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Infrastructure as a divination tool
Whispers from the grids in a Nigerian city¹

Eric Trovalla and Ulrika Trovalla

In the Nigerian city of Jos, everyday life is shaped by interlacing rhythms of disconnection and reconnection. Petrol, electricity, water, etc., come and go, and in order to gain access inhabitants constantly try to discern the logics behind these fluctuations. However, the unpredictable infrastructure also becomes a system of signs through which residents try to understand issues beyond those immediately at hand. Signals, pipes, wires and roads link individuals to larger wholes, and the character of these connections informs and transforms experiences of the social world. Not only an object, but also a means of divination, infrastructure is a harbinger of truths about elusive and mutable social entities—neighbourhoods, cities, nations and beyond. Through the materiality of infrastructure, its flows and glitches carefully read by the inhabitants, an increasingly disjointed city emerges. Through new experiences of differentiated modes of connectedness—of no longer sharing the same roads, pipes, electricity lines, etc.—narratives are formed around lost common trajectories. By focusing on how wires, pipes and roads are turned into a divination system—how the inhabitants of Jos try to divine the city’s infrastructure and possible ways forward, as well as how they try, through the infrastructure, to predict a city, a nation and a world beyond—this paper strives to find ways to grasp a thickness of urban becomings—a cityness on the move according to its own unique logic.

Key words: divination, infrastructure, Nigeria, African cities, anthropology, urban studies, materiality

In the Nigerian city of Jos, everyday life is shaped by interlacing rhythms of disconnection and reconnection. The comings and goings of amenities such as water, electricity and fuel are steeped in uncertainty, and formal and centralised systems share space with a cluster of individualised, informal and at times illegal alternatives. Moving along a multitude of simultaneous trajectories, the infrastructural landscape is one that continually mutates and needs to be re-read and where getting access to services hinges on one’s prognostication skills. Carefully attentive to subtle signs, sensing hidden chains of cause and effect, people look for ways to address problems which need to be acted upon, even if no clear answers are available. This is how...
the city’s infrastructure is turned into a soothsaying device and its residents into diviners.

However, the unpredictable infrastructure also becomes a system of signs through which inhabitants try to understand issues beyond those immediately at hand. While flows of electricity, fuel, water, traffic, etc. link individuals to larger wholes, the character of these connections informs and transforms experiences of the social world. Not only an object, but also a means of divination, infrastructure becomes a harbinger of truths about elusive and mutable social entities—neighbourhoods, cities, nations and beyond. Through the materiality of infrastructure, its flows and glitches carefully read by the city’s inhabitants, a world emerges which is increasingly disjointed. Through experiences of differentiated modes of connectedness—of no longer sharing the same networks of distribution or being connected to the same circuits of exchange—narratives are formed around lost common trajectories in a volatile city scarred and moulded by a decade and a half of ethno-religious strife, and a nation and world shaped by economic and social divides.

Challenged by processes in constant motion in multiple and unforeseen directions—the capacity of societies to ‘produce something new and singular, as yet unthought’ (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, 348–349)—scholars are struggling with grasping how African cities continuously reinvent themselves. As cities that have long been depicted in relation to their Western counterparts—as failed cities or ‘incomplete examples of something else’ (348)—they have become defined in relation to their perceived deficiencies. Shortcomings have come to dominate and overwrite all other representations, reducing African cities to issues of urban ‘development’ (see McFarlane 2008, 341; Pieterse 2013, 24; Simone 2010b, 6). Trying to understand African forms of modernity, a growing body of research emphasises instead the importance of alternative logics—how African cities are shaped by their own novelty and originality. Life characterised by uncertainty and a plurality of trajectories with conflicting logics has put inhabitants in a state of constant improvisation and experimentation (see Mbembe 1992, 5–6, 11; Simone 2006, 2013, 250–251)—an openness through which urban Africa is continuously reinvented in unpredictable ways. Rather than simplistic views of cities marked by failure, attention is turned to the complex practices in which apparent disadvantages set the parameters for new actions; how limitation creates its own possibilities, its own form of cultural production (see Belanger et al. 2000; De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 225–235; Larkin 2008, 170ff.).

