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# Infrastructural Prolepsis

Contemporary American Literature and the Future Anterior

REUBEN MARTENS AND PIETER VERMEULEN

## 1. Introduction: Infrastructure after Apocalypticism

Infrastructure and the current climate emergency share a paradoxical temporality. In the case of infrastructure, it is customary to remark on its “inherent boringness” and to conceive of it as routine and rigorously unexciting.<sup>1</sup> Infrastructure, it seems, is something that we only notice when we see it explode on our screens or when it lets us down spectacularly. The temporality of infrastructure vacillates between continuity and apocalypse, between routine and emergency; it is supposed to *sustain* our everyday lives, never to become a cherished part of lived experience. This bipolar temporality also characterizes life in the current environmental crisis more generally (at least for the kind of privileged constituencies to which the audience—and both authors—of this essay belong). While scientific research leaves no doubt that we are in a state of climate emergency and we *know* that we need to act now (a diagnosis relentlessly confirmed by footage of forest fires, floods, and overheating urban spaces in our newsfeeds), it hardly ever *feels* like we can envision a remotely realistic plan of action for addressing environmental deterioration. As long as the energy and economic regimes that sustain our ways of life have not irrevocably broken down, it is tempting to cling to available remainders of normalcy, especially when the only other imaginable scenario seems to be ecoapocalypse.

The oscillation between normalcy and emergency is a disabling one that alternately fosters modes of denial, immobility, as well as self-fulfilling emergencies. It leaves unaddressed a desire for what Jennifer Wenzel has called “something other than apocalypse or business as

usual.”<sup>2</sup> It is by now a commonplace that the notion of the Anthropocene presents the human impact on the planet in all too homogenizing and historically and culturally myopic terms, and it needs to be, if not abandoned, at least “pluralized” or “broken up.”<sup>3</sup> This also involves realizing that the effort to imagine amelioration *beyond* apocalypse is not self-evident; as Jessica Hurley has shown, the dominant insistence in ecological thought on “realistic” solutions and the avoidance of apocalypticism disregards (Indigenous and other) constituencies for whom “the unlikely, implausible, and unrealistic saturate the everyday.”<sup>4</sup> In terms of the temporality of infrastructure, this means enriching an all too provincial focus on “boringness” and invisibility by attending to the hesitations, aspirations, and false promises of infrastructure. As we set out in the first half of this essay, developing this more variegated approach to infrastructure involves moving beyond what Stephanie LeMenager has influentially termed “petromelancholia”<sup>5</sup>: an affective and imaginative attachment to “self-sustaining (yet unsustainable)” energy regimes that precludes imagining and desiring less toxic and self-defeating modes of life.<sup>6</sup> Even if we accept that the infrastructures that (barely) sustain us are often monuments of political and economic power, we argue in this essay that they can be repurposed for more viable ways of living. Through a combination of a commitment to continuity and a sense of emergency, infrastructures can become objects of temporal apprehension and affective investment.

In the second half of this essay, we explore how contemporary literature participates in these negotiations of temporal and affective investments. These negotiations need not take the form they reliably do in ecoapocalypse fiction—where such negotiations, in their categorical irreconcilability between apocalypse and the everyday, often appear as a form of imaginative blackmail: your money or your life, radical diminishment (e.g., *The Road*) or technology-enhanced survival (e.g., *The Windup Girl*). Instead, this essay zooms in on two novels that more considerably situate their engagements with infrastructure in relation to questions of affect, desire, promise, and community. In both Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014), the figure of *prolepsis* emerges as a rhetorical and imaginative strategy for apprehending a future that is *not*, as in customary sci-fi or disaster-fiction templates, a radical intensification or denial of the present but that is strangely continuous with what is worth preserving and sharing

in the present. Prolepsis, we argue, by projecting a livable future while preserving available resources as necessary intermediaries for arriving there, establishes a bridge to the future beyond break or boredom. In that way, it figures the aspirational dimension of shared infrastructure as a paradoxical and tenuous site of hope in an age of self-fulfilling emergencies.

## 2. The Legibility of Infrastructure: Affect and Temporality

Reading (for) infrastructure poses a methodological challenge, if only because infrastructure is so often taken for granted. How, then, do we give it a more than ambient reality? Our argument is that this requires an appreciation of the *temporal* and *affective* complexity of infrastructure, and not just of its stubborn materiality. In Caroline Levine's influential call for "infrastructuralism," for instance, the emphasis is on "the practice of attending closely to the jostling, colliding, and overlapping of social, cultural, technological, and natural forms"<sup>7</sup>—forms that "extend from multiple pasts and replicate themselves, indefinitely, into unpredictable and distant futures."<sup>8</sup> While drawing our attention to the material entanglements of infrastructure, this approach arguably underplays the temporal intricacy of infrastructural constellations; indefinite replication into distant futures sounds like nothing so much as Walter Benjamin's "homogenous, empty time."<sup>9</sup>

In her recent book *The Disposition of Nature*, Jennifer Wenzel foregrounds the importance of temporal complexity and the need for a sense of urgency to make overdetermined infrastructural assemblages legible. Criticizing the dominant focus on visibility and knowledge in environmental discourse, Wenzel argues that the "visibility/invisibility dyad" simplifies "the subtle interplay of invisibility and hypervisibility" that overdetermines environmental challenges; certain seemingly invisible things are open secrets hiding in plain sight, while other hypervisible entities are so spectacular that they escape scrutiny and apprehension.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, fostering visibility all too rarely leads to significant change; revealing the carbon footprint of a particular commodity (e.g., cacao or coffee) merely makes it possible to market commodities with a somewhat reduced footprint as a responsible (and more upmarket) consumer choice. Knowledge rarely translates into action.

