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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Obras politics

Elements of material populism in Ecuador

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Abstract

Materiality tends to play only a marginal role in mainstream theorizations of populism. In Ecuador, however, where populism has been described as the norm rather than the exception, *obras* (public works) are a crucial element of politics. They are framed as the gifts of leaders to the people, shaping people's lifeworlds and embedding leaders in physical landscapes. Populism thereby becomes inherently material, as obras enact the categories of "the leader" and "the people" and create personalistic-charismatic links between them. At the same time, obras politics is highly risky, given the populist Manicheanism entangled with construction projects. Any flaw encountered in the implementation of obras risks delegitimizing their initiator as incapable or corrupt. Meanwhile, "the people" of any obra materialize in divergent, competitive ways. Obras thus become infrastructural to populism, both in their variously spectacular forms and in their unpredictable mediations of everyday lives and citizen-state relations.

KEYWORDS

Ecuador, infrastructure, Latin America, materiality, populism, public works, state

Andrés, one of the people I met through university connections in Cuenca, Ecuador, was a staunch *correista*, as supporters of ex-president Rafael Correa are known.[1] A history student, he thought the Correa government (2007–17) had accomplished historic progress in the country. He thereby positioned himself clearly, as most people seemed to be doing, within the polarization of Ecuadoran society in relation to Correa: you had to be either for or against him, a correista or an anti-correista. In one of our many political conversations over the years, Andrés argued that Correa's detractors were neglecting how profoundly the country had changed during the latter's rule. Ecuador, he said, had been physically transformed through Correa's *obras*, or public works. Andrés admitted that certain public works, such as new schools in the middle of nowhere, were not helpful. But generalized and uninterrupted electricity, for instance, made possible by new dams, had been a huge achievement. Anti-correistas would too easily forget how the nation, before Correa, had suffered from regular power outages. This was now a thing of the past—a past that had been forgotten, according to Andrés, just like its infrastructural overcoming.[2]

Arguments like these are common on the correista side. Perhaps more than the Correa government's socialist and intercultural discourse, what features prominently in people's praises of the ex-president are his obras.[3] The Spanish notion of *obra*, from the Latin *opus*, means "work" or "oeuvre," the outcome of a labor process, just like the verb *obrar* can be translated as "to work," "operate" (same etymological origin), or "act." In common parlance, *obras* often refers to *obras públicas*, and they constitute, as such, a central locus of politics in Ecuador. The concept is at the core of what I will call an *obras politics*, in which people value obras as the concrete, factual achievements of leaders who truly work for the people. Obras embody the possibility of tangible change. Over the years, the Correa era's obras that I have heard most praise for have probably been his roads. Even some of the fiercest Correa critics still concede that he built great roads throughout the country. The large-scale construction projects were part of the government's autodenominated postneoliberal Citizens' Revolution, which benefited from a boom in international oil prices to initiate its national modernization program.

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Many anti-correistas, like their correista counterparts, also fixate on the Correa government's obras politics, but with an inverted valuation. They identify Correa's infrastructure projects as the expression of an authoritarian and populist-spectacular style of government, one that enabled widespread corruption and the colossal squandering of public funds (Wilson, 2021). After Correa left the presidency in 2017 (because he had reached the term limit), his successor and former ally, Lenín Moreno, soon turned his back on him, not least when irregularities were discovered in hundreds of public works projects. Since then, Ecuador has returned to neoliberal governments, while Correa is exiled in Belgium, unable to return to the country owing to corruption charges against him. And yet a considerable share of Ecuadorans still support Correa. In 2025, his Citizens' Revolution party remains the largest faction in the National Assembly. This article reflects on some of the reasons for this enduring support and, specifically, the obras logic that participates in it. This is not to say that public works are the sole concern of politicians and "ordinary people" in Ecuador. In recent years, in fact, obras politics has been somewhat displaced by a focus on security, owing to the massive increase in gang violence.[4] Nevertheless, the obras locus remains crucial and capable of inflecting local and national politics.

Ethnographically, I focus on local processes in Cuenca, Ecuador's third-largest city, where I conducted fieldwork in the aftermath of Correa's presidency, from 2017 to 2018 and from 2020 to 2021. Media analysis and informal conversations with people in Cuenca exceed this timespan. My fieldwork focused mostly on the construction of a tram in the city, which was the key obra of Citizens' Revolution mayor Paúl Granda (2009–14), in coordination with the central government. The research involved speaking to people living and working in the surrounding areas of the tram construction. More specifically, I was interested in the popular entrepreneurs, including shopkeepers and street and market vendors, who characterize these areas and whose livelihoods were affected by a long and invasive construction. At the same time, these people also hoped to reap the benefits of the megaproject, once completed, since the government had touted that the tram would boost the local economy, among its many other promised virtues. Apart from those living near the construction site, I also wanted to hear the perspectives of local authorities, journalists, engineers, and friends of mine. Beyond the topic of the tram, what emerged in these encounters was a widely shared approach to politics defined by an obras logic. Although particularly prevalent among working-class inhabitants (note, again, the etymological link of *obrero*, "worker," with *obra*), this obras logic could be found across the social spectrum. One person in particular, Miriam, a market vendor in the city center, embodied this logic the most and constituted the main inspiration for this article. Therefore, I will offer, among other things, a glimpse into Miriam's life-world, showing how it is shared at least partly with others, both ordinary city dwellers and official decision-makers.

Based on this inquiry into obras politics, the article puts forward the notion of *material populism*. Populism is gaining increasing attention in anthropology (Hann, 2019; Kapferer & Theodossopoulos, 2019; Mazzarella, 2019) and beyond, especially owing to the success of populist movements in Western countries. Populism, broadly speaking, is understood to be at play when the category of "the people" is articulated—often by, or together with, a charismatic leader—as the victim of a common threat, such as the political establishment, the elite, or immigrants. While in Western democracies, populism is usually thought to be linked to moments of political crisis, in countries like Ecuador it is described as the norm rather than the exception (de la Torre, 2000). Obras provide a helpful lens to explore why this is so. Therefore, this article addresses materiality as a crucial element in populist dynamics in Ecuador and encourages theoretical debates on populism more generally to include a reflection on its material dimensions.