By focusing on how wires, pipes and roads are turned into a divination system—how the inhabitants of Jos try to divine the city’s infrastructure in order to understand its hidden logic, as well as how, through the same material framework, they try to predict a divided city and the world it is embedded in, and how, led by these prognostications, they devise ways forward—this paper strives to find ways to grasp a thickness of urban becomings (Pieterse 2011), a cityness on the move according to its own unique logic.

Predictions of elusive utilities

Staying close to the changing rhythms of the city by moving with people during their daily undertakings in Jos (see Anderson 2004; Andersson Trovalla 2011, 25; Kusenbach 2003; Lee and Ingold 2006, 83), we have constantly been reminded how questions raised by infrastructure take centre stage. Through the encounters between people and infrastructure, divination becomes part of the very fabric of the city (Figure 1). People try to figure out why certain areas and houses receive water while others do not, when water will appear or disappear in their own lines and when, consequently, they need to be home in order to fill up their tanks and barrels. When filling stations lie dormant due to fuel shortages, rumours spread about where and when the next delivery is likely to arrive. As a result, long queues of vehicles line up in front of certain stations.
The rumour is strengthened in credibility with every vehicle in the line, but the customers far back in the queue run the risk that the petrol will run out before they reach the pump, and might conclude that they are better off gambling on a rumour with fewer followers. As for electricity, most people in Jos expect power a few hours at a time, a couple of times a week, but the distribution varies greatly between areas. In most areas the power can go out at any time, and return in five minutes or five days. Nonetheless, elusive and mutating patterns appear over time, and deviations tend to be noticed immediately; there might be times during the day, week or year when electricity appears to be more generously provided than at other times. Even if these patterns are far from consistent, they are treated as clues about the future, and daily activities are planned around them.

Different interpretations of the hidden patterns according to which water, fuel and electricity come and go, constitute popular topics of conversation. Theories and observations are exchanged, refined and adjusted according to gradual shifts in conditions. Underlying the technical infrastructure and shaping its expectations is a ‘conceptual infrastructure’ of beliefs, experiences and ideas (Rupp 2013, 79). However, divining infrastructure also involves more implicit perceptions. Whenever an appliance makes a subtle buzz, the stabiliser starts clicking or lights dim down for a microsecond, glances search the room for the place where a torch or a box of matches was last seen. This heightened sensitivity to the signs emitted by the wires is an embodied knowledge, a form of infra-divination which is mostly carried out with no need for cognisance; it is akin to the bodily anticipation Thrift (2004, 148ff.) calls the ‘land of the half-second delay’ between action and consciousness.

Since the late 1980s, and especially since affordable models imported from China appeared on the market about a decade ago, generators have become a mainstay of domestic power provisioning. Recent estimates give a ratio of about one generator for every
third Nigerian (Esiedesa 2012; see Olukoju 2004, 55). Their arrival introduced the notion that problems related to infrastructure could be solved given the right implement. Since then, there is always a new thing—a new inverter, a new rechargeable lamp, a new guy who can set you up with a better connection to the electricity grid—but which will work out and which will disappoint? As a result, many homes have several different circuits for different power sources, with separate wiring and large changeover switches to cycle through them. It is not uncommon to have one circuit for grid-based electricity, one or two less encompassing ones for the things the generator (or generators) can support and a smaller one still connected to an inverter. Over time, walls become palimpsests of wire-on-concrete, telling stories of the shifting trust vested in different configurations of grid and backup.

