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Review Essay: The Infrastructure Humanities

Rethinking Infrastructure Across the Humanities. Edited by Aaron Pinnix, Axel Volman, Fernando Esposito, and Nora Binder. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023. ISBN 9783839469835 Open Access (ebook).

The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure: Race, Affect, Environment. Edited by Kelly M. Rich, Nicole M. Rizzuto, and Susan Zieger. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2023. ISBN 9780810145504 \$32.00 (pbk).

Topothesia: Planning, Colonialism, and Places in Excess. By Ameeth Vijay. San Diego, CA: Fordham University Press, 2023. pp. 272. ISBN 9781531503185 \$35.00 (pbk).

Abstract

It is an exciting time for the infrastructure humanities, with numerous publications, the formation of the UK's first Infrastructure Humanities Group, and a swell of conferences and panel events on infrastructure appearing in recent years. As infrastructure becomes an increasingly familiar object and method of study in the arts and humanities, this essay reviews three books – two edited collections and one monograph – that were published under the broad umbrella of the infrastructure humanities in 2023. Drawing from these reviews a series of reflections on the field, the essay offers a sketch of the origins of the infrastructure humanities, a snapshot of current interests and directions, and potential areas for inquiry moving forward.

Introduction

It is an exciting time for the infrastructure humanities. The year 2023 alone witnessed the publication of several books and a bumper edition of the journal *symplokē* with fifteen articles on “infrastructuralism” (Breu & Di Leo eds. 2023); the formation of the UK's first Infrastructure Humanities Group (IHG), established by literary scholars at the University of Glasgow; and a swell of panels and events across the US and Europe that took infrastructure as their focus, from the six session streams on infrastructure at the MLA 2023 in San Francisco to an annual meeting on “Postcolonial Infrastructure” hosted by the Gesellschaft für Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien (GAPS, or the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies) at the University of Konstanz.

Several contributors to the GAPS event have a hand in the first essay collection reviewed here, *Rethinking Infrastructure Across the Humanities*, which is edited by a group of German scholars and available open access from transcript Verlag. Infrastructure now appears regularly as both an object and method of study in numerous monographs and journal articles across the humanities, but there are two other notable publications from 2023 that I review here: *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure: Race, Affect, Environment*, an essay collection edited by a group of literary scholars based in the US; and *Topothesia: Planning, Colonialism, and Places in Excess*, a critical monograph by Ameeth Vijay that brings literary analysis to bear on urban planning. This essay takes a review of these books as an opportunity to sketch some of the origins, trends, and potentials of the infrastructure humanities as an increasingly coherent and consolidated area of inquiry.

As its name suggests, the infrastructure humanities comes at the question of infrastructure – railways, roads, bridges, sewers, servers, parks, hospitals, libraries, as well as “softer” infrastructural services such as education and social care – with methodologies and perspectives honed in humanities disciplines through readings of literature, culture, and the visual arts. It reads for representations of infrastructure in “texts” broadly defined, but it also brings those ways of reading to bear on infrastructure in the material world, realising in its most exciting iterations how the structural and symbolic operate together. Twentieth-century debates about the Marxist opposition between infrastructure and superstructure are transgressed by the infrastructure humanities, which has instead learned to interpret infrastructure as symptom and system, and to track both its effects and affects simultaneously. Rhys Williams and Henry Ivry, co-founders of the Infrastructure Humanities Group in Glasgow, epigraph their aims with a quotation from the African American poet June Jordan that captures this orientation: “This was a way, a scale, of looking at things that escaped the sundering paralysis of conflict by concentrating on the point, the purpose of the fight: What kind of schools and what kind of parks and what of privacy and what kind of beauty and what kind of options would make love a reasonable, easy response?” (quoted on IHG 2023).

Headed up by literary scholars since the early 2010s (Rubenstein 2010, Beal 2013), the infrastructure humanities has functioned more like an archipelago of intersecting interests than an enclosed field of research. Its interdisciplinary and somewhat interstitial composition might be said to reflect the nature of infrastructure itself, which after all describes the stuff between things – the materials that connect and transport – rather than the things that are themselves circulated. As the anthropologist Brian Larkin has put it in an influential review article, “what distinguishes infrastructures from technologies is that they are objects on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems” (2013, 329). While this systemic quality means that

infrastructures must be apprehended and analysed with conceptual models, their material facilitation of the most rudimentary of everyday activities – switching on a light, running a bath, travelling to work – demands that we read them with an analytical register of immediacy and encounter as well. This experiential quality explains the centrality of ethnographic writing in the invigoration of critical approaches to infrastructure over the past two decades (see, for instance, Gupta 2001, Simone 2004, Carse 2014, Graham & McFarlane eds. 2015, Harvey & Knox 2015, Anand 2017, Dalakoglo 2017), while a reading of infrastructure as the concrete expression of a world-system only graspable otherwise through abstractions has also attracted materialist scholars working in the humanities (Davies 2017, Truscello 2020). This work has invigorated attention to infrastructures as symbolic forms that interpolate their users into certain ways of living and dying, while also showing how infrastructures are just as often refused through sabotage or recalibrated through theft and other unintended forms of usage. Scholars working in the infrastructure humanities have recognised that infrastructure’s joining of lived experienced to abstract systems makes it particularly open to humanistic modes of analysis, and moreover that there is political potential in this kind of engagement (see Levine 2015). As Larkin concludes, infrastructures “emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function. Focusing on the issue of form, or the poetics of infrastructure, allows us to understand how the political can be constituted through different means” (2013, 329). This challenge to read infrastructures for their poetic registers, and to think through these towards different futures, has become the central task of the infrastructure humanities (see Berlant 2016).