More important than visibility, for Wenzel, is the issue of *legibility*, which involves making violence, decay, and destruction available for critical uptake; “under what conditions,” Wenzel asks, can “environmental justice” be “*read*, understood, and apprehended?”<sup>11</sup> The doubts about the scopic and epistemological priorities of dominant environmental discourse also resonate in Rob Nixon’s by now ubiquitous notion of “slow violence”—his term for “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”<sup>12</sup> The critical task is then not simply to make unseen violence *visible* but to make it *readable* in relation to social and cultural frames, personal and collective memories and desires, and political and economic forces that impose their own rhythms on what can be felt, intuited, and apprehended. A less binary approach can, in Wenzel’s words, acknowledge how “uneven histories of extraction, combustion, and emission shape the present and future in *material* form” and how “the effects of such histories persist in bodies, biomes, and built environments, not to mention cultural imaginaries and horizons of expectation.”<sup>13</sup> Making environmental concerns *legible*, as Wenzel’s formulation makes clear, involves a way of articulating different temporalities and variegated affects. It is here that literature, as a technology engaging different temporalities and affects, comes into play.

Modern literature can be read—that is, rendered *legible*—as an archive of environmental violence. For Andreas Malm, every novel since the dawn of the fossil economy now retrospectively becomes legible as part of a corpus of “fuel fiction.”<sup>14</sup> What compounds this temporal complexity is that the literary archive is not only a repository of past environmental violence, but it is simultaneously a graveyard of lost futures. As Stephanie LeMenager and others have underlined, customary visions of the future have long been deeply embroiled with fossil fuel imaginaries and the temporality of the literary archive is then also made up of frustrated futures, missed opportunities, and disavowed failures.<sup>15</sup> For Malm, this literary archive *emerges into legibility* at our current moment of imminent climate collapse. Invoking Walter Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image, Malm proposes apprehending literary texts as monads “into which all the forces and interests of history enter”—a history that becomes legible on the brink

of climate emergency.<sup>16</sup> Legibility, then, becomes a matter of engaging multifarious affects and temporalities as they intensify at a moment of emergency. Infrastructure is a useful target for making the historical processes that have led to the current environmental crisis legible; as a material substrate to modern life and to aspirations for realistic scenarios of mitigation, infrastructure inhabits what Wenzel calls “a mesh of relations in which the liberatory and immiserating implications of globalizations—old and new—are knit.”<sup>17</sup> Infrastructure, that is, makes visible the *emergence* of environmental crisis in a moment of *emergency*, without abandoning that emergency to apocalyptic scenarios that foreclose the consideration of workable near-future scenarios.

This means that the notion that infrastructure is “the object of no one’s desire” and “a heritage of which we are usually unconscious until it malfunctions” needs to be challenged, as there is a more multifaceted affective and temporal relation to infrastructure.<sup>18</sup> Often, public infrastructure projects *are* desirable, and their desirability is often a function of their vast size. Brian Larkin has remarked that “many studies that begin by stating how infrastructures are invisible until they break down are fundamentally inaccurate”; if invisibility is one aspect of infrastructure, it is “only one and at the extreme edge of a range of visibilities that move from unseen to grand spectacles and everything in between.”<sup>19</sup> Often, invisibility is impossible; Kregg Hetherington notes a clear correlation between infrastructural visibility and infrastructure’s “location in geography of uneven development,” as “infrastructural invisibility is an elusive goal” in places “where infrastructure seems always in need of repair, or where it is unfinished or disappointing.”<sup>20</sup> Hannah Appel gives the example of Equatorial Guinea, a country with one of the highest investment percentages in the world, where the “infrastructure frenzy” saturates daily life and appeals to the population in visceral, sensory ways through “the endless thrum of jackhammers, bulldozers, and trucks too big for old colonial roads; the air full of cement dust that settles on skin and in mouths.”<sup>21</sup> In sites such as these, both the materialities and the aspirations of infrastructure are part of lived (even inhaled!) reality; the affective charge and the temporal structure of infrastructure is here decidedly more easily *legible* than in more affluent constituencies.