Materiality tends to receive limited attention in mainstream theorizations of populism (e.g., Laclau, 2005; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017), although various authors have started to take seriously specific material aspects. Mazzarella (2019), for instance, considers the importance of affective bodies in the "mattering forth" of populism; Carreira da Silva and Rogenhofer (2023) focus on how objects such as the MAGA cap in the US and the yellow vest in France became important symbolic vectors for populist movements; and Moffitt (2016), among many others, emphasizes how social media provides new platforms for populist dynamics. There is also an important literature on populism and clientelism in Latin America, which reflects on the exchange of goods and support between people and leaders, including, in some cases, public works (Albro, 2001; Auyero, 2000; Lazar, 2004; Zhang, 2022). In these and other studies on the region (e.g., Harvey & Knox, 2015; Rasmussen, 2017), the materiality of politics comes to the fore in how material realities inform political demands and imaginaries, (collective) identities, spaces, and strategies. Materials thereby become *infrastructural* to politics, because they simultaneously constitute "things and also the relation between things" (Larkin, 2013, p. 329).

Building on these insights, this article grapples with the implications of studying populism and obras politics through the conceptual lens of infrastructure (Alderman & Goodwin, 2022; Harvey & Knox, 2015; Jensen & Morita, 2017; Knox, 2017). Obras simultaneously constitute representational and practical issues; they are inhabited at the same time as they are debated. Their participation in politics cannot be limited to "objects" or "instruments," owing to their distributedness and vibrancy (Bennett, 2010). Thus, if we more thoroughly understand material populism, we can grasp how materials participate in key aspects of populism, including the dichotomic categories of "the people" and "the elite," personalistic state formation, and charismatic leadership. With such a material focus, we may challenge certain renderings of populism in terms of discourse, epistemology, social psychology, or social construction, by showing that concrete, material worlds shape and are shaped by populist dynamics.

OBRAS LOGIC

When Paúl Granda, the local Citizen's Revolution candidate, became mayor of Cuenca in 2009, public works were central to the political agenda. How the municipal administration

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framed obras—and the world through obras—becomes clear, for instance, in Granda's reelection campaign in 2014. Using the slogans "La obra se ve" (You can see the work) and "La obra sigue" (The work continues), the mayor's communications team produced symbolically rich media content.

A video published online presented a day in the life of the mayor constructed on an extensive list of his achievements. The video opens on a harmonious breakfast scene with wife and kids, after which the mayor sets off to visit each of his many obras. The latter have already become integrated into the lives of city dwellers. So Granda waves to the people on the road he built, plays football with youths in the park he renovated, and hugs an elderly man who drinks water from the tap that Granda had installed. In another scene, the mayor is at a residential construction site, checking building plans. In the end, his most ambitious project, the tram system that was being constructed, is introduced as a maquette. A narrator accompanies these scenes with a solemn discourse:

> Cuenca is a city that works, that grows, with determination and leadership. We are experiencing a profound transformation that the people feel, live. We are a city of fighters, champions, dreamers. You can see the obra. Things are changing. […] We work to fulfill dreams […] those dreams that have been ignored before. […] The obra continues. We are revolutionizing the city of today and tomorrow.[5]

Various elements can be retrieved from this video for a characterization of populism in Ecuador. It can be taken as an illustration of the personalism of politics here, through which the figure of the leader becomes the main or sole governmental actor. Instead of any party, institution, or team, it is Granda personally who is depicted as the great obras builder. Granda's candidacy is thereby not presented in "political" terms, that is, as related to partisan issues or ideological left-right differences. The mayor's achievements benefit the city as a whole, including everybody in the apparent revolution. This apolitical personalism resonates with work on Ecuadoran politics that has highlighted the enduring fragmentation of the country's political parties into fleeting movements that gather behind leaders rather than espouse clear ideologies (e.g., Conaghan, 1995). Parties are made and unmade ad libitum, and politicians switch parties just as easily.

Further, the campaign video hints at the tension, typical of populism, between the leader's identification with the people and his or her distinction from them. Granda appears as just another citizen meeting his equals while embodying the role of the expert, father, and maker of the city. This tension is enacted by the contrast between the images and the video's narration. While Granda is the protagonist of the images, the narrator confounds him in an indefinite "we," producing a discourse in which the leader, the citizens, and the city become a single living entity. "The people" of populism are discursively performed as equal and united (Laclau, 2005). The discourse also has millenarian undertones in its affirmation of a "profound transformation."

Obras play a key role in this specific populist performance. Granda (as the expert-leader and embodiment of the people) is said to transform the city through his manifold public works. Obras politics, or *obrismo* (Zhang, 2022), is a common feature in the region and has been studied in diverse contexts, from historical dictatorships (Coronil, 1997, on Venezuela; Derby, 2009, on the Dominican Republic) to more recent contexts of local populist governance (Zhang, 2022, on Lima, Peru) and clientelist relationships (Lazar, 2004, on El Alto, Bolivia). Scholars usually argue that regimes frame public works as tangible forms of progress, beyond any necessary ideological justification or beyond discourse tout court. Obras speak for themselves; in their often-spectacular form, they are meant to impress people and convince them of the state's greatness. Entangled with populist logics, obras become the personal gifts of leaders to the people—gifts that have to be received with gratitude and support (Harvey & Knox, 2015). A paternalist link is established between the leader and the people, often with religious connotations of the good shepherd, as well as of the good *patrón* of the colonial hacienda system and its perpetuation in a deeply unequal postcolonial society (Bretón, 2024; de la Torre, 2006).

Coronil (1997, p. 204) expresses the populist obras logic most pertinently in his description of dictator Pérez Jiménez's approach to politics in 1950s Venezuela:

> Words could only lead to the slippery terrain of interpretation, to the detachment of fact from opinion, and thence to the corrupt world of lies fabricated by politicians. But public works, [Pérez Jiménez] felt, spoke for themselves in the simple language of objective reality, a democratic language which met the authentic needs of the people.

This quote hints at the double dichotomy that will be central throughout this article, namely between "the people" and "politicians," on the one hand, and between "objective reality" and "the corrupt world of lies" on the other. Obras, in this logic, are objective facts and, therefore, true improvements for the people, in contrast with political talk that manipulates facts, makes empty promises, and distracts from lived reality. The Manichean divide between "the people" and "the elite," so central to populism, thus comes to be associated with the equally Manichean dualism between reality and representation, fact and fiction. Such dualisms require continual efforts to maintain them, even as they are contested, blurred, and reorganized in political practice.