Written in 2013, Larkin’s review essay identified an “infrastructural turn” centred in anthropology, though with important debts to other interdisciplinary fields such as urban studies (see Graham & Marvin 2022). The year 2023 therefore marks the passing of a decade since Larkin’s intervention, with much research since following his pivot from infrastructure’s technical functioning to its lived and affective qualities. Particularly in the late 2010s, several publications provided important stepping stones of consolidation through the fomenting waters of interdisciplinary scholarship (e.g. Parks and Starosielski eds. 2015, Harvey et al. eds. 2016), some beginning in literary studies and working outwards to the social sciences (Rubenstein et al. eds. 2015, Boehmer & Davies eds. 2018), others emerging from anthropology while drawing on work in aesthetic theory and the energy humanities (Anand et al. eds. 2018, Hetherington ed. 2019). That many of these interventions were published as special issues or edited collections is indicative of the cross-disciplinary and collaborative demands of infrastructure as an object of study, requiring as

it does the combination of political economy, ethnographic research, and anthropological expertise as well as a range of methods from literary and cultural studies. If such an approach has not always slipped comfortably into the shape of the conventional academic monograph, the archipelagic shape of the essay collection has perhaps proved a more appropriate form in which to capture infrastructure's uneven and in between arrangement.

The three books reviewed here demonstrate that the analytic problem of infrastructure – that it cannot be read in disciplinary isolation – is also its affordance. Increasingly, the infrastructure humanities is defined as much by a methodological way of seeing the world as it is by the actual objects of its analysis, though clearly this is a dialectical relationship. It shows that infrastructure failure is driving the upheavals of the twenty-first century, from mass displacement and climate breakdown to rising authoritarianism and perpetual warfare, while at the same time tracking the increasingly militarised infrastructures of securitisation and incarceration that are built to mitigate these crises. Grasping these convulsing materials in motion requires a dynamic and comparative scholarship that can join together different situated experiences in the search for a better future. If there is one thread that unites the three books reviewed here, it is a conviction that the humanities has a leading role to play in building these new collaborations.

Concept

The brief history of the infrastructure humanities that I have offered here is necessarily partial; it certainly could not do justice to the wealth of scholarship that has addressed itself to infrastructure over the past twenty years. But the opening section of *Rethinking Infrastructure Across the Humanities* takes an even longer view still, extending the roots of infrastructural analysis back into the twentieth century. The editorial team open the book with a tribute to Wolfgang Schivelbusch, the German historian and independent scholar who passed away in 2023, and whose brilliant work connected the technical dimensions of infrastructure to subjective experiences of the world and mapped their revolutionary impact on society. In particular, his 1977 study *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* provides a magisterial account of the impact of Britain's railroads, building from the nitty gritty details of 1830s engineering pamphlets into extended meditations on the cultural revolution brought about by the unprecedented speed of steam travel. Taking their cue from Schivelbusch and another early writer on infrastructure, Leo Marx (whose *Machine in the Garden* was first published in 1964), the editors of *Rethinking Infrastructure* begin with the contention that infrastructures are “fundamentally shaped

by cultural aspects like public imaginaries, social practices, and historical transformations” (Pinnix et al. 2023, 12).

The “garden” in Leo Marx’s work was of course the settler colonial landscape of nineteenth-century North America, and the introduction to *Rethinking Infrastructure* offers a careful literature review of infrastructure studies that acknowledges the important work of scholars based primarily in the US academy. At the same time, a major contribution of the collection is to shift the genealogical axes of the infrastructure humanities back towards Europe. The introduction makes reference not only to Schivelbusch (originally a Berliner), but also to another German historian, Dirk van Laak, whose many writings on infrastructure have only recently been translated into English (see van Laak 2023). Aaron Pinnix and his co-editors have done their research and read widely, capturing in their introduction a comprehensive picture of the infrastructure humanities that draws together work on novels, allegories, comics, romances, and poetry, and which reads these genres both as representations of infrastructure and forms of infrastructure themselves. Edited by an interdisciplinary group of German scholars – a literary critic, a musician, and two historians – based at the University of Konstanz and the Humboldt University of Berlin, *Rethinking Infrastructure*’s geographic orientation reminds readers that academic research relies on its own situated infrastructures of circulation, translation, and publication.

