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ariel: A Review of International English Literature, Volume 54, Number 3-4, July-October 2023, pp. 11-36 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2023.a905708

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ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 54 No. 3–4 Pages 11–36
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How Things Will Go: Genre, Infrastructure, and Hope in *Welcome to Lagos*

Rebecca Oh

Abstract: This article examines how two structuring forms, infrastructure and genre, facilitate and distribute affects of hopeful futurity in Chibundu Onuzo's 2017 novel *Welcome to Lagos.* I argue that genre acts as the infrastructure of infrastructure, an underlying connective logic that shapes how infrastructures are encountered and perceived. In turn, infrastructures materialize generic expectations about the world. *Welcome to Lagos*' comic form, which aestheticizes contingency and fortune, shapes the way characters relate to informal infrastructures like underbridges and abandoned buildings. Such discarded spaces reinforce a view of the city as a space rife with opportunity. In contrast to more pessimistic views of the postcolonial city, *Welcome to Lagos*' comedy and infrastructure foreground how access to resources and materials are unpredictably distributed, in turn making feelings of hopeful or open futurity more available to the urban poor. Ultimately, I argue that affects like hope index the lived force of genre and infrastructure as structuring forms, and that genre and infrastructure are useful for theorizing postcolonial affect.

Keywords: genre, infrastructure, comedy, hope, urbanism

I. Introduction

Genre and infrastructure are structuring forms that shape how things will go. In generic narrative worlds, what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the "compositional dimension" of genre offers an underlying "logic that connects depicted events" (Seitel 281). This connective logic or compositional dimension guides interpretation by "[specifying] which types

of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context" (Frow 110), and it appears in "characteristic configurations" of time, space, and causality (Seitel 281). These in turn shape narrative elements like plot, likely or unlikely events, types of characters, appropriate and inappropriate actions, and the affects that accompany perceived trajectories. Likewise, material infrastructures block or "facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas" (Larkin, "Politics" 328). They distribute and organize "things and also the relations between things" (329). As Brian Larkin notes, infrastructures connect many material systems at once, but they are also encountered through expectations and perceptions that mediate their material systems. Both genre and infrastructure are structuring forms that determine what kinds of perceptions and actions are likely to appear appropriate or possible in a given situation through the way they put things into relation.[1]

In other words, genre works like infrastructure by distributing narrative attention, visibility, resources, actions, affects, and expectations as well as the relations between them. But we might also think about genre's compositional dimension as the infrastructure of infrastructure, an underlying logic that shapes the trajectories we see in built things around us and the uses or possibilities we expect from them.[2] We expect office buildings, for example, to be sites of professional conduct and employment, while amusement parks offer pleasure and excitement. Genres offer flexible frames for interpreting what infrastructures make possible. In turn, infrastructures work like genre, distributing and organizing things and their relations. Infrastructures also make genre part of lived experience through the way they concretize horizons of expectation about the world.[3]

This article traces the workings of genre and infrastructure in Chibundu Onuzo's going-to-the-city novel *Welcome to Lagos*. The novel uses comedy to frame informal infrastructures such as bridge undersides, abandoned buildings, and traffic crossings in ways that pose Lagos as a space rife with opportunity and contingency. As a genre, comedy aestheticizes living a provisional life.[4] Comedy draws attention to social processes, reversals, opportunities, and unexpected developments. In comedy, the logic of narrative development assumes that there is always

"more life" (Langer 334). Its generic worldview is that of an "ineluctable future" dominated by "Fortune," involving both a "contest with the world" and "triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or . . . mischance" (Langer 331).

By constantly stressing chance and unpredictability in everyday life, comedy is one way of giving form to hopeful futurity. As Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch suggests, an orientation toward the newly emergent and the "Not-Yet" provides hope with its ontological ground (75).[5] Hope describes the "*process-reality*" of the world (Bloch 197; emphasis in original), all that is still undetermined in it and therefore possible: "possible is everything that is only partially conditioned, that has not yet been fully or conclusively determined" (196). The future as a hopeful "Real-Possible" unfolds continuously as it responds to specific material circumstances, and real hope is always in touch with the historic processes at work in a given time (196). Unlike mere "wishful thinking," which is divorced from historical contexts, hope and its striving after possible futures arise from "the point of contact between dreams and life" (145).

