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A Night with 'Ajib

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, 'Ajib,[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 'Ajib 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-Ba'arin ("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. 'Ajib 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.

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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 ©
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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 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud (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, 'Abd al-'Aziz 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 Sa'ud 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 Sa'ud 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 'Abd al-'Aziz 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

political, economic, or intellectual elite. In the two last chapters, I explore how fleeting words, vernacular poems, homemade videos, and road delinquency convey a widespread disaffection from the Saudi political, economic, and social model. The joyriding scene displays various genres of opposition: the violation of road regulations, the organization of nightly parades, and the production of songs, poems, videos, and photographs. Joyriding is not only a thriving subculture, but also a way of confronting the state in its most basic operations: managing public spaces, protecting private property, and enforcing the law.

"Originating in the United States, the term 'joyriding' arrived in the United Kingdom in 1912 and was defined simply as a 'ride at high speed. Esp. in a motorcar.'" Belfast is one of the best-studied theaters of what British law criminalized in 1930, "when it was made an offense to take and drive away a vehicle without its owner's consent." "Belfast joyriders have resisted 'adult, police or paramilitary authority' and neither custodial sentences, punishment beatings nor several fatal shootings by British soldiers served to quench" the phenomenon.[17] Joyriding emerged in Saudi Arabia after 1973, when an expansion of single-family housing and state-guaranteed household debt allowed a handful of players to reengineer the space of Riyadh around car transportation. Either in 1930s Belfast or 2000s Riyadh, the study of joyriding is crucial to the story of the relations between infrastructure and mobility in environments characterized by technological sophistication and political repression. Since its creation in the 1930s, the Saudi state asserted its authority by stopping the movements of the Bedouin tribes and by funneling mobility through roads and other official means of transportation, thus opening massive markets to private and public investment. Could joyriding's exuberant and aggressive mobility be a direct response to the state's disciplinary techniques, a noisy encroachment of the subaltern on the quiet normality imposed by the state?

The emergence of a Saudi religious public sphere in the 1980s and its repression in the 1990s has been examined by several scholars.[18] Just as 1973 was a turning point for the Saudi economy, 1990 was a turning point for Saudi politics: as the country was turned by an international coalition into a military launch pad against Iraq, political opposition crystallized around the questions of governance, transparency, the independence of the judiciary, and the fight against corruption. Marches and petitions were met with a heavy-handed repression.[19] Joyriding reportedly boomed during the years of repression, as the state deployed the rhetoric and police methods of the war on terror. As pedestrians and political activists

were thrown in jail, rebel car drivers unwittingly gained a new prestige. Meanwhile, by rendering female driving sinful, the state paradoxically acknowledged the subversive and liberating nature of car mobility.

Driving became increasingly politicized as the use – or misuse – of cars pointed to a grammar of acquiescence and protest. Could speed be a way to challenge the abstract space of the city? Was joyriding a revolt against the discipline imposed by the real estate market? Could accidents and car crashes, regularly experienced by joyriders and panicking the Saudi public, be an intentional way to denounce the "illusion of safety" that was one of the tenets of the Saudi public order? Could crashes be at the "center of the car culture" joyriders developed against surveillance and repression?[20]

Joyriding in Riyadh examines these questions by analyzing the networks of power and knowledge that created the space of Riyadh, and by exploring joyriding as an extreme practice that continuously "un-builds" the city.[21] It uses an anthropological method to understand Riyadh's disciplinary space, anarchic driving, and geography of power.

1.4. Reflexive Anthropology and the War on Terror

This book is inspired by the anthropological tradition developed by Pierre Bourdieu and his students.[22] With its attention to the social, economic, and political conditions of fieldwork, reflexive anthropology requires that researchers distance themselves from the "scholastic illusion": the misleading belief that academic knowledge stands by itself and is not conditioned by class, race, gender, power, or relations of domination.[23]

Despite its consideration of the context of fieldwork and the position of the researcher, the reflexive anthropology of Arab societies has long failed to locate its imbrication with the colonial or postcolonial order. Edward Said's insights into the entanglement of knowledge and power can hardly be overstated:

if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then, it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient . . .[24]

The first human subject that an anthropologist has to understand is herself in her interactions with her object. "Every interpretive strategy," writes Vincent Crapanzano, "involves choice and falls, thereby, into the domain of ethics and politics."[25] In other words, anthropological ethics are not a set of mindless procedures, but find their basis in reflexivity.

