine current practices of criminalization and punitive surges aimed at inequality and disenfranchisement. As these affects become increasingly, yet unstably, indexed by the performativity of particular classed aesthetics, this will require taking seriously the dissenting self-fashioning and presentation of lower-class bodies and practices. Not in a manner that leads to their romanticizing (see Bayat 2013) or essentializing into notions like “culture of poverty,” but in a way that re-politicizes and historically grounds facile assumptions and received ideas. My reading of the Tcharmil phenomenon as a heavily gendered and classed, if politically ambiguous and incomplete, excessive articulation of youthful dissent aims to contribute to such an agenda that situates and complicates established understandings about socio-economic identities and available forms of resistance in the region.

Finally, despite the country’s proudly assumed label as the “exception to the Arab Spring,” recent mass protests over access to infrastructure, economic development, and social reforms (Schwarz 2018) serve as reminders that

Morocco has not addressed underlying causes of enduring injustice and inequality. By disrupting normative understandings and analyses of urban marginality, neoliberal moral logics, and the politics and geographies of dissent, we can better sharpen our analytical apparatuses and remain attuned to the fact that the neoliberal city is not a *fait accompli*, to paraphrase Jamal Bahmad (2013), but rather an unfinished and unstable project—not only open to but also in much need of critique.

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Notes

1. I make use of pseudonyms in order to protect my interlocutors' privacy.
2. All images in this article are found in the public domain and are used in a citational manner. Source for all images, unless otherwise stated: <https://www.facebook.com/Tchârmil-476074615838935>.
3. For a look at how the blurring of distinctions between "insecurity" and a "sense of insecurity" gain the power of mobilizing punitive reactions, see Loïc Wacquant (2009).
4. The Interior Ministry is considered to be the institutional locus of the monarchy's power. As a so-called sovereign ministry, the king directly appoints its head regardless of results in legislative elections.
5. For a discussion of the distinction and relation between newer forms of associations and older institutions like *Dar Shabab* (youth club) run directly by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, see Yasmine Berriane (2016).
6. In 2017, youth unemployment in Morocco climbed to 28.5 percent, averaging 18 percent over the past decade (International Labor Organisation 2017).
7. The overall aesthetics are comparable to the British youth subculture of "chavs." For an account of the media's role in the vilification of working-class culture in Britain, see Owen Jones (2011).
8. Several dozen public Facebook groups dedicated to collecting individual poses are still active, although receiving less traffic in the post-2015 period. The most popular of these, *Tchârmil*, counting upwards of 45,000 followers. See <https://www.facebook.com/Tchârmil-476074615838935/?fref=ts>.
9. Public comments read and archived from the now-defunct open online group, on 22 April 2014. See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Marche-Contre-Linsécurité>.
10. Several journalists questioned the methods and legitimacy of arbitrary arrests and detention of minors. See *TelQuel* archive <http://telquel.ma/tag/tcharmil>.
11. The state selectively used its power to police public space. Inhabitants complained that these "security actions" were erratic and came in spurts, only when the king or his loyal administrators could be moved to intercede and compel the local authorities to act.
12. Retrieved from the online group *Marche Contre L'insécurité*, 22 April 2014.
13. My translation from French original. Archived on 13 April 2014 from <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Marche-Contre-Linsécurité>.

14. Original: *Anticharmil ou l'incitation à la lecture*. Other hashtags were “cultivate yourself” (*cultive toi*) and “books as loot” (*des livres en guise de butin*).
15. This is comparable to the Algerian *hittistes*, young unemployed men said to “hold up the walls” (Souaih 2012).
16. For an overview of the “culture of poverty” debate and its re-emergence, see Mario Luis Small, David Harding, and Michèle Lamont (2010).
17. Hisham Aidi traces the historical roots of these strategic programs to the anti-communist campaigns led in the 1970s and 1980s through “jambassadors” like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington (2011: 26–28).
18. These programs, alongside micro-credit schemes for local women, overwhelmingly dominated the local NGO landscape in Hay Mohammadi. Also see Yasmine Berriane (2010).

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