In his work on how Venezuela became a petrostate, Coronil (1997, p. 3) addresses these ambiguous dualisms through the notion of *magic*: "Suspended between fiction and fact, trick and truth," magic works by concealing the processes of production. The state thus appears as magical, a coherent entity hiding its constructedness, just as the nation is magically transformed through the transubstantiation of petroleum into money and money into public works. Wilson (2021) draws on this magical register to describe the Citizens' Revolution period in Ecuador, but his account concerns how the magic of the state fails. His notion of fantastical materialism captures how dreams

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of progress and development are turned into reality, but—in their messy, irresponsible, and arbitrary implementation—they become grotesque absurdities. Wilson focuses on the construction of a new university, an interoceanic transport corridor, and model towns in the Amazon region—all profoundly flawed projects that led not to social progress but to increased environmental destruction, exclusionary capitalism, and nonsensical squandering. The title of Wilson's (2021, p. 1) book, *Reality of Dreams*, is inspired by one of the many government billboards alongside construction sites, which read "Dreams are transformed into reality with the Citizens' Revolution." Such claims resonated as bitterly ironic as the billboards perished in ruinous landscapes.

These juxtapositions—the billboard and its surroundings, the claim and the outcome, dreams and reality—hint at an uneasy middle ground between fact and fiction, one that breaks apart both empirically and analytically. Thus are maintained the dualisms between, on the one hand, dreams, desires, discourse, and representation and, on the other hand, material, practical, hidden, real reality. Public works seem to speak for themselves, indeed, not of the greatness of the state but, on the contrary, of its absurdity. In Granda's campaign video, dreams are also said to be transformed into reality in Cuenca. But do the "dream-worlds" thus constructed in the Andean city also crumble like the Amazonian megaprojects assessed by Wilson? Does the campaign video appear as bitterly ironic in retrospect as Wilson's tattered billboards, underpinning the chasm between fact and fiction? I will present a new attempt here at analytically overcoming these dualisms while highlighting them empirically as the stuff of everyday negotiations.

SHAPING WORLDS THROUGH OBRAS

Miriam was a market vendor who lived and worked in the city center, right next to the street that was chosen for the construction of the tram. She was very engaged in city politics, and her engagement with the tram project was why I met her in the first place. In our regular conversations at her market stall, however, she would introduce all kinds of other city issues and broader political topics that were close to her heart. In these conversations, obras constituted a central locus for her. Once, she summed up to me how Cuenca had evolved over the last 25 years:

> I keep watching how Cuenca changes, how it progresses. The change started with Don Cordero [mayor from 1996 to 2005]. The change started then, everybody knows that, everybody saw it. […] The work of Don Corcho Cordero was to restructure the historic city center. He changed the sidewalks. […] He changed the water pipes, which were very old. This transformation extends until Vega Muñoz Street. […] Then came Don Marcelo Cabrera [mayor from 2005 to 2009 and 2014–19] [in whose administration] we didn't see any substantial work. Or I don't know where he did it. Then Paúl Granda [2009–14] came in, another person with vision, like Corcho Cordero. He made the tunnel over there […], the Tres de Noviembre promenade, which is very beautiful, some arrangements of the sidewalks.

The mayor in office at the time of that conversation, Pedro Palacios (2019–23), had disappointed Miriam. "We believed in him," she said. "We supported his candidacy. He came in and—nothing. You don't see the work he offered, the markets and so many things."

Miriam's account of the city was structured around a chronology of administrations and their respective obras. Space was thereby temporalized, divided, and politicized as the achievements of specific politicians. Personalism underpinned how she named mayors and identified obras as theirs ("he changed"; "he made"). Her narrative largely coincided with the obras discourse of populist leaders and authoritarian regimes that try to govern through the tangible and the spectacular.

Initially, I was somewhat bewildered by this apparent reduction of politics to the predominant focus on physical public works. But Miriam's narrative was far from a naive adoption of "official discourse." Neither was it merely a symbolic appreciation of the spectacle of the state or a "shallow" materialism. Obras appeared as the fundamental basis for life, making up the material world that people inhabited. Miriam's thinking in terms of obras was clearly influenced by how her everyday life depended on them, how it was shaped by and entangled with them. This included sidewalks and water pipes, as well as her own workplace. It is no coincidence that market halls typically figure among politicians' proposals and people's demands for (re)construction; they are popular spaces on which many livelihoods depend. Miriam's market, the obra of a previous mayor, could also use a renovation now, according to her. Some of the sidewalks Mayor Cordero had built 20 years ago also required a reworking. Miriam's inhabited, urban-infrastructural landscape was a world of obras built and yet to be built (or to be maintained, replaced, or renovated). Obras politics thereby revealed some of the ontological implications of infrastructures (Jensen & Morita, 2017).

Miriam's emphasis on vision is important here. On the one hand, her assessment of obras largely depended on seeing them ("everybody saw it" or "we didn't see any substantial work"). This speaks to obras' tangibility, which creates their objective reality: what can be seen exists and confirms the state's work, allowing ordinary people to experiment with and assess it; what cannot be seen provokes doubts about the leadership ("Or I don't know where he did it"), if not outright rejection. But the idea of inhabitation suggests not the perspective of an outside observer but one that is embodied and grounded. Obras are assessed from inside a world of obras. From this perspective, vision is informed by all of the senses, and representation is a function of experience. Given the personalism of the obras logic—an obra is always *somebody's* obra (as in *oeuvre*)—the perception of the obra can imply almost automatically an assessment of its maker.

On the other hand, vision, in Miriam's narrative, was also an attribute of those leaders themselves. Hence, she described the mayors she had supported—that is, those who had built many

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and good obras—as people "with vision." As with ordinary citizens' assessment of obras, leaders with vision seemed to be those who could grasp how people were living and what obras they needed. Vision, in this sense, involves the recognition of objective reality and a future plan to improve that reality. The more comprehensive, the better. The two mayors whom Miriam praised as men "with vision," Corcho Cordero and Paúl Granda, had both been close allies of President Correa. But rather than explaining her political preferences by identifying herself as correista or left wing, she determined the value of each politician according to his obras. Because in that same conversation, she also praised Guayaquil's long-term mayor Jaime Nebot for his obras record, even though he was a conservative politician and one of Correa's most important opponents.