Assessing in the early 1970s the incestuous relationship of anthropology to colonial enterprises, Talal Asad regretted that "the general drift of anthropological understanding did not constitute a basic challenge to the unequal world represented by the colonial system."[26] More than ten years later, Lila Abu-Lughod argued that anthropology was still oblivious to its imperial ramifications: although dwelling on the "remnants of a dying colonialism" and making snarky comments on the "merely inferior" French expats,[27] Paul Rabinow, for example, did not make explicit his own position as an American anthropologist in post-1967 Morocco, and the various distortions that this geopolitical fact impressed upon his work.[28]

Abu-Lughod writes that Bourdieu neglected to "consider . . . the particular implications of being a Frenchman in French-occupied Algeria."[29] Yet Bourdieu explored early on his own positionality as both a scholar on the payroll of the French state and a pro-Algerian intellectual. Between 1955 and 1960, he conducted invaluable fieldwork on the consequences of colonization, dispossession, displacement, and war on Algerian society. The murder of his friend Mouloud Feraoun by French extremists and the threats directed at Bourdieu by the French army are evidence of the acute challenge reflexive anthropology did represent to the colonial system.[30]

By reflecting upon the conditions of fieldwork, Bourdieu turned reflexive anthropology into a potent scientific and political weapon. Reflection was not a matter of ethical responsibility, but of political awareness: it was what distinguished anthropology from what he dubbed "colonial science." Bourdieu critiqued anthropological ethics as a naive and self-serving attempt at restoring one's "clear conscience" and "good will" in the face of colonial domination. Instead of trying to selfishly "salvage their responsibility" from the imperial wreck, he expected anthropologists operating in colonial settings "to do [their] best to restore to other men the meaning of their behaviors, a meaning of which, among other things, they have been dispossessed by the colonial system."[31]

Drawing on Bourdieu's methods and concepts, his students have studied the margins of Western societies. Philippe Bourgois and Loïc Wacquant in North American inner cities, Stéphane Beaud and Michel

Pialoux in French banlieues and working-class neighborhoods refined existing fieldwork methods.[32] They reconstituted power relations and were sensible to the multiple spatial and temporal scales of the anthropological inquiry, which could no longer pretend to be the description of a "local culture." Anthropology was no longer the science of "the small, the simple, the elementary, the face-to-face," the instantaneous, the here and now.[33] It was politically situated and, bridging several disciplinary and spatial divides, flirted with social history, political science, and urban geography.

Conducting fieldwork as a Frenchman in Saudi Arabia during the war on terror was no less problematic than doing so as a Frenchman in colonial Algeria, or as an Englishman in colonial Sudan for that matter. Even if I had planned on living off scholastic illusions, friends, interviewees, and informants constantly reminded me of my position. "Don't forget that you are European," Rakan had told me during our night with 'Ajib. This short injunction could have become the motto of my stay in Riyadh. Rakan was not alone in putting me in my place. In a recorded interview, a young middle class Saudi who, challenging the ban on demonstrations, had joined marches for the release of political prisoners could hardly hide his contempt for my privileged status. Mentioning one of Saudi Arabia's most famous prisoners of opinion, he vehemently said, "You think he's at home now, living a comfortable life? Before *you* go to sleep, the secret police (*al-mabahith al-ʿamma*) explore under your bed before you get in it. Are *you* happy with your life?"

After a long conversation about the Islamic movements, another interviewee told me why he was sharing his experience with me. He suggested that the West couldn't afford to be ignorant of Arab countries and that through his participation in my study he was trying to rectify the global balance of knowledge: "Power and ignorance? I prefer power and knowledge." I could introduce myself as a specific individual, Pascal or Bassel, the latter being the Arabic name I used to spare my interviewees the awkwardness of telling their wife or mother that they had spent the evening with "Pascale," a female name in Arabic. But I couldn't escape the power dynamic that was shaping my daily encounters with Saudis.