Opening the book’s first section, “Setting Out Some Definitions,” the introduction is followed two further genealogical chapters that are worth rehearsing here in some detail. Departing from a conventional understanding of infrastructure as sewer pipes, energy grids, wind farms, and so on (what van Laak (2023) calls the “lifelines of our society”), Christian Meyer’s second chapter turns to a conceptual rather than material interpretation of infrastructure that is picked up by many other contributors to this book. In particular, Meyer offers a review of infrastructure’s role in the conceptual battlegrounds of the mid-twentieth century – not familiar Marxist debates about the relevance of infrastructure and superstructure, but a parallel contest between structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault on the one hand, and phenomenologists such as Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the other. As Meyer argues, for structuralists the world was comprised of objective structures determining subjective phenomena, leaving little scope for a theory of agency or action. For the phenomenologists, by contrast, neither objective determinants nor subjective agents operated in isolation, with action emerging instead from the relationship *between* elements within a given totality. This focus on “in betweenness” lends phenomenology to a kind of proto-infrastructural analysis, with philosophers like Merleau-Ponty speaking of the human body as the “infrastructure of vision” as far as back at the early 1960s. Meyer concedes that as

infrastructure circulates in public discourse today it refers to technical materials such as roads and railways, but this conceptual history leads to quite a different reading: “infrastructure must be understood as [the] difference between ‘the ground’ and ‘what is grounded,’” argues Meyer, “as [a] generative condition of both ‘possibility’ and ‘impossibility’” (Meyer 2023, 46). As Meyer points out, this is the root not of infrastructure but of “infrastructuralism,” a term widely taken up in the infrastructure humanities (see Rubenstein et al. eds. 2015, Breu and Di Leo eds. 2023). Attributed to the anthropologist Marshal Sahlins (2010), “infrastructuralism” recognises that economic and technological infrastructures determine social life, but argues that they in turn have always already been made possible by a thick culture of social values, narratives, relationships, and concepts (Meyer 2023, 47).

This dialectical approach is reoriented again in the third chapter of *Rethinking Infrastructure*, which offers another very different conceptual genealogy of infrastructure. Here, the media theorist Axel Volmar tells a story of the infrastructure humanities that is rooted in “a move from a systemic understanding of infrastructure to a praxeological one” (Volmar 2023, 52). Scholars have always written about railway networks, they just didn’t happen to describe them as “infrastructures” when they did so, preferring to conceptualise them as “systems” throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Why then the shift to infrastructure? As Volmar explains, where “system” most often describes a closed internal circuitry, infrastructure is always open-ended: “infrastructures are always infrastructures *of* something and *for* someone” else (Volmar 2023, 54). The conceptual turn from system to infrastructure therefore allows scholars to pay closer attention to the lived experiences and social arrangements – in other words, the different futures – that are concretely produced by infrastructural systems. Volmar situates this within a wider “praxeological shift” across the social sciences and humanities (2023, 60), where praxeology refers to theories of human action and intentional behaviour. This aligns with ethnographic work pioneered by scholars such as Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey C. Bowker in the 1990s, and it has some conceptual resonance with the Actor Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour and his followers. Yet the key affordance of infrastructure as a praxeological method is that it is able to hold onto a rigorously situated action – a or equally an immediate ethnographic or aesthetic encounter – without losing sight of the global system of flows and structures that continue to shape that analytical moment. Critique has not run out of steam in this account of the infrastructure humanities, but on the contrary, is excitingly reinvigorated by it.

These different perspectives on the history of “infrastructure” stimulate wider reflection on methodological decision making in the humanities. If the semantic turn to infrastructure registers a

larger epistemic shift, we might want to consider the world-historical conditions that are demanding these new forms of knowledge. Academic methodologies are not developed in a vacuum, after all, so what is it about the past quarter century that has pushed humanities scholars towards infrastructure as a meaningful object of study and way of interpreting the world? To put this another way: what is the historicity of the infrastructural turn itself? These important questions are urged upon readers of *Rethinking Infrastructure*. From the mass privatisation of the twentieth-century's publicly owned systems (which Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (2001) call "splintering urbanism"), to the collapsing international order and the disruption of supply chains by regional warfare and disintegrating ecosystems (Cowen 2014), to the failure of the nation-state to provide functioning public services even for its citizens (Davies 2023), the major challenges of the twenty-first century are bound up with the world's crumbling infrastructure. In this context, the praxeological focus of the infrastructure humanities does not only offer an effective way of appraising these challenges, but also looks for a form of academic practice that is oriented towards the kinds of political action that are so desperately needed to build better futures.

Rethinking Infrastructure is made up of a further six thematically arranged sections. With a total twenty-three chapters, it is a bumper book that moves beyond concrete infrastructures such as roads and railways to explore the affordances of infrastructural analysis in a range of new contexts – parish churches, spiritual entities, romantic love, and the realist novel are all read here as infrastructures. Essays in the book's second section, "Infrastructures and Communication," analyse the hashtag, the concept, and language as infrastructure, while the third section, "Infrastructures and Sociality," moves from the militarised decision-making processes of ancient Rome to twenty-first-century relationship apps: "They not only transport ideological or culturally tinted content regarding 'successful' or 'good' relationships," writes Anne Ganzert of dating apps, "but they shape user behaviour, value perception, and social interactions" (2023, 123), and are in that sense profoundly infrastructural. So extensive is the collection's itinerary that it is beyond the scope of this review to provide an overview of every section in detail here.