Hope and comedy thus have a similar orientation toward the future. Comedy is an organizing form that aestheticizes the multitude of possibilities available in any given situation; as a genre it brings into visibility—through its conventions of narrative, perspective, characterization, and plot—the possibilities that saturate the social world. Comedy gestures toward the unfolding future by upending deterministic expectations and by drawing narrative attention to aleatory opportunities and events. Comedy assumes that the future is a developing process in which new things will keep happening. It organizes—or rather disorganizes—existing uses, opening situations up to unexpected players and events. This emphasis on unpredictable processes and "more life" makes comedy a genre of futurity, an aesthetic form through which the "Not-Yet" of hope as undetermined possibility can be affectively felt and inhabited.

Such processual, materially grounded hope is also close to what social scientists like Arjun Appadurai call the "capacity to aspire" (196). Appadurai suggests that futurity is a "cultural fact" (285), a "navigational capacity" (126) of moving between "'experience-near' and 'experience-distant'

aspects of life" (189) that must be learned as a skill. If the "capacity to aspire" is a social practice that can be strengthened or weakened, future aspirations are also a genre, for such navigations call upon generic expectations—that is, on "aesthetic structure[s] of affective expectation" between past experiences and future plans that can be learned, stretched, and modified (Berlant, *Female* 4).

In *Welcome to Lagos*, the cultural fact of the future and its affects of hopeful, open-ended futurity emerge primarily through the novel's comedic genre frame and its deployment of incomplete, informal infrastructures such as abandoned buildings, underbridges, and traffic crossings. Rather than signaling the ruins of obsolete futures or past failures, incomplete infrastructures are sites of temporal multiplicity and practices of reuse and appropriation. Lagos' infrastructures materialize a dense multiplicity of temporal pathways and possibilities that are a pedagogical tool for aspiration—one way in which the novel's characters learn to navigate between where they are and where they want to go in the city. The novel's comedy uses these infrastructures to organize social knowledge and more generally to "accomplish" (Frow 14) certain actions like moving toward a desired future.

Yet between the book's generic structures and any particular narrative episode lies a range of interpretive possibilities, and individual characters must learn to make use of the unlooked-for opportunities available to them in any given situation. Comedy is both the book's structuring logic and a chosen interpretive practice that is facilitated through encounters with incomplete or informal infrastructure. In portraying its own comic framing as a learned interpretive act for its characters, the novel highlights how comedy, like all genres, offers "situational expectations" along with "ranges of potential strategic responses" (Coe et al. 6).

To call genre the infrastructure of infrastructure is then to name the structuring tendencies that genre foregrounds and prioritizes without reducing them to a totalizing rule. While comedy drives the general arc of Onuzo's narrative, it does not completely determine how all situations will be encountered or interpreted all the time. Indeed, while comedy is the most dominant frame for relating to Lagos' built world, it also coexists with other interpretive possibilities that occasionally interrupt it. In

the same way, infrastructures, built to facilitate certain uses over others, are also used in ways not intended by their planners.[6]

The novel's overarching comedy is therefore accompanied by a canny awareness of the way some infrastructures, especially new ones, are framed by narratives of temporal closure and failed development. These participate in a pessimistic worldview of stalled modernization in which infrastructure and the city at large can only be viewed as symbols of failure and affective abjection. For Onuzo, new infrastructures facilitate assumptions of entrenched social hierarchy and reinforce perceptions of social determinism, of "the rich getting richer, the poor sliding into abjection" (158). New infrastructures throw into relief a world that lacks possibilities for social mobility or developmental progress.[7]

Such infrastructural pessimism and indeed the wider disappointments of postcolonial modernity are in part what make the comedic frame in *Welcome to Lagos* surprising and revelatory. The novel's comic genre offers a corrective to narratives of future foreclosures and their related systems of fixed material inequality by turning informal infrastructure into an aesthetic, material, and affective heuristic through which characters and readers experience the feeling of having a future—one that is open-ended, undecided, and full of possibilities rather than predetermined. This sense of hopeful futurity may seem trite, but only if we forget that not having a future often feels like precisely the opposite: tragic situations without choice, with only unmovable or closed pathways. In the first section of this essay, I consider the novel's attention to infrastructural pessimism before turning, in the second section, to how the novel's comedy shifts away from this view of infrastructure.