In a subsequent conversation in 2021, Miriam was weighing her options for an upcoming presidential election. She went through some of the candidates, judging them not by their ideologies but by their alleged willingness and ability to build obras. Correista candidate Andrés Arauz was her preferred option, because Correa "had stolen a lot, but he had also built a lot of obras" (a common compromise in the obras logic; Zhang, 2022, p. 588). What she knew for sure was that she would not vote for Guillermo Lasso (who did end up becoming president), not because he was the right-wing candidate but because at Miriam's market she knew only two Lasso supporters. Also, Lasso was an elderly man and was starting to limp, which suggested to her that he was no longer apt for the job. With Moreno, the incumbent president and a wheelchair user, people would have understood that it takes a president in top shape to build the obras that the country needed, she argued.

Miriam's reasoning illustrates how obras logic, as a politics of the tangible and of physical work, can circumvent explicit ideological considerations. In fact, she even suggested that the different local and national politicians were all just staging their differences and were secretly colluding. What was left for ordinary citizens like her to judge was individual politicians' willingness and ability to see beyond their elite interests and work for the benefit of the people. In that way, Miriam's focus on (in)competence and on who had the most popular support (she knew only two Lasso supporters) gave the election the feeling of a sports event. Candidates were evaluated on their physical ability and technical skills, and the support they attracted encouraged them to deliver. Miriam bet not so much on different political agendas as on candidates' ability to beat others in the same game. The only uncontested ideology, the name of the game, was the developmentalist value of material progress.

This approach to politics and life more generally echoes the double dichotomy between the people and the elite, and between fact and fiction. And this double dichotomy broadly coincides with a modernist ontological configuration. That is, a modernist nature/culture divide (Latour, 1993) is reflected here in the form of matter that is shaped at will by humans. But a second distinction qualifies which humans can shape matter on the scale of obras. Thus, obras support a binary distinction between those who build obras and those who do not (or cannot). Among the former are the great, world-shaping leaders who remain inscribed in people's everyday spaces. In the latter camp, we find ordinary people, the receivers of obras, as well as those politicians who lack the "vision," capacity, or desire to work for the people. The obras logic thereby enacts populist Manicheanism and charisma, and hence renders populism inherently material. But to give materiality such a central, active role in populism is also to grasp the contingency of such material populism (which I will address in more detail below).

In her comparison of assisted reproduction in the US and Ecuador, Roberts (2013, p. 563) argues that people's material embeddedness in specific realities shapes their sense of self and existence:

> The relative (and I stress relative) stability of infrastructures like schools, health care, roads, and public sanitation in many parts of the United States can produce in middle-class and wealthy people a sense of autonomy about many of their pursuits, including having children.

In Ecuador, in turn, relative material *in*stability created a world of mutual dependence, an ontology of assisted being. Assisted reproduction, according to Roberts, thus inscribed itself in a generalized relationality of hierarchical, paternalistic assistance maintained, for instance, within the family, with God, or, historically, the *patrón* of the (neo)colonial hacienda. As is well documented in the literature on Latin American clientelism (e.g., Albro, 2001; Auyero, 2000; Lazar, 2004), such patron-client relations still undergird much contemporary politics in the region (see also Bretón, 2024). But these relationships are always ambiguous. They presuppose reciprocity and intimacy between leaders and led (Rasmussen, 2017), but they also commonly generate a political cynicism (Ospina Peralta, 2006) in which the other is understood as a self-interested and unreliable exchange partner, which can render the relationship more volatile and, paradoxically, more intense (and resource-intensive in terms of obras, for instance).

This idea of political cynicism resonates with Miriam's understanding that all politicians were ultimately in it together. For Miriam, the political class existed in a separate sphere, detached from the problems of ordinary citizens. "They cook [their plans] up there in their offices," she said. But, at least at the municipal level, these offices were just around the corner and relatively accessible for ordinary citizens and protesting crowds. And Miriam was proud of having established direct contact with authorities through her many engagements over the years. "I spoke to them," "I advised them," and "I made friends with them" were the kinds of comments she made to highlight—and at times exaggerate—her influence on mayors and their advisers. So citizens had to directly encourage politicians to work for them, and they had to monitor that work personally. Despite the separation between citizens and the political class, some leaders could have the vision to truly work for the people. And these leaders inscribed themselves in people's lived, material spaces.

Populist leaders are often idealized as Christ figures guiding and sacrificing themselves for the people (de la Torre, 2000), and this religious analogy can be taken a step further here. True leaders become the godlike creators of the people's world. But

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FIGURE 1 A billboard depicting Mayor Marcelo Cabrera in front of the tram construction in Cuenca, Ecuador, in 2018, including his slogan "With the people, always." The back of the billboard read, in big letters, "Another obra for the people." (Sam Rumé) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

these quasi-gods are rarely considered perfect; far from it. At the heart of the obras logic lies a paradox, linked to the fact that infrastructure construction is an intrinsically complex endeavor. As a result, leaders can become celebrated world-makers, as well as disdained world-breakers. But before I discuss this paradox in more detail, a comment on mediation is needed, to address the variety of elements that sustain the links between obras, their makers, and their receivers.

MEDIATION AND REPRESENTATION

The idea that obras speak for themselves as objective facts is usually contradicted by a host of representational elements that accompany any construction project and that give it meaning, provide information, and influence the general mood around it. This includes "official discourse" in the form, for instance, of campaign videos such as the one described above, or billboards such as those mentioned by Wilson (2021). Indeed, when one travels along the highways or walks through city streets in Ecuador, all kinds of billboards promoting construction projects catch the eye. They usually include political slogans, the name of the project, its cost, and who initiated it. "The Citizens' Revolution finances this obra" could thus be read on billboards across the country during Correa's government, accompanied by slogans such as "We progress, *patria*," "Ecuador has changed," and "We did it." In Cuenca, each new stretch of paved road comes with its billboard. It is the most common and visible way for mayors to attach their faces and names—or, in just slightly more subtle cases, the colors, emblems, and slogans of their administrations—to obras (see figure 1). Each mayor can be recognized by their particular symbols (Zhang, 2022). As I write this article, Cuenca's new mayor, Cristian Zamora, has already imprinted his trademark slogan "Love for Cuenca" on billboards, municipal vehicles, and other objects throughout the city. Previous mayor Pedro Palacios even engraved the name of his program Cuenca United into the cement of new pavings in the city.