Taken as a whole, *Rethinking Infrastructure* walks the line between a productive application of infrastructural analysis to new contexts and stretching the concept so thinly that it risks losing its theoretical value – after all, if infrastructure is everything, then it risks becoming nothing as well. Yet the collection manages this balance overall, the range of essays moving beyond understandings of "infrastructures" as static objects and towards "the infrastructural" as a method of interpretation. In its final four sections – "Infrastructure and Religion," "Infrastructure and Genre," "Infrastructure and Environment," and "Infrastructure and Colonialism" – *Rethinking Infrastructure* extends the

definition of infrastructure to “ultimately encompass everything that people in the past and present need for their daily necessities,” as one contributor puts it (Signori 2023, 173). Infrastructure becomes redefined here more as process than product, recognisable through the future actions that remain latent as potentials within its form, particularly as these are involved in the extension or elimination of life. Glasgow’s Infrastructure Humanities Group offer a similar definition on their website, describing their aims as “an effort to grasp the social, ecological, and aesthetic dimensions of infrastructures that subtend or delimit lives and worlds” (IHG 2023). Notably, this view of infrastructure as distributive of life itself shapes another of 2023’s major contributions to the infrastructure humanities.

Life

In their introduction to *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure*, editors Kelly M. Rich, Nicole M. Rizzuto, and Susan Zieger set out the collection’s aim to imagine “the aesthetics of infrastructure through the heuristic of ‘life’” (2023, 10). Theoretically in tune with the recent work that falls under the umbrella of the infrastructure humanities, the collection can be situated in a wider turn away from preoccupations with infrastructures of destruction and death, and towards infrastructures that enable and sustain life instead. Throughout the 2010s and taking a cue from Frantz Fanon, literary scholars tended to read infrastructure as a form of “planned violence” that foreshortened the lives of the colonised and disenfranchised, and which nonetheless yielded spontaneous and informal modes of counter-planning and resistance that it was the critic’s job to identify, amplify, and celebrate (Boehmer & Davies eds., 2018). This view has traction with much scholarship across the environmental and energy humanities, where our current moment has been starkly described by the literary scholar Michael Truscello as a period of “infrastructural brutality”: “the historical context in which industrial capitalism has met the limits of its expansion and domination, and yet continues to press for unprecedented commitments to build more oil pipelines, more large dams, more roads, more paved surfaces than at any time in human history” (2020, 4). As Truscello’s formulation suggests, this rebuttal of infrastructural violence grows from a tradition of critique that has roots in Fanon’s anti-colonial analysis, and it can be tracked through the work of Achille Mbembe as it has evolved from a critique of the postcolony (2005) to a global necropolitics (2019) to the brutality of today’s planetary destruction (2020).

More recent scholarship in the infrastructure humanities has by no means scaled back its critique of the devastation wrought by capitalist infrastructures, but it has at the same time

combined this with an interest in identifying life-giving infrastructures – solar farms, social housing, hospitals, and so on – and reasserting the infrastructural qualities of forms of activity that have hitherto tended to pass unrecognised as such – for instance, domestic labour and care work. A recent book by an early writer on infrastructuralism, Caroline Levine’s *The Activist Humanist* (again published in 2023), explicitly spells out this “turn” in the environmental humanities from necropolitical critique to the development of collective infrastructures for living. While this renewed interest in life bears some continuities with Foucauldian work on biopolitics, it makes an important shift away from a conspiratorial suspicion of infrastructural and collective power, which has tended to serve rather than challenge neoliberal interests over the past forty years. Indeed, it is in this respect more obviously resonant with the increasingly influential tradition of abolitionist scholarship, which from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s conceptualisation of time as “the resource of life” (2022, 227) to Neferti X. M. Tadiar’s theorisation of “a new global political economy of life” (2022, x) has inquired into the kinds of infrastructures needed for a more equal redistribution of the time of life itself. *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure* steps into this critical moment with propulsive force, employing the dual categories of infrastructures and aesthetics to contend that any study of one without the other will “miss the human experiences that constantly reconsolidate and subvert [infrastructure’s] interfaces” (Rich et al. 2023, 2). In this formulation, reading for the aesthetics of infrastructure is not to attend to some symbolic afterimage of technical materials, but rather a way of foregrounding what might be described as the lived experience of infrastructure.

Rich, Rizutto, and Zieger, set out a coherent agenda for the collection in their pithily title opening essay: “Reading Infrastructure” (Rich et al. 2023, 1-19). Published a decade after Brian Larkin’s influential 2013 review article, the authors update his focus on the poetics of infrastructure with a gentle critique that demonstrates the deepening nuance at work in the infrastructure humanities. As they point out, for Larkin the fantasies we hold around infrastructures are so powerful that they often decouple from actually existing infrastructure altogether, taking on a performative power that is divorced from the way in which infrastructure materially reshapes the economies of life. Rich and her colleagues object to the separation of the affective from the material that is implied in this argument, asserting instead that we should read “the poetics of infrastructure as its mode of address (its promise or social fact, as opposed to material existence) *and* the aesthesis of infrastructure as the experience of its material qualities (e.g., the dampening effect of asphalt, the hardness of concrete)” together as simultaneous forces (Rich et al. 2023, 2-3, my emphasis). The poetics of infrastructure are no mere semiotic echo of the railroad, or sewer, or server in this analysis. Rather, that poetics is constitutive of the aesthetic life of the materials from which

infrastructure itself is constructed, where “aesthetics” is understood “as *aesthesis*, or sensory and embodied experience” (Rich et al. 2023, 11).