What further compounds the complexity of the relation between in-

frastructure as routine and infrastructure as aspiration is that the very thing infrastructure promises is often, precisely, continuity, or a life that would be routine, predictable, and unremarkable. Dominic Boyer's recent anthropological study of wind farms in Mexico shows how infrastructural works can be deeply aspirational—as when a road or bridge holds the promise of a more convenient or simply merely predictable and reliable way of life.<sup>22</sup> For Boyer, infrastructures are marked by “a temporality of perdurance”—even if the hope of “perdurance” at times asserts itself as an experience of inertia.<sup>23</sup> Boyer underlines that the growing critical interest in infrastructure in scholarly discourses is an effect of the reality of “infrastructural collapse, infrastructural decline and decay,” as we see roads, energy plants, and libraries fall into disrepair through lack of maintenance and care.<sup>24</sup> As Cymene Howe and her colleagues note, while infrastructure's promise is a constructive one, driven by its future orientation, in reality many constituencies outside the affluent metropolis live among “various kinds of ruined and faltering infrastructure”—among unfinished or abandoned constructions, among projects that survive as a reminder of a promise betrayed.<sup>25</sup> Perdurance and inertia intersect in two possible scenarios: In poorer constituencies, emergency is a lived reality, and what is lacking are infrastructures that establish continuity. In more affluent environments, these infrastructures are slowly disappearing, and what is often missing is the urgency and desire to address this decay. One way in which literature can make infrastructure legible, then, is by engaging the temporal and affective multidimensionality of infrastructure in a way that *makes perdurance desirable*—even if the very possibility of continuity and sustenance requires change. As we will argue, the figure of prolepsis is a surprisingly productive literary figure for apprehending this overdetermined temporality.

Making perdurance desirable, all too often, is co-opted by petroinfrastructure and the “petroculture” that sustains it. More than any other kind of infrastructure, petroinfrastructure has sustained and fueled the “happier affects” of modern life and is especially tied up with notions of freedom, comfort, and mobility.<sup>26</sup> Anxiety about infrastructural change, as Stephanie LeMenager has shown, is linked to constituencies' deep investment in the luxuries that fossil fuel infrastructures have facilitated.<sup>27</sup> This inspires a “grave inertia in the face of the needed retrofit or conversion to other fuel sources.”<sup>28</sup> Imre Szeman has identified

three dominant discourses that discourage us from confronting oil infrastructure and its affects as an urgent concern: “strategic realism” and “techno-utopianism,” which in different ways deny the need for concerted action, and “apocalyptic environmentalism,” which takes shape as a self-fulfilling emergency that fails to mobilize available resources for an imagined future.<sup>29</sup>

Moving beyond this imaginative and material impasse requires a pedagogy of “learning to read for energy,”<sup>30</sup> which, as the Petrocultures Research Group writes, means we need to take into account “where we sit historically, where we find ourselves in terms of our infrastructural dependencies and our affective and erotic attachments to the fossil economy.”<sup>31</sup> Reading for the unseen affective investments that are facilitated by petroculture involves what we have called an effort to “make infrastructure legible,” showing how our reliance on energy is unequivocally tied up with political feelings and aspirations, as infrastructural developments can function as catalysts for political and social change. Such a strategy must overcome certain hindrances. As democratic systems and institutions are fundamentally marked by hydrocarbon dependency,<sup>32</sup> this explains imaginative blockage and political and affective inertia; it also explains why so much literature approaches infrastructure in an ecoapocalyptic mode. In the rest of this essay, we turn to a different kind of literary engagement with infrastructure. Rather than canceling or continuing the present, the novels we discuss make legible the affective and temporal complexity of infrastructure and mobilize it as a reserve for imagining a future that changes the present yet remains continuous with the most promising resources available in it. As we argue, it does so through the figure of prolepsis—often referred to as flash forward but also connected to the “aspirational mode” of the future anterior that Gregg Hetherington sees as central to the temporality of infrastructure.<sup>33</sup> In this way, we submit, literature becomes a resource for mobilizing infrastructure that moves beyond the lacunas, blockages, and exclusions of existing energy regimes.

### 3. From Future Inferior to Future Anterior

Jennifer Wenzel describes the genre of ecoapocalypse as “another mode of unimagining the future, rendering it *still* unimaginable.”<sup>34</sup> As a narrative expression of a crisis of futurity, it misrecognizes the potentials of



the present and ends up perpetuating more destructive dimensions of contemporary life. One of the most axiomatic examples is perhaps *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), where even after the ecoapocalypse, the main currency remains oil; similarly, Rick Crownshaw has remarked on how many supposedly “post-oil” fictions fail to disentangle themselves from the imaginative templates of petroculturalism.<sup>35</sup> Other critics find more political purchase in apocalyptic imaginings: Jessica Hurley calls on literature to show how, for nondominant groups, “apocalypse saturates the everyday,”<sup>36</sup> and argues that realism dooms us to a continuation of this everyday apocalypse. For Rebekah Sheldon, the realist insistence on the sustainable cultivation and “reproduction of fixity” precludes a recognition of “the queerness of matter” and of a “future outside of reproduction.”<sup>37</sup> For Claire Colebrook, moving beyond human callousness means “abandon[ing] the fantasy of one’s own endurance.”<sup>38</sup> While we share these critics’ insistence on the unsustainability of the status quo, we emphasize the need for continuities between past, present, and future in breaking its hold. As Wenzel notes, “the melancholy lure of eco-apocalypse can be far too easy; the desire to imagine our own destruction, or living on in the aftermath of collapse, distracts attention from the collapse and the alternatives already at work in the present.”<sup>39</sup> What Wenzel calls ecoapocalypse’s “future inferiors” misrecognizes that the present can already be made legible as a *future anterior*—as an already ongoing anticipation of a livable future. Gregg Hetherington notes a clear parallel between infrastructure and the future perfect, “that suspended tense that will someday have been the past of a better future.”<sup>40</sup> Through the continuities of infrastructure, then, the present (and the traces of the past that can be made legible in it) can be read as the occasion of an emergency that fosters rather than cancels the future.