A typical approach to this kind of symbolism is to compare it to "reality," to see how what is being said or represented diverges from how things really turn out. And, surely, this is what many people affected by construction projects do—justifiably so. But in many ways the distinction between representation and reality also dissipates in practice and is analytically unhelpful. The same goes for the closely related distinction between mediation and immediacy. Mazzarella (2019) characterizes populism as a politics of immediation. Institutional mediation between the people, and between them and the leader, are repudiated by populist movements and, instead, more intimate, affective ties are sought. The protest march and the rally, with their corporeal engagement and proximity, are obvious examples of this, but increasingly so is social media, which creates a sense of community and direct connection with the leader. Mazzarella points to the paradox of this mediated sense of immediacy. He also addresses the problem of continuity intrinsic to movements based on proximity and affect. Given the fleeting nature of proximity and affect, how can populist movements survive over time?

Material populism in Ecuador may provide a case of how populism manages to keep itself alive over time and space. Obras, of course, are key here in the way they can work as "things and also the relation between things" (Larkin, 2013, p. 329) or, to put it slightly differently, as mediated things and also as mediating things. Media objects, be they digital (such as campaign videos) or nondigital (such as billboards), can be said to do more than merely represent (or misrepresent) obras. They participate in the distributed performance of the obra and, by extension, of the world that material populism shapes. By reminding the receivers of obras of their constructedness and of who exactly built them, they counter the tendency

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of obras to become *infra*structure in the sense of the taken-for-granted background of social life (Star, 1999). The obra's reach in time and space as infrastructural *spectacle* (Larkin, 2013) can thereby be extended while it slowly becomes a functional backdrop. Such media objects thus bridge two opposed figures of infrastructure—as representational thing and as practical system—while they perform the personalist link between the leader and their creation. It is through this mediation between obras and leaders that receivers of obras, such as Miriam, may feel connected to certain leaders. That way, obras themselves become mediators not only of everyday life activities but also of the relationship with the (personalistic) state. The tangibility of obras assuages the desire for political immediacy.

The kind of performance that emerges here goes beyond common accounts of populism as a performance by the leader (cf. Moffitt, 2016). Populism becomes a collective, more-than-human performance of leaders building obras, people inhabiting these obras, obras improving people's lives, and people therefore remaining supportive of the leaders. This is what is suggested by Granda's campaign video, in which Granda, the city, and city dwellers form a lively whole. Although Mazzarella (2019, p. 52) is predominantly concerned with human bodies in interaction, his notion of the "mattering forth" of populism best captures this dynamic of coalescence and transubstantiation "between land, people, and leader." While studies of populism commonly argue that the leader seeks to embody the will and identity of the people (de la Torre, 2000) and that the people identify with their land (or nation), obras politics embeds the leader in people's physical landscapes. The leader's work then improves that land and, by extension, life for its inhabitants in a developmentalist virtuous circle. This is the dynamic of the "successful" performance, although success is always a matter of extent, relativity, and negotiation. As will become clear, any disruption to this more-than-human performance is likely to have opposite effects.

The idea of *charisma*—central in definitions of populism (Burbano de Lara, 2020)—is thereby also substantially transformed or, shall we say, transubstantially formed. Charisma does not inhere in the leader, nor is it produced merely in the relationship between the leader and their followers. Obras politics adds a material dimension to charisma, since obras can confer their material and representational power on the leader. Here again, it might be unhelpful to distinguish too neatly between the materiality and the representation of the obra, or between the practices and the ideas afforded by it. Imaginaries of progress and concrete experiences of improvement may be told apart analytically, but they also crucially inform each other, especially in contexts of populist mediation. Take Andrés's thoughts, at the beginning of this article, about generalized electricity thanks to Correa's dams. The kind of inhabitation suggested here was inseparably practical and representational. Distant dams participated in Andrés's lifeworld simultaneously as inhabited matter and as inhabited idea.

In the remainder of this article, I will delve further into the mediations of one specific obra, the Cuenca tram. In this case, too, the obra is inhabited as a range of representations and a set of practices. We could say that, long before the tram was actually operationalized, many people already inhabited its modernity yet to come, while others refuse to do so to this day, despite (inevitably) integrating it otherwise in their lives. The tram has undeniably become an object and an infrastructure in Cuenca, although it may vary dramatically in what it tells us as an objective fact and what it infrastructurally mediates. Accordingly, as we will see, the figure of the leader and the category of "the people" materialize in different ways.

THE CUENCA TRAM

The tram was to be the *obra maestra*, we could say, the masterpiece of Paúl Granda's mayoralty. It was presented as first-class technology, brought straight from Europe by the best engineers, to make Cuenca an international, modern, and sustainable city. In this form, a tram had never existed in Ecuador, but it was in line with other modern transport systems being developed concurrently in the country's largest cities. As Miriam also recognized, "The Cuenca tram is a very important obra, as is the metro in Quito and the cable car in Guayaquil." Ecuador's three largest cities promised to turn a good deal more modern overnight with these sophisticated infrastructures. Many inhabitants, especially those, like Miriam, working along the proposed tram route, dreamed of the progress and prosperity that such an infrastructure would bring to the city. But as soon as the construction started, problems became visible in the building process, and discontent grew among inhabitants. Elsewhere, I have described in some detail the unsettling effects of this construction process and how it harmed people's livelihoods around the building sites (Rumé, 2024). Completion deadlines were repeatedly missed, and inhabitants started noticing incoherencies in the building process. For years, the public works did not culminate in a new, improved reality but remained an invasive ruin taking up space in the city and interrupting its everyday flows.

I spent long days talking to affected shopkeepers along the construction sites. One of them was Alberto, whom I met in 2018, when the tram construction was still dragging on. Alberto was furious about the situation, blaming it on the municipality's incompetence:

> This mister [Granda], like a maniac—because that's how it works in politics—said, "We'll do [the tram], and Cuenca will be so beautiful and this and that." [But authorities] don't organize, they don't plan. They think that with simply initiating something, it's solved. No, no, no. What I was saying—I'm not an engineer, I'm not an architect, I'm just a citizen of Cuenca—but seeing the atrocities they're doing, I say, you need to have a plan!