I couldn't escape a pervasive sense of vulnerability either. I could think of myself as actively conducting fieldwork, but I was more often an object of suspicion or disbelief than a sovereign subject. Even if their rebuttal was gentle or coated in politeness, most people I approached refused to be interviewed. And my middle class interlocutor made it very clear

that *he* was the one actually conducting the interview. After I asked him what, in his view as a demonstrator and activist, could be a solution to political apathy, he burst in excitement and, pointing to my tape recorder, exclaimed,

The solution is this! Part of what I'm telling you, I hope you'll publish it. Part of what I say is part of the solution; it is part of a harassment strategy. . . . If I talk to you, it is not to fulfill *your* desire. It is something that *I* want, something that *I* decide.

For most of my interlocutors, I was first and foremost a male Western Orientalist whose research could add some day to the information gathered by Western governments, security agencies, and private and public armies. My initial research project, on Saudi Islamic movements and youth politicization, was partly dictated by debates within the French public institutions that granted me access to the field. I was a philosophy teacher and a student of Arabic when I first came to Saudi Arabia in September 2001. I went there to do my national service: I would teach in one of the many neocolonial outposts (or "cultural centers") the French operate across the world. I was unsure about my commitment to writing a PhD on Hegel, whose *Philosophie der Religion* I had packed with me. The rich history of Central Arabia and my students' communicative passion for the place convinced me, instead of writing a philosophy thesis, to enroll in a Middle Eastern Studies program. My decision to study the politicization of youth was compounded by the desire to critique widespread stereotypes on Arab youth and to show that Islamic groups were not the hotbeds of religious radicalization that were regularly demonized by the Western "Islamic study industry."[34]

I wanted to test in Riyadh the fieldwork techniques and social history hypotheses of Bourgois, Beaud, and Pialoux, who deconstructed sensationalist clichés about urban violence and social marginalization in U.S. inner cities and French banlieues.[35] One of my aims was to show that Islamic groups articulated an informed critique of the state policies. That topic was congruent with the preoccupations of the French Foreign Office, which granted me a doctoral scholarship and a rare four-year research visa to Saudi Arabia. With that scope in mind, I started fieldwork in January 2005 in a Saudi context that was loaded with the proximity of the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), and marked by several decades of internal repression backed by European and North American powers. I was there with a French scholarship and on a French

research visa (*ta'shira bahth*). No wonder most of my contacts were convinced that the researcher (*al-bahith*) was clocking in at the secret police (*al-mabahith*).

1.5. Saudi Youth and the Politics of Representation

While I continued studying Islamic groups, my work on car drifting moved more and more center stage, and triggered my postdoctoral archival study of the urban planning of Riyadh between 1967 and 1972. Saudi Islamic groups today are confronted with a particularly harsh dilemma: be depoliticized and stay unharmed, or politicize their activities and be threatened with repression and accusations of terrorism. Repression and co-optation have deprived most Islamic groups of their political acumen, and state violence increased after 2001, as the royal family joined the U.S.-led war on terror. Islamic groups progressively turned into elite socialization circles. Instead of looking at the politicization of these socially and culturally endowed youth who participated in Islamic activities, I adopted a more comprehensive view and looked at the broader dynamics of political, economic, and social marginalization. Joyriding and drifting were an ideal object to examine the link between structural violence (exercised by the state through economic laissez-faire policies, social and spatial segregation, and police crackdown) and what was presented by Saudi and western media as gratuitous violence, the mere outcome of individual boredom and of a banal car-oriented youth subculture.[36]

The choice of such loaded objects as youth violence, car drifting, and joyriding deserves an explanation. An ethnography of joyriding runs the risk of being perceived as a piece of sensationalist and voyeuristic scholarship that looks at a marginal population and is therefore unable to say anything substantial about the whole political, social, and economic picture. Furthermore, searching for a political significance in joyriding seems to fall under the "romance of resistance,"[37] and to end up naively interpreting youthful exuberance as subversive rebellion.