In people’s everyday lives a backup culture grows. As it has proved difficult to discern which backup system will work in a given situation, the layers of backups are multiplying. In many homes, a striking amount of equipment facilitates life during service interruptions, each filling in when the others fail (see Trovalla and Trovalla 2013). It is common to have more than one phone, connected to different service providers, for the times when one network is down. For the same reason, popular phone models have up to four SIM-card slots. When electricity grids are dormant, candles, kerosene lanterns, rechargeable lamps and torches fill in. Depending upon household resources, they can also be accompanied by generators, inverters connected to car batteries and—although still too costly for most—solar panels. As soon as the power goes out, the backups pose the question whether to spend or to conserve, which ultimately relates to how long the power cut is expected to last. When there is a fuel shortage, the black market price quickly adjusts to the changing prognostications of how long the scarcity will last, and the quantities people buy depend on whether they expect the price to go up or down. This makes the divination process largely a matter of knowing how to patch up broken circuits with the help of backups, add-ons and substitutes.

The superfluity of backups, add-ons and parasitic or competing systems adds to the opacity of Jos’s infrastructure, but also provides enough flexibility to deal with contingencies. In this way, divination is the search for cues as to when and how to switch between different material frameworks and modes of connectedness. However, the many backups also reveal another thing about divining infrastructure: far from being a passive reaction to a situation, it entails actively engaging with, and investing in, particular ways of envisioning the future. It is, to borrow a phrase from Simone (2013, 242), a matter of working ‘with the loose ends, to concretise potential futures from what is left over’. This makes divining infrastructure a way of installing the framework of what one wishes, fears or just expects, the city to become.

Reading disconnections in a troubled city

Although pipes, wires, roads, rails, etc. in a very real way have the power to shape ‘social collectives through the “binding of space”’ (Gandy 2006, 390), in Jos, the infrastructure has fused with the landscape into a riddle about religious and ethnic forces of disconnections and violence. Unravelling this enigma, people try to understand where the troubled city is heading. In 2012, even if there was no overt violence at that time, the heightened tensions could already be discerned when approaching Jos. In and around the city there was a marked presence of highly conspicuous roadblocks manned by security forces—police, military and Special Task Force—armed with automatic rifles. Even though roadblocks had become an intrinsic part of the urban landscape in the last decade, there were changes. The usual makeshift constructions of tree trunks and rocks placed on the road had been
replaced by more permanent fortifications of walls of sandbags and barrels filled with concrete decorated with rebar pickets, which had multiplied to the point where movement across the city had become marred by constant traffic congestion. As we waited to pass one of the roadblocks together with Ibrahim—a young man belonging to the large Muslim population generally seen as ‘settlers’ by the Christian population, who identify themselves as ‘indigene’ to the area—he explained, ‘This is a sign that it is a war zone.’

With shifting constellations of ethnic and religious groups, the struggle over the ownership of Jos is as old as the city itself (Plotnicov 1972). From its establishment at the beginning of the 20th century, after the British found tin in the area, it has been an intrinsically divided city shaped by patterns of presences and absences—of who is and who is not entering a certain road, market or house (see Bingel 1978, 6, 8; Plotnicov 1969, 41–42, 50; Zangabadt 1983, 2). Still, in comparison with other cities in Nigeria, Jos has been depicted as peaceful, a place where all of Nigeria’s different religious and ethnic groups live together in harmony. In relation to this narrative, the inhabitants of Jos came to experience ‘the Crisis’ of 2001 as a rupture of this peaceful past, a turning point or beginning of a cycle of escalating violence that has continued to the present (Andersson 2010; Andersson Trovalla 2011, 29–52). After renewed violence in 2010, a news article headed ‘Jos Crisis—When a Mining City Becomes an Eternal Killing Field’ tellingly concluded: ‘The once peaceful plateau has transformed into a battle zone, where human lives are slaughtered at irregular intervals. Time was when Jos was famous for its tin mines. But today it is notorious as a killing field’ (Kumolu 2010).