The result, these scholars insist, is that “infrastructure is an assemblage of sociality, collective affect, and poetry” (Rich et al. 2023, 9-10), and in this sense infrastructure can and should be read as though it were a poem demanding our interpretation. There is however another fold in the reading for infrastructure that is set out here, which pushes critics to become conscious of their embodied relationship to the system they are interpreting. This has much in common with the arguments of *Rethinking Infrastructure* and its emphasis on the praxeological shift of infrastructure thinking, which departs from systems analyses and other methods of critique that place the reader at a distance from their material. Rather than separating ourselves out from the world, reading for infrastructure offers a reinvigorated form of critique that begins by recognising how we are imbricated in – and ourselves partly constructed by – the very patterns of infrastructure we are analysing. This raises the stakes of critique not least because it restores a sense of subjective agency to the reader, who does not simply observe infrastructure as it occurs “out there,” but who must make the political choice to interpret something *as* infrastructure and in so doing come to understand the different futures it makes possible, as well as those it deliberately or inadvertently closes down.

Exemplary here is the editors’ insistence that we read “race, racialisation, and racism” – they bracket the three together – as infrastructure; or to be more precise, that we read for the way that race *operates as* infrastructure (they draw here on Nemser 2017). This is an important conceptual shift and one that pushes infrastructural analysis into new terrain. It’s obvious enough that many forms of infrastructure enact racism in the world, from the building of prisons and the bombing of hospitals to the neglect of fire safety systems in tower blocks; and it’s equally the case that infrastructures themselves are often racialised, from Cecil Rhodes’s imperial railways projecting ideas of white supremacy to the imagery associating informal slum dwellings and burst sewer pipes with a dehumanised underclass (see Davies 2023). *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure* takes this forward to argue that race itself is infrastructure – “because whatever else it may be or do, it has a long and enduring history of mediating relations between states, capital, people, and the spaces, technologies, environments, energies, and affects that both connect and partition them” (Rich et al. 2023, 13). Infrastructure is not only how racism materialises in the world, it also mediates the violence of racialised relations. This is the aesthetic life of infrastructure and it refers not only to the representation of infrastructure in literary texts, but also to the ways infrastructure is experienced and imagined as it extends life for some and shortens it for others.

This concern with race as infrastructure cements the joins between the book's different contributions, which on the one hand attend to this expanded definition of aesthetic life, while on the other retaining a fairly traditional view of infrastructure – most chapters attend to “hard” materials such as roads, bridges, telegraph wires, wind turbines, and nuclear reactors, though there are one or two exceptions. If there is not quite so much elasticity of conceptual application on display here as in *Rethinking Infrastructure*, the pay off is a more focused volume with just ten chapters spread across three parts: “Part One: Spatial Histories of Racial Capitalism”; “Part Two: Affect and Technologies”; and “Part Three: Energy, Environment, Extraction.” Part One moves from Ramesh Mallipeddi's reading of the ports and plantations of Caribbean agriculture as accumulated repositories of infrastructural harm, to Louis Moreno's view of colonial infrastructure and its neoclassical aesthetics as an expression of capital in motion, to Samantha Pinto's analysis of the ways that nineteenth-century life writing by Black women worked tactically through imperial infrastructures, rather than – as is normally characterised – in “retreat from or resistance to” them (Pinto 2023, 64). Yanie Fecu's chapter opens Part Two with an exploration of radio static as a sonic infrastructure of anti-colonial aesthetics in Frantz Fanon's writing, and it is followed by three chapters that each offer brilliant close readings of contemporary novels that will be familiar to many postcolonial and world literary scholars: Chris Abani's *Graceland*, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, and Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*. With this structure, the collection not only cements the central role of literary critique in its own development (all of its editors are also literary scholars), but also reflects the fact that while the infrastructure humanities has its roots in anthropology, it is primarily in literary studies that the field is coming into its own.

The collection's movement between readings of architecture and life writing to radio waves and novelistic prose exemplifies what the infrastructure humanities has to offer – a method that folds together the material, imagined, and embodied landscapes of infrastructure and reads for the processes by which they mutually constitute one another. The book's final section exemplifies this agility, its essays slipping seamlessly from readings of infrastructural materials to their representations and back again. In her remarkable appraisal of the aesthetics of clean energy, Georgiana Banita studies the eroticised infrastructures of wind farms and their representations in environmental photography to point to “an insatiable public desire for a kind of infrastructural porn” (2023, 150). Rahul Mukherjee meanwhile reads the aesthetics of nuclear reactors alongside the lives of nuclear factory workers as they are represented in a series of films and documentaries, tracking the ways in which the usually invisible decay of radioactive infrastructure is made aesthetically available for perception in the deterioration of workers' bodies. Finally, this section

concludes with one of the collection's more conceptually expansive contributions, written by one of its editors, Susan Zieger, who uses a series of "nonfiction novels" to upend the conventional view of drug smuggling as a failure of national border infrastructure and instead "to interpret cocaine itself as a global infrastructure supplying energy for human labour" (2023, 187). Taken together, these chapters exhibit an infrastructure humanities that is confident in its interdisciplinarity and assured of the rewards of infrastructural analysis as a way of reading. Indeed, what emerges as this book turns our attention to infrastructures and their representations across media is a renewed conviction for the value of *reading* itself as a practice. There is more than a little irony in the fact that it is through the study of infrastructure that higher education's obsession with STEM subjects is rebutted, and the material relevance of humanist skills of interpretation, decoding, and critique robustly revalidated.