Alberto thus hinted at the inherent complexity of building something—a fact that obras politics systematically ignores, only to be haunted by it when the construction process turns uncomfortable. This constitutes the intrinsic paradox of the obras logic. Politicians aim to capitalize on the "objective" improvement offered by obras, drawing on an image of leader-

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ship characterized by technical expertise and professionalism. Obras politics thus relates to what de la Torre (2020) terms the "technocratic populism" of the Citizens' Revolution and particularly of Correa himself, who combined the contradictory identities of the expert and the "man of the people." De la Torre, however, does not focus on the distributed, more-than-human performance that this technocratic populism involves, or on the contingent outcomes of such a performance. Any flaw encountered in the development of an obra risks discrediting its maker as incompetent, as a liar or a profiteer. In Alberto's eyes, the tram project had revealed a lack of commitment and expertise on the part of the municipality—and particularly the mayor—and an excess, in turn, of "politics."

When Alberto used the word "politics," it was basically as a dirty word, akin to Coronil's (1997, p. 204) "corrupt world of lies fabricated by politicians." "Ever since I can remember," Alberto said, "our politicians have abandoned us to our fate. I won't talk about politics, but terrible things have happened in my country, until some years ago when I saw that things were changing. But [now] we're again returning to the same." He elaborated on the "terrible things," naming various presidents who had brazenly robbed the country. The period of change he mentioned referred to the Correa era, which had recently come to an end. Correa had been somewhat of a game changer for Alberto, offering the country a different political perspective. But now things were returning to the same old scheme, in which politics was synonymous with rich people in government stealing from *el pueblo*, "the people." Even though Granda had been Correa's local appointee, the mayor's chaotic tram project had unmasked him as a fraud. For Alberto, the municipality's incompetence was clear proof that an internally solidary elite was in power, enriching itself without the intention or know-how to serve the people. Contracts and public positions would be distributed among friends and supporters of the mayors instead of qualified people. "They're earning their salary without doing anything, and that's not called work, that's called stealing. It's called harming *el pueblo*," Alberto concluded.

The tram project thus helped Alberto articulate his political views and assess the municipal administration. It provided the grounds for what Knox (2017) calls "material diagnostics": ideas about the state that are formed through the experience of material conditions. With this approach, Knox shows that infrastructures are both spaces of inhabitation and objects of political struggle. The roads in Peru that she is concerned with do indeed shape lifeworlds—as I have tried to show with regard to obras more generally in Ecuador—but they do so in unpredictable ways and as part of diverse political processes. What I would add to this perspective is that, in Ecuador and the region, populist-personalistic dynamics configure this material diagnostics. Leaders attach their names to obras to be recognized as competent and hard at work in the service of the people. But as soon as an obra generates complications or does not fulfill the expectations linked to it, this personalistic association quickly backfires and engenders the opposite effect. The initiator of the obra comes under fire for being incompetent, indifferent, dishonest, wasteful, or corrupt (Harvey & Knox, 2015). This is the other side of the coin of personalistic material-populist politics. If world-changing powers are concentrated in the person of the leader, the latter is also made responsible if the world does not change or if the observed change is detrimental.

Obras politics is therefore an inherently risky strategy for politicians, but in a context in which obras have become a key means for people to articulate politics, it is also difficult to escape. And the larger or more numerous the proposed obras, the greater the politician's possible prestige, but also the greater their risk of falling into disrepute if things go awry. Both prestige and disrepute coexist, in fact, in the different realities of obras and people. This tension participates in the marked polarization of society in relation to Correa, the ultimate obras builder.

The Manichean divide of populism thus tends to impose a binary choice on obras and *through* obras. The obra is either good and made for the people, and therefore favors its initiator, or it is bad—useless, flawed, exclusive—which suggests that it is the product of an incompetent, corrupt leader and that it benefits only the elite. The line between these two options is fine, and the product of a negotiation (as when Miriam said Correa "had stolen a lot, but he had also built a lot of obras"). The material diagnostic at play is thus highly determined by populist logic, but it also makes this logic contingent on the practical and affective experiences of unpredictable materialities. In other words, obras and leaders tend to fall in one of the two camps offered by populism, with few in-betweens; the binary categorization, however, depends on material circumstances that are intrinsically unstable and relational.

During the years of the tram construction, the project was complicated by several problems—including a drop in international oil prices, archaeological findings on building sites, neighbor protests, adverse weather conditions, and intrastate conflicts. Nonetheless, many people blamed Granda alone for the problems. His many obras, vaunted in his reelection video, were not enough to keep him in office, arguably because his biggest project was turning into a nightmare for inhabitants. The personalistic association between the obra and the mayor contributed to his downfall. Granda's successors in the municipality therefore tried to maintain this association, blaming Granda for ongoing issues in the construction process. Whenever progress was made in the construction, of course, it was presented as the achievement of the mayor in office. The tram's personalistic associations thus became increasingly diffuse, while the project itself developed erratically.

In a book by local civil engineer and critic Eduardo Cardoso Martínez (2017, p. 16), the tram was nicknamed "el trenecito de Paúl," Paúl's little train, attaching the project to Granda and figuring it as the toy of a spoiled child instead of the leader's marvelous gift to the people. The book's title, *Ilusiones*, is telling, since the Spanish word *ilusión* means both "hope" and "illusion." The author develops a fantastical register resonating with that of Wilson (2021), suggesting that Cuenca's inhabitants had been seduced into a dreamworld by Granda and the Citizens' Revolution. In a conversation with me in 2017, Eduardo argued that "it would have been preferable not to raid the city of Cuenca [by choosing] a different transport system, such as electric buses." The notion of the raid made clear that, for Eduardo, the tram was *breaking*, rather than remaking, the city. By proposing electric buses as a more viable alternative to

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the tram, Eduardo—a civil engineer, of all people—was not just opposing this specific obra but suggesting an alternative to the obras logic altogether. Obras lose their self-evident value when public works turn out to be *unnecessary*.

And the engineer was not alone in advocating the "less infrastructural" alternative of electric buses. In their despair, city dwellers from all walks of life were voicing this option and thus hinting at the limits of material populism. In any case, such populism diverges from classical understandings of populism as based on unconditional support through people's charismatic enchantment. The obras logic makes populist allegiance very much conditional, if not highly unstable. The charismatic effects of obras notwithstanding, they are the stuff of everyday negotiations and political deliberation; they tend to polarize people and, sometimes, provoke openings in populist dualisms.