In Jos, today a city of 1 million, the crisis came to rewrite the urban landscape in profound ways. As Muslims in mainly Christian areas and Christians in mainly Muslim areas were targeted, a cleansing from within began which left the inhabitants of Jos with not only lost family members, missing friends and, as religiously and ethnically diverse groups moved apart, new neighbours, but also a landscape engraved with burnt-out homes, businesses, churches and mosques. Jos was no longer what it once was. With the Crisis, previous truths were thrown into confusion. What a place was and how to behave to gain entry to it, which gates were secure to pass, which streets were safe to walk down or whom to trust, turned into highly unpredictable issues, and inhabitants have increasingly found themselves having to manoeuvre in an unstable world coloured by fear and anger.

In searching for signs and clues in trying to grasp the sentiments in what has become a highly volatile landscape, the inhabitants of Jos have encountered the city’s infrastructure as an increasingly important divination tool. People look with anxiety to the flow of traffic for indications as to whether or not it is safe to go outside. Vehicles passing at normal speed, and taxis and buses sounding their horns in the specific way they do when looking for passengers, tell people that things are calm in the city. Cars speeding to get out of town, on the other hand, signal trouble, and empty streets indicate that violence is imminent and it is not safe to go out. Sensing texture, conductivity, friction and flow, people try to make sense of the city: to whom its different parts belong, and when and if it is safe to enter neighbourhoods and streets. Carefully attentive to how it feels to walk along a certain road and how others move, they take note of subtle changes in glances and ambiences. Amidst no-go areas and no-go times with constantly changing perimeters, they have come to continually re-read the networks of roads in terms of shifting patterns of resistance. What feels like free movement can quickly turn into something very different. Operating at the level of the surface of the body—the skin, nose, eye and ear—infrastructure has turned into a deeply sensory experience (Larkin 2013, 337).
On yet another level, with years of feelings of distrust, fear and hate running high, people have increasingly come to divine their city through traces of disconnections. In 2013, as we walked with Sarah, an official from the Water Board, through a mainly Christian area in which all Muslim homes had been burnt down during the violence in 2010, it was brought forth how readings of these lost connections come to shape people’s experiences of the city. As eerie reminders of people who had been counted and recorded, but now were gone, the ruins of the burnt-out and abandoned houses still carried the markings from the census in 2006 as well as their customer numbers with the Water Board. In the dead quiet of the empty alleys, she recited the numbers, recalled her former clients and pointed out the disconnected pipes. ‘Their connections are closed now,’ she said, ‘but if someday they return and rebuild their houses, we will open them again.’ Just like the no-go areas, the severed connections and fading numbers on the walls are all parts of an agglomeration of indications read by the inhabitants of Jos as warnings not only of the shifting conditions of connections and disconnections between and within areas, but also of a city being unplugged, piece by piece, from familiar narratives and common trajectories (Figure 2).

In 2012, the Plateau State government banned ‘goings’, motorcycle taxis, within the city of Jos—claiming that the fast-moving vehicles undermined stability and security. As most drivers were Muslims and the political elite in the region mainly Christian, the injunction was construed as a sign of a ‘hidden politics of flow and connection’ (Graham 2010, 3), as an attempt to restrict the movements of the Muslim population as well as to deprive them of the economic means to remain in the city (see McFarlane 2010, 141). At the same time, to keep the traffic in the city flowing, 300 ‘keke napeps’, tricycles, were imported from India. Interested drivers could purchase them from the state government and pay in instalments. As the first keke napeps started to ply the roads and streets, following routes assigned in such a way that they did not cross the boundaries between Christian and Muslim areas, suspicions were aired by former motorcycle-drivers that only indigene Christians were given access to the new vehicles.

