Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Afterword

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The afterword draws out the political stakes of the recent expansion of critical infrastructure studies. Describing the articles' interventions, it explains how nineteenth-century studies is well positioned to engage infrastructure to perform vital progressive scholarship.

We crave infrastructure. We desire it so much that we are beginning to see it everywhere: not just in roads and bridges, but in civic institutions and media forms, people and emotions, even animals and plants. The concept has broken free from the stability and internal organization the word itself connotes. No longer a mere synonym for public works, infrastructure has come alive, as coral reefs, simmering affects, whispered gossip.[1] These are not hallucinations. Infrastructure's capacity to enable growth, collectivity, and dynamism; its ability to hold space, while at the same time emerging, abiding, and falling into ruin, make it powerfully transformative. Like imagination itself, it unfolds a multitude of possibilities. Such expansiveness challenges thinkers to reconceptualize the figure and ground, temporal multiplicity, form and function of any particular infrastructural situation. It is vital work. Fifty years of neoliberal destruction of public works and institutions has left us so starved for the means of collective life, that to reclaim the commons we must aim for more than just the transport and communications networks that serve capital. As the onslaught of privatization and austerity threatens a third generation and climate change imperils planetary life, we reclaim everything we need to survive and flourish. What we concede to a loosened definition, we reap in the revivification of critical thought and new political strategies.

A major trend within this reclamation re-humanizes infrastructure. Returning it to the scale and sensual abilities of humans, critics describe its consumption and — less often — its production.[2] People make infrastructure, inhabit jobs within infrastructural systems, and serve as infrastructure, often under great duress. To emphasize infrastructure as a human making is to complete its social circuit: it is both for us and by us. Yet the simplicity of this point can be deceptive, as I later explain.

The critical renovation of infrastructure has energized every field that has taken it up, including nineteenth-century studies. Our tools were ready to hand: a robust tradition of critiquing liberalism and imperialism; a Marxist-informed, cultural studies appraisal of the Industrial Revolution and its technologies, institutions, and popular culture; and a growing analysis of the era's decisive acceleration of climate change. As this issue's editors note in the introduction, 'infrastructure' operates anachronistically

[1] See, for example, José Luis Caparrós-Martínez, Rosa María Martínez-Vázquez, and Jaime de Pablo Valenciano, 'Analysis and Global Research Trends on Nautical Tourism and Green Coastal Infrastructures: The Case of Coral Reefs and Seagrass Meadows', *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 34.33 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-022-00614-2>; Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34 (2016), 393–419; and Julia Elyachar, 'Phatic Labor, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo', *American Ethnologist*, 37 (2010), 452–64.

[2] On the sensual aspects of consumed infrastructure, see Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), 327–43, and 'Promising Forms: The Political Aesthetics of Infrastructure', in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 175–202. On the sensual human labour to produce infrastructure under violent coercion, see Susan Zieger, 'Back on the Chain Gang: Logistics, Labor, and the Threat of Infrastructure', *Social Text*, 40.4 (2022), 43–68.

in the period, and yet its retrospective application reorients all our other categories. The grand projects of the nineteenth century — the Suez and Panama canals, the North American transcontinental railways, the electricity grids, telegraph networks, gasworks and water systems, the global proliferation of docks — all emerged through human labour, affects, and aesthetics; all transformed the non-human environment. Reading infrastructure critically, nineteenth-century studies scholars have seen Marlow's wood-fuelled steamboat in *Heart of Darkness* as part of the novel's perceptual veil concealing extraction.[3] The performative and melodramatic aspects of the 1889 London Dock Strike become a political and affective scaffolding for workers' rights.[4] And Mary Seacole's eyewitness account of railway construction in Panama reveals her own ambivalent position as a Black woman, care worker, and imperial entrepreneur.[5] Such examples demonstrate that infrastructure's expansiveness sharpens rather than blunts its critical force.

Two of the articles collected here connect the liberalism of the Victorian period to present-day neoliberalism in order to document the power structures of both. Ruth Livesey demonstrates how Anthony Trollope's provincial fiction illuminates the passage from a religious civic infrastructure to that of the imperial state's governance from a distance. In her account the liberal subject is revealed not as a post-Romantic, mobile figure who commands infrastructure for his own use, but rather the civil servant who it reduces to obsolescence. In her moving connection to the present crisis in higher education, this coercion foreshadows the fiscal austerity policies that have cut short the careers and upended the lives of her colleagues. Whereas Livesey conveys an elegiac tone and sense of inevitability as the capitalist state grips its provinces, Karin Koehler's account of *The Rebecca Rioter*, Amy Dillwyn's 1880 novel about Welsh protests against road taxes, sceptically points out the tenuousness of its grasp. In Koehler's reading the civilizational discourse of development, along with its privatizing infrastructure, fails. In doing so it opens a space to imagine more radical and collective rebuilding. Both articles complicate the orthodox sense of infrastructure as an index of the security state's health, seen in Alicia Barnes's article which straightforwardly underscores its importance in George Chesney's invasion fiction. Analysing the psychological transactions of novel reading, Livesey and Koehler make the individual's lifespan

[3] Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[4] Joanna Hofer-Robinson, 'Performance as Infrastructure: Melodrama and the 1889 London Dock Strike', presented at the Global Nineteenth-Century Studies Seminar, University of California, Riverside, Center for Ideas and Society, February 2021.