In the afterword that closes the collection, the world literary scholar Jennifer Wenzel meditates on exactly this topic. Taking a cue from the editors' introduction, she highlights the limitations of understanding infrastructure as "by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work," as the ethnographer Susan Leigh Star (1999, 382) so famously put it in the late 1990s. In this account, infrastructure only comes into view "when it breaks: the server is down, the bridge washes out, there is a power blackout" (Star 1999, 382). Though a generative observation in its time, it could only have been made from the global North in the second half of the twentieth century. As Frantz Fanon (2004, 4-5) first argued, failing infrastructure was not exceptional but the rule of the colonial and postcolonial experience, with functioning infrastructure operating as a deliberately visible display of white supremacy while also providing the material means of oppression and extraction. Growing scholarly attention to infrastructure in the twenty-first century may correspond historically to the slow (and sometimes quick) collapse of infrastructure in the global North, but this is only revealing a condition that has long been evident to postcolonialists and others working in and with the South – as world-literary scholars have argued, taking their cue from the prophet of modernity J.G. Ballard, "the periphery is where the future reveals itself" (quoted in WReC 2015, v). With postcolonial and world literary studies providing the backbone of *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure*, the collection's major contribution – as Wenzel notes – is to offer a robust and collective refutation of this dichotomous understanding of functioning and failing infrastructure as invisible and visible respectively. Instead of simply making infrastructure visible by pointing it out, these chapters pursue the more ambitious aim of making infrastructure legible as one might a literary narrative, with its contexts, chronologies, settings, and symbols acting together to produce a texture beyond the sum of its parts (see Rich et al. 2023, 3-4; Wenzel 2023, 206).

Calling on us to “read” infrastructure *like* poetry, *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure* reinvigorates our methods of critique in the process.

Yet it is also here that Wenzel offers a caution to scholars working in the infrastructure humanities, one that hinges on the simile of that italicised “*like*.” After all, a poem may have infrastructural qualities, and it may even be considered as infrastructure if it enables action that could not have happened without it – we might for instance think of the hashtag-cum-slogan #BlackLivesMatter as an infrastructure that enabled collective protest. But this is not the same as saying that a poetic statement is immediately *equivalent* to infrastructure as a set of life-giving materials. As Wenzel explains with reference to a short story by South African writer Ezekiel (Es’kia) Mphahlele: “The news shoots up and down Nadia Street like electric current. There is no electric current on Nadia Street. The simile does not make it so” (2023, 208). To read infrastructure for its poetics or to assert a poem’s infrastructural qualities is not the same as building a new electricity grid or abolishing the prison system. There is powerful imaginative potential in metaphor and it is partly this that makes the infrastructure humanities so exciting. Without tempering this potential, Wenzel nevertheless ends her afterword – and the essay collection as a whole – with “a warning against too-broad notions of infrastructure that miss the concept-grounding power of the material” (2023, 210). This is not a backward glance to twentieth-century Marxism’s opposition between infrastructure and superstructure, or a relegation of the humanities to some cultural afterimage. It is rather a reminder to keep firmly in sight the life and death stakes of infrastructure’s uneven material development. If the infrastructure humanities is interested in ways of reading for the poetics that constitute the aesthetic life of infrastructure, the field must also take time to think on its plans for these new forms of legibility – to identify points of systemic weakness, perhaps, or to push for material forms of justice, or to build infrastructural literacy where it is needed most.

Futures

In her afterword to *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure*, Wenzel worries that the humanities’ over reliance on metaphor “is one reason why traffic on the bridge between disciplines seems to be largely one-way at the moment” (2023, 209). Wenzel speaks from her position in literary studies, where scholars draw ideas from all kinds of disciplines to build new ways of seeing and reading, but the work of which is not so widely received by colleagues in the social sciences, never mind those in STEM subjects. A central challenge currently facing the infrastructure humanities is to begin driving the traffic across the bridge in the opposite direction, and Ameeth Vijay’s monograph,

Topothesia: Planning, Colonialism, and Places in Excess, is impressively engaged in this work. Vijay is a literary critic working in the intra-disciplinary space of postcolonial and urban studies where the infrastructure humanities is currently thriving, and while the word “infrastructure” is not mentioned in the book’s title, *Topothesia* is exemplary of humanist scholarship that self-consciously attends to physical infrastructure as it operates through cycles of speculation, planning, and development.