What has emerged is a city in which the materiality of infrastructure in a very palpable way turns rumours, suspicions and hidden agendas into tangible evidence of changing power relations. Through the suspended connections—the absence of the disenfranchised motorcycle-drivers and their vehicles, and the keke napeps emphasising the imperviousness of religious boundaries—the city’s hidden politics are read

Figure 2   Ruins. While the differentiated burn marks in Christian and Muslim areas have come to convey messages about power regimes of different neighbourhoods, the desolate ruins also invoke a haunting presence of their evicted owners—a sense that the other is there in the shadows, making plans that are concealed (Andersson Trovalla 2011, 96). The experience reinforces the notion that the volatility of the landscape can be anticipated only through directing one’s efforts of prediction to the city itself—its flows and non-flows, its connections and disconnections. Photo by E & U Trovalla.
out. Together with the burnt-down houses and no-go areas, they accompany observations of how new roads are being built in certain areas while others are left to deteriorate, how burnt-down marketplaces are left to disintegrate while new ones are built elsewhere, and become signs in a divinatory process which brings out images not only of a segregated and divided city, but also of a city where the inhabitants, even if they once shared a turbulent past, no longer see a common future within the city’s boundaries. Guided by these predictions—steeped in fear and mistrust—everyday actions bring forth a city where inhabitants move apart, no longer travelling along the same roads to the same marketplaces, and where ruins, year after year, are left to deteriorate without the owners ever returning to erect their walls again—a city where citizens no longer invest in shared paths.

**Divining a re-wired modernity**

Carefully reading the infrastructural weave—its density, tears, holes and threads—and comparing it with how it appeared yesterday, citizens try to predict the trajectories which will lead them into the future. In Jos, as in Nigeria at large, people look back upon the early days of independence in 1960 as a golden age when there was water in all the lines and electricity was constant (Trovalla and Trovalla, 2015). During the oil boom of the 1970s, massive investments were made in the infrastructure. As prosperity peaked with a Nigerian ‘petro-naira’ equalling 1.60 USD, so did confidence in the nation. However, with the oil bust of the 1980s, a new era of crumbling infrastructure, shattered dreams and systemic failure was initiated (Apter 1999, 268–269). Since then, a downward spiral of declining trust in infrastructure and in public institutions has been feeding into a ‘national pessimism’, often expressed in phrases like ‘the Nigerian factor’ (Obadare 2006, 101) or ‘this Nigeria’ (Bastian 1998, 114, 118; see Diamond 2001, xiii).

Samuel, a retired veterinarian who lives in Vom, a small town some 30 kilometres from Jos, told us that they had their first power outage in 1986. Before that, he said, the electricity would only be cut when the power company needed to do maintenance work. Moreover, they would apologise afterwards. We all sat quietly for a moment, taking in the almost inconceivable image. ‘Around the same time,’ he continued, ‘the ice cream truck stopped going.’ When we sat together with Dora in her parlour in her apartment in Jos, talking about the Tin City Bus Service, which used to connect Jos with its environs in a tightly woven web of routes and bus stops, she said she was glad she was able to experience it before it all vanished in the early 1990s. As schoolchildren in the late 1980s, she and her sister used to take a bus the 20 kilometres from their home in Bukuru to their school in Jos. Riding in the comfortable bus, they used to pretend they were in London. As we continued talking we realised that one of the old bus shelters was still there, the sturdy brick building fading into oblivion in plain sight, just outside the compound.

In 2013, newspapers wrote about the reopening of the old railway line between Lagos in the south and Kano in the north (Agabi 2013; BBC 2013; Olukoya 2013). When we mentioned this to Umar, a used-car dealer in his 40s who had recently moved from Vom to Abuja, he laughed. ‘There are so many stories. I have crossed the line going to Kano several times and it is completely overgrown. It is just lies.’ His sentiment reflected that of most people. Since the 1990s, when the Nigerian Railway Corporation plummeted into a series of bankruptcies and failed resuscitation attempts, railway traffic had come to seem an increasingly unfeasible proposition. In 2014, the train station in Jos, which had been used by street hawkers as storage space for several years, had just been cleared out and repainted in anticipation that the crew overhauling the rails some 100 kilometres south-west of Jos would soon reach the city. However, people were
sceptical—much more so than they were about other infrastructural investments. ‘I will believe it when I see it’ was the most common response when we raised the subject. When we asked what it was about railways that made these promises so difficult to believe, people often replied by telling us about journeys they used to take. The stories echoed nostalgia not only over the affordable, comfortable and sophisticated mode of travel that rail traffic used to offer, but also over a period irrecoverably lost. It was not so much the challenge of rebuilding and maintaining the rails, or keeping the engines running, that made people doubt that railway traffic could be restored. The problem was more profound than that. Nigeria, it seemed to most people, just was not that kind of country anymore (Figure 3).