The temporality of the future anterior, and the figure of prolepsis that pertains to it, are often evoked in discussions of the Anthropocene.<sup>41</sup> For Rick Crownshaw, for instance, postcatastrophe imaginaries are “the dramatization of that which will have been.”<sup>42</sup> They dramatize “an etiology of the conditions that are imagined in the future but that are unfolding in the present of this literature’s production and consumption.”<sup>43</sup> We argue that this temporality also applies when the future does *not* constitute a rupture with the present (as it does in ecoapocalypse). Prolepsis, in other words, can be a *figure of continuity*

*and perdurance*. Prolepsis is an imagining of the future that sustains a “proleptic” aspiration for a world that, while different from the current one, is essentially continuous with it. It intimates a future that stands for the desire invested in shared infrastructure as a paradoxical and tenuous site of continuity.

The rhetorical trope of prolepsis has (perhaps surprising) affinities with infrastructure that pertain to the way they constellate affect and temporality. We focus on four aspects that we will mobilize in our literary analyses below. *First*, there is an inherent if subdued mode of *desire* in prolepsis as well as in infrastructure. In relation to the use of prolepsis to provide a shorthand for novel characters’ future, Bruce Robbins notes, “Being told in advance what will befall minor characters many years later *adds* narrative suspense to what would otherwise have been mere landscape. It adds desire, and it adds concern even if what we’re given is abrupt and terminal unhappiness.”<sup>44</sup> Prolepsis, in other words, generates a shared space of care and concern—a space that is, moreover, expansive (and this is a *second* feature). Robbins shows that the use of prolepsis (as in the famous opening sentence of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) expands *both place and time*; it intimates that attention must be paid to enlarged temporal and spatial domains and that the spatiotemporal setting of particular novels has planetary resonances.<sup>45</sup> Prolepsis makes room for a conglomerate of multiple geographies and overlapping and conflicting temporalities, as it extends the present into an intermittently evoked future, in a way not too different from the temporality that energizes infrastructural networks.

*Third*, prolepsis fosters the *intelligibility and legibility* of narrative elements that limited narrators and characters are unaware of as they are caught in the frame of the narration and experience time linearly; for the reader, prolepsis can extract elements that remain unseen and unapprehended by the characters from the past and present and project them into the future. Again, prolepsis shares this feature with infrastructure, whose temporality often precedes, exceeds, and elaborates that of individuals, who can never fully predict the fate of infrastructure, as “infrastructures are seldom built by system builders from scratch. . . . They are formed with the moralities and materials of the time and political moment in which they are situated.”<sup>46</sup> Prolepsis and

infrastructure alike intimate an agency that transcends the different human perspectives they collect—which is to say that they figure the possibility of community.

Apart from its entanglement with desire, with space and time, and with supraindividual intelligibility, prolepsis also shares a *fourth* feature with infrastructure. In her reassessment of the postmodern novel's rehearsal of Greek tragedy, Gloria Fisk argues that "the device of prolepsis locks peace and violence together in a paradox, through which readers can experience dailiness *coincidentally* with its disruption."<sup>47</sup> Prolepsis, in other words, collapses the distinction between everyday life and emergency, between routine and exception, by situating everyday life under the sign of the threat of its eventual undoing. It infuses the (often false) continuities of the present with a sense of emergency, and it reminds readers that continuity and everydayness are aspirations that require change. Again, this also characterizes the temporality of infrastructure as it fosters an investment in the present as the necessary precursor of a changed future.

Jessica Hurley draws up a clear opposition between the apocalyptic mode, which radically ruptures the connections between present and future, and a realist mode in which the future can always be "known, understood, and predicted by the present."<sup>48</sup> Prolepsis provides a nonapocalyptic alternative to this conservative mode; while it asserts the continuities between present and future, it leaves room and provides trust for a measure of creativity and improvisation. Prolepsis, like infrastructure, opens up opportunities while bracketing the threat of total failure and discontinuity. For Fisk, prolepsis's future tense creates a certain trust in the future and a sense of political community, enabling "every citizen to believe that the events that are inexplicable in the present will make more sense retrospectively, as others will come later and care enough to look back."<sup>49</sup> Fisk further argues that novelistic prolepsis provides a shorthand for community, where a "diffuse commonality" can be distinguished based on the capacity "to feel sorrow for the suffering of other people while [we] also know that [we] might be next."<sup>50</sup> In a similar vein, Robbins remarks that "the tradition of intrusive or self-conscious narrators [using prolepsis] . . . has something to do with faith in *social* resolution—in collectivities capable of seeing the whole and being the whole, at least enough so as to resolve and to act."<sup>51</sup> In the rest of this essay, we zoom in on two novels to substanti-

ate the “something” that Robbins leaves teasingly undefined in his articulation of literature and social relations. Unsurprisingly, we will give that “something” that needs to be cultivated and perpetuated the name “infrastructure.”