The relationship between infrastructure and genre points to the power of genre's "compositional dimension," the way genre functions as the infrastructure of infrastructure. In my call to think about infrastructure and genre together, I also argue that these two structuring forms are useful for theorizing postcolonial affects in Lagos and potentially elsewhere. *Welcome to Lagos* offers aesthetic and material encounters with the hopeful possibilities of the postcolonial city, possibilities that become legible through the way comedy as a generic frame shapes and organizes infrastructural uses and perceptions; in turn, infrastructures

materialize comedy's aesthetic principles of provisionality, making them part of the lived experience of the city.

In a comic world like Onuzo's Lagos, informal infrastructures help us understand the city as a place where it is possible to inhabit and feel the unfolding, contingent "process-reality" of hope. This processual quality is both a feeling and a practice, a generic perception brought to bear on the city and a mode of sociality and action borne out through infrastructure. In *Welcome to Lagos* informal infrastructures are material instantiations of comedy's generic principles of continuous adaptation, unpredictability, and open-endedness; they mediate characters' perceptions of the city and create a horizon of expectation that includes hope for the future. And if genre conventions do not offer the same kinds of constraints as the material properties of built infrastructures, both genre and infrastructure are nonetheless structuring forms that shape how things will go in a world.

II. Developmental and Infrastructural Pessimism

Future-bearing infrastructures saturate postcolonial literature, testifying to ordinary desires for the future possibilities infrastructure might bring. These desires are both individual and national; as Akhil Gupta argues, "very often, in the global South, projects are sold by the promise of modernity that they offer" ("Future" 75). This symbolic and affective dimension of infrastructure underpins its appeal and public legitimacy, as demands for infrastructure double as "a materialist insistence on a desired standard of living" (Appel 47). Infrastructures can function as material instantiations of individual future hopes but also concretize collective feelings of having arrived at national independence or of the country becoming a player in the global economy and world stage. However much postcolonial studies might critique modernization and its linear temporalities, ongoing desires for modernity and development persist and often play out around infrastructure.[8]

These dimensions of infrastructure contest the common idea that infrastructures are designed to be overlooked. The "infra" prefix, which indicates that which is "under" or overlooked, supposedly signals infrastructure's invisibility, boringness, and lack of affect.[9] This invisibility

has invited literary critics to attend to representational strategies that cut through the "privileged obliviousness" that shrouds infrastructures (Levine 588).[10] Such infrastructural opacity is a special challenge when infrastructure works well: "When it's not exploding, infrastructure is supposed to be boring" (Rubenstein et al. 576). But in casting the representational challenge of literature as bringing attention to smoothly operating infrastructures, critics have implicitly naturalized the assumption that infrastructures work most of the time and are in turn "the object of no one's desire" or attention (Robbins 26). This assumption plays out even when it is patently false. As Bruce Robbins notes in "The Smell of Infrastructure," infrastructural invisibility in the United States goes hand in hand with its neglect and slow breakdown, not its smooth functioning. Yet assumptions of infrastructural boringness are upheld by norms of successful operation even if these are belied in practice.[11]

In contrast to the boringness and invisibility of infrastructure, a global South standpoint offers very different kinds of situated knowledge about infrastructure.[12] In postcolonial contexts, infrastructures are rarely taken for granted or overlooked; they are dense sites of symbolic meaning and contestation, affective attachment, and promise. Moreover, in the global South, infrastructures often work sporadically or not at all—available for a couple hours a day, for those who can pay, or for those who can mobilize to harass local officials.[13] Their inconsistency, inequality, and temporary breakdown thrust them into constant visibility and narrative attention; the illusion of smooth functioning is neither available nor relevant.

Yet precisely because they magnetize desires for development and modernization while working so erratically, infrastructures are often perceived as failing to deliver the modernity they promise. In this way, they become symbols of national failure, accumulating negative affects of pessimism or lack. In *Welcome to Lagos*, such a negative perspective is voiced by the outlawed Minister of Education, Remi Sandayo. He narrates, "What would these new chairs do? Or the computers? Or the textbooks? The statistics did not lie. If these children could read it was only to learn that their country was not made to work for them. . . . Despite one's best efforts, despite one's highest hopes, the world did not change" (Onuzo 198–99).