As he stripped down a broken extension block to salvage a piece of wire, Gabriel, an electrician who had been working in Jos for 40 years, shook his head. Although the rubber in the cable was thick and convincing, the wire he found was thin as a hair. ‘And look,’ he said, examining its yellowish colour, ‘it is not even copper! China is really ruining us!’ The influx of affordable goods mainly from China has made a huge imprint on the material cultures connected to infrastructure. An overwhelming majority of rechargeable lamps, torches, extension cords, stabilisers, batteries, mobile phones, engine parts, water pumps and other paraphernalia increasingly intrinsic to everyday life is manufactured in China, especially for low-income demographics in the global South. This has given rise to a new vocabulary describing the attributes of consumer items. ‘China quality’ as opposed to ‘international quality’ describes more than differences in materials and workmanship; it also

Figure 3  Possibilities. While remnants of defunct infrastructure still linger in Jos as a haunting presence of trajectories now abandoned and modes of connectedness no longer viable, they act as physical evidence of truths that have ceased to apply. However, among the skills of decoding infrastructure is also a specific way of disenchanting the world, ridding oneself of the reverence once attached to the tokens of modernity, stripping down complicated technology to its most basic form, to see what uses it still lends itself to. Thus dead wires become clotheslines, fridges without electricity become pest-proof pantries, and railway tracks are turned into grazing grounds and marketplaces. Often frowned upon by the older generation still invested in the dreams of the past, the new uses are seen as a lack of commitment to common trajectories. However, in reality they represent an ongoing endeavour to understand increasingly complex relationships between present and future (Guyer 2007, 418). Photo by E & U Trovalla.
evokes memories of bygone times when Nigeria was connected to other commodity chains, and thus to other patterns of cultural, political and economic exchange. Still running after several decades, generators from Germany or Japan, or monumental cast-iron industrial equipment made in Britain in the 1930s, signify durability and cast it firmly as a thing of the past (see Ferguson 1999, 12–13). While in reality ‘China quality’ items have made a vast array of previously expensive goods accessible to the many, their abundance is interpreted as a sign of having been downgraded in relation to an unofficial global hierarchy.

‘China quality’ signifies a suspicion in relation to objects, and pessimism in relation to the future read out from the constellations of consumer goods at hand. Similar to knock-offs, which are also associated with China, the term signifies a deceitful relationship between appearance and substance, and thus a lurking disappointment (Figure 4). The suspicion extends to genuine brand-name objects. Highly coveted objects like Nokia phones or iPads sold in Nigeria are believed to be manufactured to lower standards than their counterparts bought elsewhere and thus less durable. Similar distrust is attached to generators; even the affordable Chinese Tiger models, which were initially frowned upon, are now being knocked off, and people search in the back of the stores, at the bottom of the stacks of boxes, in the hope of finding the last genuine Tiger in Jos.