Does a study of joyriding youth contribute to the exoticisation of Saudis, to their portrayal as irreducible others and aliens? I don't think so. On the contrary: by bringing Riyadh back into the mainstream of dysfunctional urban societies, it shows the deceptive ordinariness of Saudi Arabia. Whereas most studies emphasize the conservative and reactionary elements of Saudi politics, I draw attention to the way the Saudi state, like most liberal nation-states, forces people into various gender, class,

ethnic and religious categories while claiming to promote equality between them (we, the Saudi nation). Yet Riyadh is not only the product of the Saudi state and deserves its place on the world map of urban marginality and revolt. The *dakhl al-mahdud* (low-income) areas of Riyadh match the ghettos, banlieues, *problemområde*, and *favelas* of other cities and testify to the fact that, in liberal societies as in those systems that are described as "authoritarian," political power is equally based on economic violence.[38]

Still, why choose joyriding as a case study of disenfranchisement? In Saudi Arabia, joyriding is commonly associated with various violent practices, including rape and drug dealing, and could reinforce racist stereotypes about Saudi youth as idle pests, culturally unsuited for regular employment, and prone to enrollment in violent activities. Can I, in good faith, wish to critique stereotypes of Arab youth while studying an activity that seems to reinforce this typecasting?

In Saudi Arabia, as in the United States, studies of disenfranchisement and marginality run the risk of being "misread as negative stereotypes . . . , or as a hostile portrait of the poor."[39] In the Saudi case, this common bias is reinforced by geopolitical considerations: since at least September 2001, it has been open season on Saudi youth, who have become fodder in media reports and research papers that link them to political radicalization and militant Islamism. Youth unemployment has been studied through the facile lens of the war on terror, not the demanding perspective of a transnational critique of urban and economic policies. By constructing an ideological straw man, think tanks and security experts have carefully avoided looking into the very mechanisms of social and economic exclusion, and merely rehearse widespread racist and Islamophobic assumptions.

One of the reasons for the eruption of security-oriented discourses is the dearth of reliable sources about Saudi demographics, poverty, and unemployment (the latter is estimated anywhere between 10 percent and 30 percent). In an environment characterized by a scarcity of reliable statistics, the pervasiveness of informal economic activities, and the inaccessibility of public archives, anthropological fieldwork is a way to answer pressing sociological and political questions. No doubt extensive fieldwork on unemployment, for instance, would refine existing hypotheses about the role of state policies (the absence of a minimum wage) and business practices (the exploitation of cheap imported labor in violation of Saudi and international regulations) in the economic marginalization of Saudi youth.

Joyriding in Riyadh is not such a study, and its scope is both narrower and wider. By focusing on joyriding in the urban space of Riyadh, I enlist anthropological fieldwork and archival investigation in the task of deciphering the responsibilities of the Saudi state in the production of marginalization and urban violence. The photographer of U.S. skate culture Warren E. Bolster wrote, "when fun is outlawed, only the outlaws have fun:"[40] I analyze joyriding as a politics of fun and a way to flaunt extreme leisure in the face of state repression.[41] Yet I do not wish to romanticize joyriding or to present it as a fight for freedom. Neither do I wish to sanitize or justify the violence endured by young Saudi males at the hands of the various institutions entrusted with their disciplining (the family, the school, the police, the prisons).

The dangers faced by young Saudis in their dubious battle with the state match the self-destructive riskiness of joyriding. Since its emergence, joyriding has been the target of police campaigns, sociological studies, and reform attempts. Saudi experts and journalists view it as a symptom of a deep-seated malaise within Saudi society. I tend to view it as the outcome of the poorly managed integration of Saudi Arabia within global networks of expertise, business, and power. Far from reading joyriding as an abnormal local production or an exotic carnival, I see it emerging at the meeting point between local and international politics, national and global markets, state and economic violence. As I hope to show in the following chapters, it is not only the Saudi Kingdom that is adrift, but also the networks that crisscross it and weave it firmly into a global fabric that, itself, is moving.