#### 4. Retrofitting Petroculture: Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*

Los Angeles is an overdetermined place in the Anthropocene imagination. With Hollywood, it is home to the Western world’s dream factory that has for decades been producing images of apocalyptic doom. Situated on the San Andreas Fault, it is a location of extreme geological vulnerability—a vulnerability exacerbated by climate change–induced threats of coastal flooding and desertification. As Karen Tei Yamashita’s 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange* notes, “Climatic change in L.A. was different from other places. It has less perhaps to do with weather and more to do with disaster.”<sup>52</sup> *Tropic of Orange* carefully resists the lure of disaster and, instead, interrogates the multiple vulnerabilities besetting a globalized and overheating world by zooming in on, precisely, infrastructure. At the heart of the novel is the LA freeway system—a gigantic and iconic road network constructed in the middle of the twentieth century by the massive displacement of earth matter and local communities. Since its inception, the freeway system has been fostering fantasies of fossil-fueled automobility.

The novel consists of forty-nine chapters and follows the intersecting trajectories of seven characters from very different social strata over seven consecutive days. The novel is preceded by a grid that lays out its structure, which immediately connects prolepsis to infrastructure. Entitled “HyperContexts,” this table gives us a synoptic account of what will happen in the novel before we have even read its first sentence. It is, in other words, a proleptic device that frames the readers’ encounter with the text. The table reveals how the different narrative strands interconnect. What stands out is that most of the events are set on or near a highway, interchange, freeway, or in locales that are in some way related to transport and travel. As a grid, this opening hints at the many underlying, essential infrastructural grids that the reader will be confronted with in the novel: those of labor, international migration, legal and illegal trade, transportation, and telecommunication

networks. “HyperContexts” fosters a certain kind of *legibility* of the complex relations between characters, places, and events that might otherwise go unnoticed because of the novel’s sprawling flow and narrative excess, which is also definitely unavailable to the different narrators and characters. The grid invites the reader to inhabit the novel’s zone of concern and to identify with an instance that subsumes the different interconnected fates it maps.

The opening paragraph of the book further hints at its concern with the future anterior, as the omniscient narrator addresses the reader: “Gentle reader, what follows may not be about the future, but is perhaps about the recent past; a past that, even as you imagine it, happens. Pundits admit it’s impossible to predict, to chase such absurdities into the future, but *c’est L.A. vie.*”<sup>53</sup> *Tropic of Orange* presents the space of the novel as one that inspires trust in continuities between a narrated past that is actualized in the present moment of reading and a future that is not obviously different (“may not be”; “perhaps”); this trust, we read, is the result of the novel’s status as an LA novel and is thus again linked to infrastructure. The opening chapter of *Orange* draws attention to an orange growing in an orchard in Mazatlán—what the novel calls “an orange that should not have been.”<sup>54</sup> The orange tree is imported from Riverside, California, and planted on the Tropic of Cancer; it is not supposed to be producing fruit in the climate conditions that pertain in Mazatlán, but in a climate changed-world, it does so all the same. The orange is distinctly material and directly linked to infrastructure: the production of oranges connects different parts of the American hemisphere; it circulates in global trade relations; and oranges will occasion the traffic jam that dominates the novel, which is triggered by an accident caused by another orange, spiked with drugs. The special orange, we read, “resonated with several thousand oranges rotting in toxic landfills, hidden under floorboards, sweltering in drawers filled with lingerie.”<sup>55</sup> Prolepsis, here, like infrastructure, serves to extend the geographical scope of community.

The strange orange is a node in the transnational network the novel draws up, but it is also a “geographic nexus” that has the power to unsettle the very makeup of the planet; it highlights the different temporalities and spatialities embedded in the infrastructures of globalization. When, late in the novel, the quasi-mythical character of Arcangel—who, embodying the violent legacies of empire, colonialism,

and slavery, “functions as the testimony of the indigenous, the displaced, the exterminated, the poor, and the workers”<sup>56</sup>—followed by a caravan of Mexican immigrants, brings the orange across the border from Mexico into the United States, they drag the Tropic of Cancer with it. This “slow northward creep” disorganizes the maps through which we aim to master the world,<sup>57</sup> as “distances [are] skewed and the streets [aren’t] parallel.”<sup>58</sup> Temporal experience is marked by “an eerie liquid elasticity,” by “an uncanny sense of the elasticity of the moment, of time and space” in which “the world teeter-tottered.”<sup>59</sup> The emphasis on elasticity underlines that this warping of space and time does not decisively *break* the makeup of the world; the infrastructure that enables the “slow northward creep” can, the novel suggests, be repurposed for less destructive ends and need not be abandoned.

Throughout, the novel imagines North–South relations beyond the constraints of NAFTA (figured in the novel as a fairly ridiculous wrestler called SUPERNAFTA), which in the 1990s turned Mexico into a vast sweatshop catering to a rapidly deindustrializing United States. Arcangel, a voice for the Global South, insists, “We are not the world,” rejecting facile images of global connectedness. Throughout his journey toward Los Angeles, Arcangel’s catalog chronicles histories of empire and colonialism in the South that rely on an illusory idea of a shared global “we,” and they reveal how globalization infrastructure from the North erases such histories. Increasingly, Arcangel’s lyric comes to condense histories of violence and dispossession in synthetic images, in a way not very different from Benjaminian dialectical images making the past and present legible in a moment of crisis; as Andreas Malm has it, “Only from the vantage point of the contemporary emergency can the underlying image become legible at all.”<sup>60</sup> Importantly, this articulation of past and present proleptically spills over into an imagining of “*the Third World War, / the gliding wings of a dream.*” This transition is crucially marked by a reference to petroculture: “*And every rusting representation of an / American gas guzzler from 1952 to the present / and all their shining hubcaps.*”<sup>61</sup>