Sandayo narrates his take on infrastructure while commenting on a grassroots project of "education transformation" (164), which on its surface seems to conform to the fortunate developments characteristic of comedy. After Sandayo runs into bureaucratic red tape and absconds from his government post with ten million dollars, others take up his professional goals of educating Nigeria's populace. The protagonists Chike, Fineboy, Oma, Yemi, and Isoken capture Sandayo and confiscate the ten million, turning it to better ends. Originally marked as part of the "Basic Education Fund" (56), what would have been the spoils of political corruption is instead money redeployed into schools, and the group is able to achieve in a few weeks "all [Sandayo had] been trying to in one year in the ministry" (272). As Fineboy spins it, "he's just doing his job in an unusual way" (282). One would assume that this reeducation/redistribution project would fit within a comedic pattern of fortunate reversals, as illegal money is turned toward unexpected ends. Indeed, Sandayo's visit to the improved schools is initially positive: "'We've done well,' he said, meaning it for a short moment" (198). This "short moment" points to Sandayo's past as a grassroots worker for education in Yorubaland, when he brought literacy to its farthest edges.

But this moment is soon overturned by Sandayo's conviction that newness is temporary and only the first step on a path to the infrastructure becoming undone. For Sandayo the arrival of new infrastructure does not herald robust or widespread modernization. Once achieved, infrastructures only have one trajectory available: decline. Rather than inaugurating change or even a multitude of pathways, new infrastructures become materializations of postcolonial national failure and closed futurity. Sandayo's insight bears out, as later in the novel all the new equipment is vandalized by his political opponents to discredit the efforts of the protagonists and preserve the divisions of power that their distribution has threatened.

Infrastructure is always "a terrain of power and contestation" (Appel et al. 2). Whether considering infrastructure in contemporary Lagos or as part of the colonial past of Nigeria, "[t]here is no such thing as politically neutral infrastructure[s]," for "the future they bring about always favors one set of political actors over others" (Gupta, "Future" 66).[14] Or,

as Sandayo puts it, infrastructure "was not made to work for" ordinary people. This is because the world in which these new infrastructures function is only partially developed and is socially stratified: "winners and losers" are "decided before they were born" (Onuzo 100). Sandayo measures his country's functionality by its infrastructures, which distribute resources, organize behavior like school attendance and literacy, and more generally create or deny opportunities for advancement. Sandayo, seeing the educational infrastructures he has initiated, immediately connects this newness with its foreclosure and with the political interests that always shape infrastructural access and distribution. New computers do not themselves create new opportunities; at best they offer a façade over a "world [that] did not change" (Onuzo 199). The distribution of infrastructure and resources is an important central problem of the novel and its overall comic genre that I will turn to in the next section.

For Sandayo, infrastructure is deterministic rather than open to possibility. The reform efforts in which he becomes embroiled are not a way of doing good or making change; rather, infrastructural newness is always already tainted by closure and failure. Unlike the fortunate reversals of comedy in which the world might always bring something new, for Sandayo new infrastructures have a tragic tinge of inevitable disappointment. Sandayo's perspective echoes and confirms the ethnographic insight that "ruination prefigures even the completion of projects" (Gupta, "Future" 72). While this sense of ruin pertains to the materials that make up infrastructure—as soon as they are built they begin to break down and need repair—it also applies to the futures that infrastructures are supposed to bring. Within an unequal economy of opportunities and resources, certain populations experience even new infrastructures as immediately failing, being neglected, or as taken away from them. From a perspective of failed modernization, newly built infrastructure does not signal hope for the future but instead confirms existing patterns of inequality. The uses of infrastructure are tragically confined within old patterns of bad distribution.