The book’s eponymous term – “topothesia” – refers to a literary device that describes the construction of an imagined location. Yet only three of the book’s six chapters are centred on readings of literary texts, and even then only one of these fictions is utopian (William Morris’s *News From Nowhere*). As Vijay explains, his aim instead is “to theorise urban planning as a mode of speculative fiction, one that, even in its most mundane documents, is compelled to produce elaborate fantasies of future places” (2023, 5). Speculative fiction is often celebrated in the humanities for its ability to dissent from dystopian presents and imagine alternative futures. Vijay is much more cautious about this potential, insisting that “the speculative” has historically been used “as both an opening up *and* a closing down of possibility” (2023, 11). His research bears this out: late imperial urban planners used utopian imaginaries (including socialist ones) – along with the ambitious infrastructure programmes that they precipitated – to resolve political tensions thrown up by structural crises in the history of industrial capitalism and that were manifested spatially in the uneven developments of metropolitan and colonial cities.

Following the spiral of history, Vijay splits the book into two parts that invite us to read two discontinuous yet homologous phases of history together: first, the height of liberal colonialism and the rise of top-down planning movements across the British Empire in the early twentieth century, and second, the revanchist colonisation of inner urban areas through neoliberal regeneration – particularly in London – in the late twentieth and early twenty-first. These planning programmes were each bound up with broader spatial “fixes” to working-class threats to capital in Britain, the first through paternalistic moves toward a welfare state, the second through a programme of deindustrialisation, off-shoring, and privatisation. Tracking the cultural afterlives of the former phase as they persist in the residues of the latter, Vijay looks in the book’s second half to the speculative imaginaries of development – from urban riots to infrastructure mega-projects – in Thatcherite and New Labour Britain. By showing how contemporary regeneration has been articulated through the speculative plots of early twentieth-century planning, Vijay opens a view onto the racialised temporalities of spatial abandonment and future-oriented place-making that were eventually pushed into the political foreground by the Brexit referendum.

The historically repetitious element of this argument has some precedent. The Marxist geographer Neil Smith identified the structural homologies between outward colonisation and “the new urban frontier” some time ago (Smith 1996), while the racialised violence and displacements of the Grenfell fire has led commentators to argue that “gentrification isn’t the new colonialism, it’s just the old one” (Urena-Ravelo 2017; see also Danewid 2020, 302). Yet Vijay has much to add to this conversation. To begin with, *Topothesia* complicates overly simple postcolonial critiques that grasp the language of imperial nostalgia as somehow purely retrogressive or backward looking. On the contrary, as Vijay shows, “fantasies of empire and homogeneity not only reference a lost past but are reproduced toward the construction of a speculative future” (2023, 211). We are pushed here towards the much-needed dialectical understanding that the fight for the future is bound up with our reading of the past, and more particularly in our reinterpretation of it. It is therefore all the more important that Vijay’s use of a literary term – topothesia – to describe colonial forms of urban planning is not “mere” metaphor, as concerned Wenzel: “planning is not just analogous to literary speculative fiction,” writes Vijay, “but the two have an interwoven history and epistemology” (2023, 8). This argument rests not on figurative or conceptual analogy, but in real archival material that grounds the book’s claim in historical detail.

The cross-contamination of speculative fiction and urban planning is concretely worked out in the first part of the book, where the opening chapter tracks the founder of the garden city movement Ebenezer Howard’s co-option of William Morris’s utopian vision in *News From Nowhere*. Howard was directly inspired by Morris’s novel, though he softened its socialist elements with an imperialistic and civilisational terminology. Describing his famous “garden cities” as a form of “home colonisation,” Howard aimed toward the liberal “improvement and reconciliation” of slum-dwellers and other members of the racialised working class (Vijay 2023, 23). The second chapter thickens this argument by turning away from literary texts altogether to study the work of Patrick Geddes, a sociologist who persuaded colonial administrators in Palestine and India through the 1910s and 1920s to mobilise town planning as a form of counter-insurgency against mounting anti-colonial resistance. Like Howard, famous for his “garden cities of tomorrow,” Geddes conceived of planning through botanical imagery, wherein the “excessive” growth of urban space – the poor displaced from their land by colonial enclosure and amassing at the city limits – were to be trimmed back by the planner and eventually “cultivated” out of existence. It is from the topothesic “tidiness” of these speculative visions that Vijay derives the phrase in the book’s subtitle: “places in excess.” This refers to the use of planning to curtail forms of urban life deemed “excessive” by administrators, but it also doubles as a critique of topothesic planning by revealing the

“excessiveness” of its own attempts to imagine a reconciliatory future into existence. The book’s second part then tracks these geographies of excess through planning documents for events such as the 2012 Olympics in London and development projects in regional towns that would later turn out in favour of Brexit. These are read in dialogue with writing by Iain Sinclair, Zadie Smith, and Caryl Phillips to draw out the experiential dimension of infrastructure in these contexts.