When the traffic literally comes to a standstill on the freeway, it leaves room for imagining different forms of mobility and different uses for infrastructure. If traditional disaster movies make infrastructure visible by blowing it up on screen, *Tropic of Orange* does something more remarkable: it suspends infrastructure’s customary operations to

make room for different forms of connectedness. Manzanar Murakami, a Japanese American surgeon who became willingly homeless and devotes his life to conducting symphonies composed of LA traffic, serves as *Orange's* pedagogical proleptic device in infrastructural literacy; he notes how the traffic jam creates “a kind of solidarity: all seven million residents of Greater L.A. out on the town, away from their homes, just like him, outside.”<sup>62</sup> Manzanar registers the sensory reverberations of the city—he senses and makes legible “the time of day through his feet, through the vibration rumbling through the cement and steel”—and manages to convert them into a different affective complex, “a controlled reverie of rhythmic cadence and repeated melody.”<sup>63</sup> Manzanar’s sensitivity to the city and its community is emphatically linked to his attunement to the infrastructural layers making up the place. Manzanar, we read, has the power to see layers of maps that “began within the very geology of the land, the artesian river running beneath the surface,” and are complemented by “the man-made grid of civil utilities: Southern California pipelines of natural gas; the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage.”<sup>64</sup> Manzanar’s composite vision brings together “the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior” with “the historical grid of land usage and property” and “the great overlays of transport—sidewalks, bicycle paths, roads, freeways, systems of transit both ground and air.”<sup>65</sup> By making infrastructure legible, Manzanar makes infrastructure available as a place where more sustainable communal relations can be entertained. Manzanar is clearly also a figure for the work that literature can do—and that Yamashita’s novel wants to do. His choreographic interventions indicate that literature can play a vital role in anticipating “a new kind of grid.”<sup>66</sup> *Tropic of Orange* is emphatically not pursuing a form of life off the grid but rather making legible what “a new kind of grid” would entail—a kind of community built on something as banal and basic as shared infrastructure.<sup>67</sup>

The potential of a renewed building of community in the future anterior is explored through the sudden immobility of what the novel calls “the truck beast, whose purpose was to transport the great products of civilization.”<sup>68</sup> Infrastructure that used to sustain petrocultural ways of life and mobility is repurposed for different modes of imaginative and social transport. The novel’s relentless references to automobility, transport, TV stations, the internet, and radio waves underline

modern life's dependency on oil infrastructures. In the world that the development of the novel suspends (but never fatally demolishes), it confirms that "oil produces our daily lives, our daily selves, our daily communities and everything else in a primary way. It has a definitive role in forming understanding of self and relation to the world and others."<sup>69</sup> In suspending and repurposing this petrocultural mode of community, the novel forces the imagination of a different kind of collectivity, which Lee has called a "romantic universalism," in contrast to the contrived universalism of globalization, which stubbornly ignores those impacted by the infrastructure that sustains it.<sup>70</sup> Lee sees the character of Manzanar (who we earlier identified as a figure for the novel's own political operation) as intimating a new community: "Manzanar's romantic universalism . . . postulates a 'we' that is absolutely inclusive because there is no criterion for inclusion, which is the same thing as saying that there is no possibility of exclusion."<sup>71</sup> This "we" is the "we" who happen to coincide in a particular infrastructural site.

The inoperativity of "the truck beast" creates a vacuum that is immediately filled with life "reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways" when homeless communities take over the jammed freeway and create a new mode of living out of what is there.<sup>72</sup> Energy provision at once becomes a minor concern for "people living in abandoned luxury cars, creating a community out of a traffic jam."<sup>73</sup> The "we" of shared infrastructure is no longer simply that of "the global village," and the setup of *Orange* seems to reiterate Fredric Jameson's call to alter the spatial logic of urban life and "reconquer" the city "*as place*," a project that aims to "rescue the city and its citizens from the experiences of alienation that arise from inhabiting a realm overwhelmingly and increasingly designed in service of capitalist production and globalization."<sup>74</sup> Against this stifling spatial logic, *Tropic of Orange* emphasizes the improvisational aspect of community building—which, we read, is "quite a mess"<sup>75</sup> but, as such, serves as a site of creativity and viable change.

If a different world is possible beyond the deadlock of fossil fuel modernity, the novel suggests, it will still need infrastructural support. What the novel proposes is a repurposing, or "retrofitting," of infrastructure to meet new contingencies. Cymene Howe et al. note that "retrofitting demands that we take temporality into account at every instant. It necessarily looks to past projects—failed or



successful—to foresee what comes next. Retrofitting has a futurological orientation that has us thinking into the horizon while building from the materials and technologies of the present.”<sup>76</sup> Retrofitting, in other words, is very much a process of creativity in a future anterior. The stability of infrastructure, it seems, enables it to survive its original use (automobility) and become an opportunity for improvised modes of sociality and altered mobility: “Amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking.”<sup>77</sup> In one move, the novel draws out the incapacities and blockages of contemporary fossil fuel infrastructures, while also formulating “provocations to adapt and retrofit older infrastructures to new realities” or imagine “entirely new systems to fuel the flow of contemporary life.”<sup>78</sup> Cumulatively, the different proleptic devices in *Tropic of Orange* make infrastructure legible in a way that anticipates a future that is strangely continuous with what is worth preserving in the present. The novel defies the traditional literary imagining of (postcatastrophe) Los Angeles, which has been chronicled many times before, perhaps most notably by Mike Davis when he writes that LA is “a dystopian symbol of Dickensian inequalities and intractable racial contradictions. The deepest anxieties of a postliberal era—above all, the collapse of American belief in a utopian national destiny—are translated into a demonic image of a region where the future has already turned rancid.”<sup>79</sup> If anything, *Tropic of Orange* makes the city’s infrastructure legible as an ineluctable resource for a future on the other side of the demonic and the rancid.