[5] Samantha Pinto, 'Infrastructure and Intimacies: Early Black Women's Writing and the Care Work of Colonialism', in *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure: Race, Affect, Environment*, ed. by Kelly Mee Rich, Nicole M. Rizzuto, and Susan Zieger (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022), pp. 61–78.

and rural space into measures of infrastructural ambition. In doing so they reveal the human scale and cost of the state–capital partnership that governs both eras. Whether neoliberalism and its handmaidens, globalization and development, are shifting into fascism, more progressive governance oriented towards sustainability, or a prolonged centrism mediating between the two, infrastructure remains capital's extrastatecraft.[6]

Caroline Sumpter's article sets aside this epochal continuity, sketching instead the wider swathe of infrastructural thought in late nineteenth-century understandings of the popular press's civic infrastructure. In her analysis of striking compositors, we see infrastructure as fixed capital to be disrupted and contested. Worker action ramifies the central question about whether privately owned and managed journalism can responsibly serve a democratic society. William Morris's idealistic sense that a socialist utopia would cease to generate news contrasts with the cynicism of the present government's defence of the conservative *Daily Mail* and other papers targeted by Extinction Rebellion as 'critical infrastructure'. It is cynical because these organs miseducate, anaesthetize, and ultimately subjugate their readers rather than serve them. Sumpter's emphasis on the dilemmas arising from the press's intervention in events upon which it reports brings to mind our current woes of fake news and manipulated election reporting. Unlike today, however, nineteenth-century writers had a stronger ideal of the press as a neutral, disinterested reflector of events — and more consensus on the common good.

The workers who populate these articles — Sumpter's compositors, Koehler's agrarian rioters, Livesey's sacked colleagues, and astonishingly, Kameron Sanzo's Malayan bird augurs — show how people perform the work of infrastructure. Sanzo's article offers us yet another critical tool for excavating this topic: the supply chain. Her deep materialist account of telegraphy includes not only the field theory that generates energy around the wire, but the South-East Asian Indigenous practice of finding ripe gutta-percha trees by awaiting the auspicious appearance of specific birds, the *beragai* and *nendak.* The standardization of cable insulation obscures the spiritual practice of avian augury but does not wholly assimilate it into its economic calculations of work and energy. As the pathway of the material and components of telegraphy, the gutta-percha supply chain reveals the real human practices powering the medium's mystified operations. It also demonstrates that infrastructure, so often theorized merely as fixed capital that, as Livesey puts it, solves 'the problem of *flow* in industrial capitalism', requires its own supply chains. Sanzo's rich account of the production of energy infrastructure in turn yields an ingenious and yet intuitive interpretation of Dracula

[6] See Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2016).

as an 'ambient, atmospheric force' that translates value across differences. As the embodiment of a new style of extractive capitalism at century's end, Dracula unifies capital and energy by obscuring labour. This deeply researched, rigorously imaginative article suggests the worlds of unseen labour and cultural practice that give sensual life to infrastructure: the sound of a bird call, the flash of scarlet feathers.

Perhaps nothing obscures labour today so much as datafication, the practice at the heart of James Smith, Claire Conolly, and Daniella Traynor's article on networks and infrastructure in Irish travel writing. In the crux of their account, human experience resists annotation and coding. As they explain, small human choices and frailties — the vicissitudes of rest or seasickness or a cold — profoundly impact 'the expression on the infrastructure'. And the descriptors of digital annotation routinely fail to capture such nuances. Their analysis of digital humanities' 'ever-expanding', almost Borgesian codification of human life points us to the infrastructure for living most under threat by Big Tech — the human sensorium. As increasingly granular instances of experience — our utterances, meals, keystrokes — are translated into data, circulated along networks, and monetized in order to redistribute wealth upwards, our lived reality assumes more vivid clarity.[7] As Smith, Connolly, and Traynor indicate, tourist Mary Anne Eade, feeling deafened and singed at the fiery Birmingham ironworks in 1802, had already commodified those moments for readers. Our craving for infrastructure beats with the impulse for it to transcend its parentage by capital and state.

The sensual experience of infrastructure is not only that of the consumer, traveller, or reader. As I observed at the outset, we make infrastructure as much as we use it. Its lived, sensual experience is also our sweat, stress, and bleary-eyed fatigue. I write this in a moment when workers are demanding their due. The pandemic turned mass attention to critical social needs: essential labour, supply chains, the infrastructure of global trade. These revaluations are political contests. To win them for the widest understanding of human flourishing will require not only an expansive critical imagination of how the public-works model has changed since the nineteenth century, but also a precise focus on the ongoing physical and sensual human costs of infrastructural production and service.

[7] See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).