Joyriding in Riyadh is not a hopeless book, however. I wish to present a humanized image of Saudi youth and to celebrate their courage, inventiveness, and humor. Road violence can, in my view, be solved by drastically reducing the number of cars, just like gun violence in the United States can be alleviated by drastically reducing the number of guns in circulation. Abandoning the all-car development scheme followed by the Saudi state since the 1960s will be costly and painful. It will entail a dramatic increase of public transportation alternatives and the generalization of the Riyadh and Mecca subway projects. It will require a densification of urban areas and the reversal of the massive land development policies that have been de rigueur since the 1970s. This will undoubtedly be the most painful change, as real estate is one of the ways the state co-opts and silences economic elites. U.S. anthropologist Laura Nader warned her colleagues in the 1970s, "Don't study the poor and powerless because everything you say about them will be used against them."[42]

I write this book in the hope that everything I say will be used not against young Saudis, but as a critique of those public and private institutions that are complicit of destruction on Saudi roads. If road violence is a form of political violence, then road deaths are also political deaths, and ordinary Saudis have some right to hold the state responsible for them.

1.6. Plan of the Book

Joyriding in Riyadh is a work of urban and historical anthropology. In the continuation of current trends of urban anthropology in the Middle East, it is based on a thorough critique of the idea that Middle Eastern cities are exceptional environments.[43] The book is composed of six chapters, including this introduction. It can be read from cover to cover or in any order the reader wants to follow. Readers who wish to know more about car drifting, and are eager to read 'Ajib and Rakan's stories, may jump directly to Chapters 5 and 6. They may come back later to Chapters 3 and 4 to understand the development of Riyadh since the late 1960s. Chapters 3 and 4 tell the story of Riyadh from the point of view of the state and urban planners. Chapters 5 and 6 tell it from the standpoint of young drifters and their followers. Each chapter can also be read individually.

Chapter 2 traces the contours of the Saudi political realm. It explores the barriers to fieldwork and shows how I reacted to them. Anthropologists live with the people they study and enter in complex relationships of friendship, collaboration, and respect. They themselves become a benchmark and progressively shape their language abilities, their senses, and their analytical capacities. In the Saudi context, marked by a pervasive yet unpredictable repression, the anthropologist is confronted with situations that shape her research in often-unpredictable ways, and the second chapter is an essay in self-reflexivity.

Chapters 3 and 4 track the emergence of Riyadh as an oil-based space, and contribute to both debunking the myth of the "Islamic city" and tracking its origins. Chapter 3 shows how the 1971 Riyadh master plan was designed by Greek urban planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis and his team of experts in conversation with princes, brokers, bureaucrats, investors, and landowners. In the debates surrounding the publication of the plan, the city became a capitalist, high modernist space. Chapter 4 examines the urban dynamics after the 1973 oil boom. It shows how the 1971 master plan was not the "Dictator" envisioned by Le Corbusier, but was disrupted by post–oil boom dynamics of real estate investment and

political favoritism. These two chapters show that the city's expansion entailed a demise of the initial high modernist project. In that sense, my analysis is situated within the "critical ethnography of modernism" pursued by James Holston in Brasília.[44]

The last two chapters move from the making of Riyadh to the way young disenfranchised Saudis reclaim the capital's urban space through their use, misuse, and abuse of cars. Car drifting turns the whole commoditization process upside down. In Chapters 3 and 4, the city of Riyadh, constituted by flows of capital, migrants, goods, and ideas, has become a central character of the book. This cast is now joined by the joyriders and their followers, who invent a specific urban landscape through their driving performances, and explore the possibilities for political expression through car figures, poetry, songs, and videos. Chapter 5 describes how joyriding emerged from the oil boom, at the frontier of the expanding city, where marginalized youth tried to appropriate the spaces created by developers and builders. By studying the state's reaction to joyriding and the various moralization and repression campaigns launched by sociologists, religious preachers, and the police, Chapter 6 shows how joyriding became, eventually, political.