Eduardo's "illusion," this tram "dreamworld," did not suffer an ultimate collapse, an irrevocable awakening. Rather, it kept developing along variable degrees of (un)certainty and (in)stability. After some troubling years of construction, the tram *was* put into operation in 2020. Its initial grandeur could thereby be reestablished, at least for some city dwellers. Miriam, who had also been critical of the project management, was nevertheless proud of this new means of transport circulating in front of her market, with its modern "European" aesthetic. I accompanied her on some occasions when she tried out the tram. What she traveled on was unlikely to become a nonrepresentational system anytime soon, but it remained a changing practical-representational ensemble transporting her through the city, as well as toward ideas of the personalistic state, progress, and Europe. For other people, the tram's operationalization did not make it a substantially more stable or viable reality. Eduardo, for his part, continued to insist on the tram's flaws, political mismanagement, and financial impasse.

"THE PEOPLE" OF MATERIAL POPULISM

December 2020. I was looking through the windows of the tram as it smoothly circulated through Cuenca's old town when, in the middle of the city center, the tram suddenly ground to a halt. The passengers started nervously chatting, standing up to see what was going on. After a while of standstill, the driver announced through the loudspeakers that a protest was hindering the tram. He apologized for the inconvenience, expressed his hope that the road would soon be cleared, and asked for patience. Some minutes later, however, he seemed to have gotten authorization from headquarters to open the doors and let people out, preventing further inconvenience. I got off and approached the crowd of protesters. It seemed like a rather improvised event, undertaken by some 50 people without any banners or other materials. Police officers had encircled them but abstained from interfering. When I asked one of the participants what their protest was about, she explained that they were street vendors angered by the mayor's decision to limit their possibilities for work over the Christmas period. They demanded the right to dignified work, which was especially necessary this time of year. She said "el tranvía es del alcalde" (the tram is the mayor's), so they were blocking the tram to be heard.

This protest on the tram route had by no means been the first. Since the beginning of its construction, protesting crowds had regularly interfered in the project for various reasons (see figure 2): because they rejected the tram itself, because they criticized the management of the project, or, as in this case, because "the tram is the mayor's" and so it provided them a means to pressure the local government on unrelated issues. In saying that the tram was the mayor's, the protesters drew, of course, on the personalistic attachment of leaders to their obras. But this attachment was, again, conceived of in a different sense from that of the leader's gift to the people. The association was made, on the contrary, as a claim that the obra did not belong to the people. It belonged to the sitting mayor, according to the protesters, even though the mayor had already been replaced twice since the tram project began. But the question of whom the obra belongs to also implies the issue of who exactly "the people" are in the populist equation.

Obras are presented by their initiators as "for the people" and as responding to the people's true needs. The tram was presented as the solution to local problems of dangerous, congested, and polluted streets. Apart from offering comfortable, efficient, inclusive, and sustainable public transport, it also implied ideas of economic development and sociocultural progress. The obra thus defined the problems that people were suffering from and how to solve them. It thereby also worked with a specific understanding of who "the people" actually were, what their lives were like, and what they lacked, needed, and wanted. In this sense, the obra can be taken as not only a gift to the people but also as an attempt to *enact* them.

Laclau (2005) takes the construction of a homogeneous category of "the people" as the defining aspect of populism. According to Laclau, populism is about connecting people's diverse demands in chains of equivalence through a common denominator, an empty signifier such as "the people." This discursive logic makes "the people" appear as one thanks to their sharing of unanswered demands, making the diversity of demands and identities disappear behind this construction of equivalence. Yet Laclau's construction of "the people" can be criticized for being "exclusively discursive and abstract" (Disch, 2010, p. 280). The idea of material populism aims to grasp how "the people" can be performed not only discursively but also materially and practically. The obra appears again as the medium of this performance, constituting the platform on which "the people" can come into being through their support and everyday usage. Instead of an empty signifier, the equivalential chain here is a material infrastructure aiming to embrace diverse demands, identities, and hopes (see also Harvey & Knox, 2015). The obra becomes "of the people," describing and shaping who the people are. It is the public good, the concrete public sphere inhabited by the people.

Yet the protest that took place on the tram rails in December 2020 presented a very different picture of the tram. To say that "the tram is the mayor's" implied that the tram constituted not a public infrastructure but an exclusive, elite technology. This much was conveyed to me by another street vendor I talked

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FIGURE 2 A protest blocking the tram in Cuenca, Ecuador, in March 2021. (Sam Rumé) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

to during fieldwork, who criticized the tram system for barring street vendors from riding it if they were carrying their merchandise. As a medium for enacting "the people," the tram turned out to involve a rather restrictive definition of "the people." Indeed, in comparison to, say, a new market hall, an obra like the tram involved a rather different set of ideas and uses. The imaginaries accompanying the tram, in the form of video advertisements, for instance, could in large part be described as middle class. There were images of office clerks, tourists, and sports cyclists riding the tram, but not street vendors. Moreover, the recurrent references to European cities, from which the tram was said to originate, lent the obra a particularly white appearance.[6]

Such exclusionary tendencies and the many issues engendered by the tram project since the beginning of its construction had given rise to a number of "counterpeople," so to say. Here, we can draw on Marres's (2012) pragmatist concepts of publics and material participation. Inspired by Dewey, Marres understands publics as emerging from shared issues and as materially mediated. "Public participation," in this sense, is not limited to the specifically designed settings of democratic institutions but can include practices such as energy consumption at home (in Marres's study) and urban mobility (in my study). Participation becomes an inherently material—rather than discursive, abstract—affair. Hence, Marres's work challenges the liberal ideal of democracy and public participation, but we can also use it to defy overly discursive renderings of "the people" in populism. In the case of the Cuenca tram, moreover, we can say that instead of neatly enacting its projected kind of people, the tram became for many inhabitants the very issue for which a solution was demanded. Counterpublics emerged, claiming that the tram was not for them.

By protesting on the tram rails and interrupting the tram's circulation, however, people repurposed the tram and effectively appropriated it as a medium—not for their mobility or to express their support for the government but, on the contrary, to perform their dissent. The tram was thereby simultaneously rejected as "of the elite" (the mayor's) and appropriated as a material device to express this alternative public. Furthermore, by interrupting the tram's flow, the protest interrupted the whole reality in which the tram was an infrastructure working for the people. "The people" of obras can thus be performed not only by the users and supporters but also, and competitively so, by the dispossessed, the disadvantaged, the nonusers, and the "misusers." Alderman and Goodwin (2022) also suggest this in relation to Ecuadoran roads, as they were appropriated by protesters during the October 2019 national strike. Obras, in this sense, become infrastructural to populism in diverse and often unexpected ways.