##### 5. “In Advance of the Communal Body”: Ben Lerner’s *10:04*

Ben Lerner’s *10:04* is as firmly rooted in New York as *Tropic of Orange* is in LA. And while *Tropic of Orange* resolutely suspends LA’s petroinfrastructures, Lerner’s novel leads up to a comparable moment of hopeful suspension: the Manhattan blackout at the time of Superstorm Sandy in 2012. As in *Tropic*, the vulnerability of the grid intimates a changed future, even if this altered future is not separated from the present through apocalypse or catastrophe but is oddly continuous with it. *10:04* is essentially a hyper-self-conscious effort to think together the continuities between present and future—a continuity that the novel achieves through its use of prolepsis and infrastructure. If *Tropic*’s multiple narrators and characters allow it to foreground the way infra-

structure disconnects and reconnects people in different ways, *10:04*'s first-person narrator places more emphasis on how the temporality and affect of infrastructure afflict one individual—even if that individual, as we show, proleptically prefigures a community sustained by infrastructure.

At the outset of the novel, its protagonist (named Ben and strongly resembling the novel's author) experiences the future as a site of apocalyptic dread. He has just signed a contract for a novel on the basis of "an earnest if indefinite proposal"<sup>80</sup>; he is diagnosed with a heart condition that gives him "a statistically significant" chance of sudden death; his best friend Alex has engaged his services as a sperm donor, without really resolving the issue of his paternal involvement; and if that weren't enough, he is also a particularly self-conscious contributor to anthropogenic climate change who compulsively imagines the future "underwater" and "wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns."<sup>81</sup> At the outset of the novel, this surfeit of future assignments and responsibilities has a disabling effect on the narrator's composure, as he feels his "future collapsing in upon [him]."<sup>82</sup> In this affectively overcrowded present, he experiences a disconnection from the future—the kind of crisis of futurity that, as we have seen, tends to lead to a perpetuation of the status quo or a desire for radical rupture. Tellingly, the novel intimates a different articulation of past, present, and future by rediscovering the present as a site of possibility (rather than beleaguered actuality)<sup>83</sup> in encounters with infrastructure—infrastructure that serves as a proleptic device intimating a less enervating and more communal future.

Significantly, the novel's first scene connects the narrator's initial apocalyptic dread to infrastructure—and more specifically, to an infrastructure project that has failed to solve and has even aggravated inequalities and injustices. Ben and his agent are walking along the High Line, "an elevated length of abandoned railway spur [converted] into an aerial greenway."<sup>84</sup> Since its opening in 2009, the High Line park not only has served as a tourist attraction but has also ended up transferring millions of dollars of public funding to private companies and serving as an engine of gentrification and heightened social inequality that has crowded out many residents and business.<sup>85</sup> The association between Ben's futural malaise and infrastructure that perpetuates rather than challenges the status quo soon makes way for more productive en-

counters with the infrastructure of the city. Walking around, the narrator suddenly feels a strong sense of connection as he walks through the city: “I was aware of the delicacy of the bridges and tunnels . . . and of the traffic through those arteries, as though some cortical reorganization now allowed me to take the infrastructure personally, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body.”<sup>86</sup> Later, the view of the skyline, illuminated windows, and traffic registers as a “small thrill” as Ben sees it as “the expression, the material signature, of a collective person who didn’t yet exist, a still-inhabited second person plural.”<sup>87</sup> As Ben De Bruyn has shown, the novel’s reflections on more sustainable ways of life are often conspicuously linked to infrastructure; the novel features uplifting encounters on the subway, on train platforms, and on the bus, to the point that “public utilities,” De Bruyn writes, “seem to function like the positive counterpart to capitalism’s destructive network of commodities.”<sup>88</sup> Time and again, these moments of community are triggered by what the novel refers to as “the vulnerable grid”—the availability of infrastructures that are both necessary and precarious and that need not necessarily go the way of the High Line.<sup>89</sup>

In *10:04*, infrastructure choreographs individuals into constellations that prefigure more communal forms of life—as when the storm makes landfall in New York and the narrator remarks that, in the wake of parts of the subway system being shut down and parts of lower Manhattan being taken off the grid, “the city was becoming one organism.”<sup>90</sup> Crucially (and this is another similarity to *Tropic*), the novel traces affinities between infrastructure and its own literary project—“prosody and grammar as the stuff out of which we build a social world.”<sup>91</sup> After one of his infrastructural epiphanies, the novel’s narrator resolves to become “one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body.”<sup>92</sup> The reader is a crucial part of the choreography; the novel immediately addresses the reader as a fellow New Yorker—that is, as someone inhabiting the same infrastructure—when it notes that “you might have seen me sitting there on the bench that midnight . . . as I project myself into the future.”<sup>93</sup> The novel commits to a “fantasy of coeval readership,”<sup>94</sup> to a belief in “the transpersonality of prosody”<sup>95</sup>; intermittently, the novel synchronizes author, text, and reader, as when it describes a trip to Marfa: “I remember the address (you can drag the ‘pegman’ icon onto the Google Map and walk around the neighbor-

hood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I'm doing that in a separate window now).<sup>96</sup> This anticipation of its own consumption shows the extent of the novel's investment in (second-degree) prolepsis; the anticipated act of engaging with the text comes to prefigure a coming community, as the novel conceives of its audience "as a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence."<sup>97</sup>