But still other misgivings are read out from the proliferation of generators. People fear that as long as the rich and powerful can buy increasingly bigger generators, needed investments in the collective distribution systems will not be made, and common people will remain in the dark. For some, the abundance...
of generators is a sign of a conspiracy at work, a generator mafia enjoying their heyday dishing out bribes in order to ensure that the grid remains inactive. A perpetual source of doubt and ambiguity in everyday life, infrastructure opens up an undefined space onto which conceptions about larger social wholes can be projected, reflected upon and appraised. As the ‘China quality’ epithet points to disconnected or redirected circuits, the generators indicate signs of a re-wired modernity, where the Nigerian city has been disconnected from a hegemonic domain of networked electricity and inserted into a world of generator monads (see Larkin 2008, 244). Similarly, the tales about a lost golden age of infrastructure, commemorated by the decaying remains of bus stops, railway tracks and dormant electricity lines, are not told primarily to point out the present lack of buses, trains and electricity. The stories are told, repeated and probed as a way to figure out what element or essence made them all possible, and to what extent Jos as a city, Nigeria as a country and indeed society are possible without it. As the infrastructural ‘ruins draw on residual pasts to make claims on futures’ (Stoler 2008, 202), the stories, although steeped in nostalgia, are not of the past but are divination instruments aimed at discerning the future.

Divination as ‘experimental knowledge’

Through the many readings, a city emerges where the infrastructure aligns with religious tensions, and where citizens no longer share the same roads, water pipes or electrical lines. Where before there was synchronicity in light and darkness as electricity came and went, now some houses bask in light from generators, solar panels and inverters, while in others there is only the dim gleam from a candle or a torch. All the while, the message read out from the proliferation of imported paraphernalia to infrastructural systems—from rechargeable lamps to engine parts and phones—is that the city has entered new global circuitries. Simultaneously travelling along numerous and unknown routes, the inhabitants of Jos struggle to divine where their city—and their world—is heading, and which avenues will be available and viable tomorrow. In Jos, as in many cities in Africa and across the global South, infrastructure, with its deflecting paths and redirected currents, requires people to cultivate skills to stay ahead of the game, to act on hunches and suspicions just as they are about to solidify into truths. In this environment, infrastructure, as well as city life in general, calls for modes of anticipation and divination (De Boeck, forthcoming; Simone 2010a, 96–98). Steeped as it may be in uncertainty, it simultaneously conjures larger contexts and processes, inviting the notion that there is a deeper meaning hidden just below the surface. In this vein, the fragmented infrastructure comes to operate like typical divination systems, where obscured truths are deduced out of seemingly random distributions of matter. Connecting and disconnecting, putting people in different kinds of relationships with each other, facilitating transactions between past, present and future, and between friends and enemies, infrastructure appears to reveal invisible channels within society. This is how infrastructure becomes not only an object, but also a means of divination, offering insight into complex and elusive social processes.

However, divining infrastructure is not so much about abstract speculation or passive reflection. It is inextricably linked to actions, to making moves—to choose a petrol queue, buy into a particular technology, stay at home to wait for water or enter a potentially hostile street—to invest in a particular version of the future. It is about setting wheels in motion while keeping an open mind in preparation for both success and failure, a readiness to move ahead or to abandon or revise one’s hypothesis in a way that makes life ‘intensely experimental, full of hits and misses’ (Simone 2013, 250). As Dewey’s (1930, 161) concept of experimental knowledge brings forth, knowledge is itself a kind of action, the outcome of which is not certainty but rather the starting point for
renewed exploration. Infrastructure emerges as a floating bricolage of half-fulfilled goals, continually mutating into new aims and new truths about the world. People predict, and act according to their predictions—actions through which new arrangements are brought into existence (132). In other words, the world becomes known to its inhabitants through their engagement with it, but this engagement also structures the world; people’s dealings and journeys are part of the world’s becoming as a whole (Ingold 1993, 164). In the city of Jos, probing the constantly mutating infrastructural rhizome, predictions around lost common trajectories are continuously re-examined. Shaping people’s everyday actions, each new prophecy brings into existence an increasingly disjointed city life. As experimental knowledge, divining infrastructure is more than fortune telling; it is future-making. In a myriad of individual acts, it transforms each city both physically and conceptually in relation to its own unique logic, and lies at the heart of urban becomings or of city life in motion.

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1. This paper builds on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Nigerian city of Jos between 2000 and 2014.

2. Presently, you get around 160 naira for 1 USD.

References


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