These observations point to the ways obras politics materialize the tension in populism between democracy and authoritarianism (Kapferer & Theodossopoulos, 2019). Obras such as the Cuenca tram are commonly perceived as top-down projects, either by visionary leaders (think of Miriam's narrative of "vision") or by "maniacs" (in Alberto's account). Ordinary people are relegated to the position of spectators in the building process. As we have seen, however, this spectatorship is far from passive. Citizens demand certain obras, closely monitor their development, and judge their rulers accordingly. These evaluations inform their votes, as well as a range of practices to lobby authorities and express their discontent—the kind of protest seen on the tram rails being perhaps the most concentrated expression. The immediacy of protest, and the proximity it often creates to decision-makers, is simultaneously a key

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democratic practice of material populism and a testing of democratic limits. Because, unlike the peaceful instance on that December day in Cuenca, protests against and by means of infrastructures can also provoke violent state repression.[7]

OUTAGES

In June 2024, I returned to Cuenca for a short visit and met Miriam again, although in quite uncanny circumstances. When I went to greet her at the market one afternoon, a blackout suddenly afflicted the whole city. In the previous weeks, there had been regular power outages induced by the government to cope with the fact that, owing to drought, the country's most important dams were not producing enough energy. But on this day, it was not a planned outage; recent rainfall had allowed the dams to recover their capacity, and no alert had been issued beforehand. It later turned out that a key transmission channel had broken down, sparking a chain reaction that left the entire country without energy for several hours.

As I walked through the city center toward Miriam's market stall, I observed the strangeness of dark shops and of cars improvising their way through intersections without traffic lights. Arriving at the market, the tram stood still and empty in the middle of the street. The outage was not dramatic for Miriam's job directly, but to her it provided proof of the country's dire situation. "It goes from bad to worse," she said. Lasso, the previous president, had done nothing for the country, she said, and his successor, Daniel Noboa, even less. "Look where this leads us to," she lamented, pointing at the motionless tram in the street.

So the tram had once again been halted, this time not by a protest but by nationwide infrastructural breakdown. And again it served locals' material diagnostics to denounce not the tram's initiator but the president's management of the country. When ex-mayor Granda had been blamed for the flaws of the tram project, this personalistic framing had excluded from the equation all kinds of other human and more-than-human forces—from archaeological findings to international oil prices. Likewise, in blaming the ongoing power outages on president Noboa, Miriam left little room for the agency of, say, drought, let alone the planetary assemblages causing climate change.[8] In the material-populist cosmology, in which local and national leaders are responsible for the world people inhabit, such agencies are routinely excluded as determining factors.

And by cosmology, as I hope has become clear by now, I refer to an ordering of the world intrinsically linked to material and practical inhabitation. It is in no way a coherent, autonomous, or stable "ontology," but a politics with ontological implications as well as openings. We can nevertheless understand material populism here as enacting a specific version of the modernist constitution of the world (Latour, 1993), one whose relative power and stability simultaneously stem from the materiality of obras and ongoing (material) histories of Western developmentalism and (neo)colonial patronage. Therefore, "failed" obras can reinforce material populism as much as "successful" ones, affecting only the place that specific leaders occupy in open-ended and diverging cosmological stories. If, in Miriam's account, President Noboa was to blame for all of the country's current ills, many others framed the same ills as Correa's legacy. Such opposing views nevertheless shared, in many ways, the same obras logic.

The infrastructural progress and taken-for-grantedness that Andrés pointed out at the beginning of this article had now suddenly been undone. Personalistic associations of dams and the power grid were rekindled, although in contested ways. In one narrative, the world built by Correa was dissolving, not as a dreamworld that had been debunked but as real progress that had later been neglected. In another narrative, the progress under Correa had always been more of a facade, which kept crumbling and evincing its lies. Such seemingly arbitrary interpretations, however, do not make the materiality of obras ultimately irrelevant to populist framings. On the contrary, what I have tried to show is how the manifold material effects of obras help bring into being various populist dynamics—including the dichotomic categories of "the people" and "the elite," personalistic state formation, and charismatic leadership. The successful obra enacts the people and the charismatic leader, confounding representation and practice. But while obras constitute the infrastructure for citizen-state relationships, they do so in unpredictable ways. They embed leaders in people's everyday settings as world-makers or world-breakers, provoke contradictory formations of "the people," and, correspondingly, support antagonistic enactments of public participation.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All my interlocutors are pseudonymized, except for author Eduardo Cardoso Martínez. Political figures appear with their real names. Place-names are real.

[2] This conversation took place in 2020, well before the severe power outages that have once again afflicted the country. This issue will be picked up in the conclusion.

[3] This observation is based on various years of ethnographic fieldwork and non-fieldwork visits to Cuenca, which may not coincide with people's experiences in other contexts. One anonymous reviewer cautioned me not to neglect Correa's class politics, hinting at his agenda for "socialism of the 21st century." While this was also part of local political debates, it often faded behind, or was grounded in, the more "concrete" focus on obras.

[4] This focus on security came with its own set of obras (such as prisons and public CCTV systems), but not the kind of everyday infrastructures that many people expect. Crucially, security displaced the focus on progress.

[5] My translation. Original fieldwork documents and interview quotes are in Spanish.

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[6] The tram, in consequence, could be understood as a whitening technology (Roberts, 2013). Although class and race play into this issue in ways that cannot be elaborated on in the space of this article, I do not wish to take them as strict determining factors in how obras and "the people" are shaped. In fact, materialities contribute to rendering these categories malleable (Roberts, 2013). Accordingly, tram supporters and opponents, users and nonusers, cannot clearly be identified along class lines, despite the project's exclusive tendencies.

[7] An instance of this being, again, the October 2019 protests in Ecuador, as mentioned by Alderman and Goodwin (2022).

[8] In her account of a comparable power outage in the US, Bennett (2010) challenges anthropocentrism and modernist and neoliberal patterns of assigning blame by stressing the more-than-human assemblage of the power grid. My goal here, in contrast, is to understand how agency is distributed in a material-populist world that has much in common with the modernism against which Bennett writes.

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