Both the infrastructural epiphanies and the intermittent reminder of the copresence of text and reader do their proleptic work by interrupting everyday life. They generate brief moments of emergency, only to rob these moments of their apocalyptic sting by streamlining them in a proleptic scenario sustained by infrastructure. It is when the customary routines of everyday life are estranged—by a coming storm, by a blackout, by an artistic intervention—that "the miracle and the insanity of the mundane economy" that undergird the narrator's privileged New York lifestyle become legible.<sup>98</sup> Early in the novel, the approaching storm estranges the buying of coffee; it reveals the commodity's trajectory from "Andean slopes" over "a factory in Medellín" and JFK airport and Pearl River "for repackaging" to its being transported by truck to the store.<sup>99</sup> This recalls Jennifer Wenzel's critique of "postconsumerist commodity biographies," which often merely end up turning the commodities they pretend to defetishize into "value-added objects of desire."<sup>100</sup> Yet *10:04* not only makes this history visible; it shows it to be charged with potentiality: "It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow . . . lending it a certain aura."<sup>101</sup> The intent, it seems, is less defetishization than revealing latent sources of potentiality by making carbon histories legible—potentiality that can be mobilized to less destructive ends.

The minimal—indeed, for some readers of the novel (and of this essay), arguably *too* minimal—difference the novel anticipates between the present and the future is captured by a line from Walter Benjamin, which figures in the book's epigraph and is repeated throughout, appropriately, with minor differences: "Everything will be as it is now, just a little different."<sup>102</sup> The difference, as the novel's insistence on recovering potentiality makes clear—and as we can gather from Giorgio Agamben's book *The Coming Community*, from which Lerner borrowed the Benjamin passage<sup>103</sup>—is that "everything" will no longer be just the actual world but also the world of potentiality that the novel restores. The invisible change, then, is that the obscured potentialities

of the past and present will have become legible: “the past will be citable in all of its moments, including those that from our present happened but never occurred.”<sup>104</sup> *10:04* promotes (and instantiates) the project of making infrastructure legible, then, as a way of reorganizing the relation between everyday life and emergency in a way that promotes continuity as well as change.

Even if *10:04*'s concern with alternative energy sources is mainly metaphorical, its final scene suggests that the “proprioceptive flicker” that articulates present and future is activated when customary energy regimes are suspended.<sup>105</sup> The novel ends during the 2012 black-out that hit Manhattan at the time of Hurricane Sandy, which leaves room for infrastructure to be (metaphorically) energized by something other than fossil fuels: “A steady current of people attired in the usual costumes was entering the walkway onto the bridge and there was a strange energy crackling among us. . . . What I mean is that our faceless presences were flickering.”<sup>106</sup> It is remarkable how quiet and nonapocalyptic this anticipation of the future is, as if radical aspirations are kept in check by an awareness of our continued reliance on some sort of infrastructure, some sort of energy. After it almost imperceptibly shifts from the present to the future tense, the novel's (almost) final intimation of a kinder future is a case in point: “We will catch the B63 and take it up Atlantic. After a few stops, I will stand and offer my seat to an elderly woman with two large houseplants in black plastic bags. . . . Everything will be as it had been.”<sup>107</sup> The repetition of the novel's motto underlines the quiet messianism that characterizes the novel's reflections on infrastructure and politics. It would be a mistake to read this as a self-defeating form of petromelancholic quietism; rather, the novel's hyper-self-conscious and incessantly worrying narrator does paint the present as a site of emergency, but he refuses to waste his energies on a facile apocalypticism—an attitude that, as we have seen, threatens to hinder the possibility of an intentional transition and to force us into a chaotic and spasmodic transformation.

Los Angeles and New York often figure in popular culture as explosive sites of disaster and apocalypse. Even if this apocalyptic dimension is—in 2020, when we are writing this essay—increasingly becoming part of the lived reality of these places, the two novels we have focused on provide powerful arguments that this apocalypticism needs to be challenged rather than embraced. They find resources for

a commitment to continuity in their attachment to infrastructure. In these novels, infrastructure serves as a repository of social affects and nonlinear temporalities that ultimately make it possible for the desire for community to become legible. For Bonnie Honig, infrastructures count as “public things” that “constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship.”<sup>108</sup> These novels make infrastructure more than indifferently available and turn them into objects of affective uptake and temporal apprehension. Even if these literary mediations lack the radicality that pertains to the apocalyptic imagination and even if the insistence on continuity inevitably delivers a compromised politics, they underline that infrastructure is constitutive of any form of community. Ultimately, it is these novels’ mobilization of prolepsis that makes their politics a project of hope rather than despair.

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