For a book that explores the co-option of speculative narratives by the planners of colonising infrastructure, one of *Topothesia*’s most counter-intuitive lessons attends to the problems of local place-making. Postcolonial studies has long celebrated the resistance of “local” particularity against the “homogenising” forces of capitalist globalisation. In recent years, this overly simplistic opposition has been co-opted by a populist far right that targets migrants and “metropolitan elites” as “anywheres” who threaten the “somewhere” of the nation-state (see Goodhart 2017). While the popularising of theories of combined and uneven development by world-literary scholars has done much to nuance this imagined geography (WReC 2015), Vijay’s challenge to the fetishisation of local place-making is not theoretical, but rather stems from his historical case studies. As he points out, the phrase “act local, think global” is attributed to the colonial planner Patrick Geddes; rather than obliterating the specifics of place as they manifest in topography, community, and identity, Vijay shows how “the ‘local’ was and is a central concern and object of knowledge for planning,” deliberately mobilised by colonial development “to mitigate its own high-modernist tendencies” (2023, 16). Rather than seeing “the local” as a resilient island resisting the swirl of capitalist modernity, the specificities of place have on the contrary been used to conceive future developments that will resolve spatial tensions for capital – from quelling anti-colonial resistance to displacing working-class communities and opening up land for accumulation. “Topothesic places are speculative and *not yet* real,” writes Vijay: “They are *realisable* and as such emerge in the very play between abstract and particularity” (2023, 19, my emphasis). If infrastructures are the materials and systems that shape the future of place, rewarding or ruinous as that future may be, then Vijay’s critique of future-thinking itself sets a new challenge for scholars working in the infrastructure humanities.

It is in this respect that *Topothesia* is something of a foil to the two essay collections reviewed above. For if *Rethinking Infrastructure* and *Aesthetic Life* both follow infrastructure in its temporal orientation towards the future, Vijay is not only suspicious of that speculative disposition, but actively chooses to withdraw from it. In the book’s final paragraph, he notes his reluctance “to adhere to a script that says a critique of power ought necessarily to make space for forms of resistance” (2023, 220). Far from an admittance of defeat, the refusal to strike a conciliatory or

reassuring tone for the reader at this moment in world-history is in its own way a political statement. More to the point, it makes a fitting ending for a book that has spent most of its time documenting the strategic manipulation of utopian imaginaries and their promises of improved infrastructure to cut away the “excesses” of capitalist development. If it feels in the end antithetical to the praxeological method of *Rethinking Infrastructure*, and strikes a warning to match Wenzel’s at the close of *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure*, reading all three volumes together points to the maturity of thought currently underway in the infrastructure humanities.

Taken together, the books reviewed here might be said to work infrastructurally, making possible future directions for research in the infrastructure humanities. In my own view, there are two problems in particular that the field would do well to address moving forward, and I offer these by way of conclusion.

The first concerns the political form – by which I mean the jointly imaginative and organisational scale of political action – through which a revolutionary infrastructure programme might be articulated. For instance, there are many progressive alliances mobilising around community energy projects across Europe and parts of the UK, stimulating collective engagement in participatory forms of infrastructure provision. But these actions are isolated and require complex organisational arrangements to be scaled up, even as they also fall short of the majoritarian opinion-making that is needed to effectively combat challenges on the scale of the climate crisis. The racialised violence and securitising borders of today’s ethno-nationalist states meanwhile demand that we figure out ways to reimagine infrastructure through a committed internationalism, even as the nation-state still remains – at least for now – the only viable vehicle for a newly dynamic modernism and green industrial revolution. Perhaps progressive regional governments are well-placed to contest the authority of national governance and scale-up community infrastructure projects, yet their place-centred politics is vulnerable both to the idiosyncrasies of local leaders and global events such as wars and pandemics. These scalar problems require political agility and multilateral alliances, a movement between single-issue protests and longterm planning. The infrastructure humanities has a role to play here: it is well-positioned to think across these different contexts and hold them together, maintaining a suspicion of utopianism while keeping in view a shared horizon for more equitable infrastructures of life opportunity.

The second somewhat related problem derives from a productive tension at the heart of the infrastructure humanities. On the one hand, the conceptual elasticity of infrastructure has enabled humanist scholars to push their theorising in new directions and build bridges (albeit metaphorical ones!) to exciting work taking place in neighbouring disciplines. On the other, infrastructures are not only theoretical issues, but also material necessities that we all share in common (Berlant 2016). As a way of conceptualising the world and a set of material objects simultaneously (see Carse 2017, 35), infrastructure draws unprecedented connections between the lived extremities that are baked into our life- and death-making systems, from extraction zones and energy grids to homes and hospitals. There is in this respect something common sensical about infrastructure; from boarding a bus to turning on the tap, infrastructure provides a sensory experience that global communities hold in common, and in that sense – in that common sense – it points us back towards a universalist politics that is not often articulated in the twenty-first century. As the criminologist Tony Jefferson points out, one challenge that desperately needs addressing is the disjunction between the availability of progressive ideas – of which there are many – and the political failure to mobilise majorities around their implementation, and more energy might be poured into the fight for a universalist consensus that finds ways to turn “good sense” into “common sense” (Jefferson 2021). In its capacity to link the extremities of lived experience into networks we all hold in common, reading and analysing and organising around infrastructure might be one way to build solidarity and recover the radical universalism that should lie at the heart of all progressive politics.

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