Sandayo's native critique of infrastructure is supplemented by a foreign perspective, articulated by a BBC journalist named David West whose surname gives away his position as a geopolitical mouthpiece:

> West stared out of his porthole to catch his first glimpse of Lagos. A rash of electricity spread over the city, an eczema of twinkling lights and street lamps, but mostly the skin of Lagos was a thick sable black. No constant power after decades of independence. No constant water supply. No constant healthcare. A rich African state but, essentially, a failed one. (Onuzo 258)

Visiting Nigeria for the first time, West nonetheless inhabits the position of an imperial expert, a white British man returned to a former colony and able to diagnose Nigeria's modern infrastructural malaise like a doctor would a rash. By suggesting that the "eczema of twinkling lights" does not belong on the "sable black" skin of the continent, West's commentary is, like Sandayo's, based in infrastructure. Failed infrastructure means a failed state, just as well-functioning infrastructure would signal modern state success. The future of Nigeria is bleak, he implies, since decades of independence have resulted merely in a rash of electricity and no healthcare. The country's infrastructure chronicles its trajectory of failure.

West's pessimism here is as diagnostic as Sandayo's. Together Sandayo and West situate infrastructure within a tragic frame in which promises of futurity and modernity can only be seen as inevitably foreclosed or entrenched in inequality. Hence West concludes that Lagos is a place of "[w]aste[,] . . . like Lagos was one giant bin" (264), and Sandayo likens the country to mud: "Mud became Nigeria. Filth was her natural covering" (198). From such perspectives, infrastructure invites pessimistic affects, dismissals of the future, and the confirmation that Nigeria is and always will be a failure. In failed progress narratives, the broken promises of infrastructure draw attention only to the chasms between desired forms of modernity and their lived reality. In such generic frames, the future feels far away.

III. Comic Critique and Material Inequality

Welcome to Lagos is thus aware of the pitfalls of infrastructure and the entrenched material problems of the city. And yet, its generic frame and narrative development present an alternative to the tragic, closed view

of infrastructural and national futurity that Sandayo and West convey.[15] The novel does this largely through informal infrastructures that emphasize the continuous processes through which Lagos is inhabited and put to use precisely by those for whom it is not supposed to work.[16] By narrating the hierarchical world of Lagos in a comic genre, *Welcome to Lagos* offers an aesthetics of flexibility that contests and undermines the rigidity of the real city's materially unequal systems. A comic genre frame shifts the viewpoint through which one relates to systemic inequality: not as inevitable, with "winners and losers decided before they were born" (Onuzo 100), but as potentially open to redistribution and degrees of change. The generic conventions of comedy—chance, fortune, opportunities, and reversals—determine how things will go by introducing a degree of indeterminacy into the world of Lagos' poor inhabitants.

For instance, Fineboy, one of the protagonists, finds a basement apartment; this lucky discovery enacts in microcosm the significant if not systemic upsets inaugurated by comedy as well as the close intimacy of shelter and abandonment in the city's wider housing. The apartment is located in a guarded "residential estate" (116), physically embedded in a surrounding wealthy neighborhood. This structural intimacy of poverty and wealth is echoed throughout the city, where "a grittier Lagos" is always close by and on occasion "spill[s]" into affluent neighborhoods "in the form of armed robberies" (50). The infrastructures of the city are porous, gates and walls no guarantee against crime or the intermingling of poverty and wealth. Indeed, in the case of the basement apartment and Lagos' other neighborhoods, infrastructures of exclusion like walls are penetrable by those meant to be kept out: Fineboy enters through an existing "man-sized gap in the perimeter wall" (116).

The sense that winners and losers are all chosen before birth and that the "rich [get] richer, the poor [slide] into abjection" (158) is a material reality that comic form rails against and to some degree upsets. If it does not create a different system, it insists on making the current system distribute wealth more unpredictably, into smaller and more ordinary channels. It attends to the ways the poor work a system not meant to work for them, and it assumes that distribution need not be, and indeed is not, stacked only in favor of society's obvious winners.

In *Welcome to Lagos*, "[n]o condition is permanent" (148). This fluid and aleatory version of the city starkly contradicts a rigid system of urban hierarchy and challenges a deterministic view of Lagos' resources. A comic generic frame instead stresses the many modes of large and small redistribution at work in the city, which help ordinary Lagosian characters survive.[17] The most obvious redistribution occurs when Sandayo shows up to the group's basement flat with ten million dollars in cash. As I note above, this money is then used to renovate schools, circumventing the paralyzing bureaucracy that has kept Sandayo from being able to reach the "field of illiterate Nigerians he was supposed to educate" (59).

Other redistributions occur when Fineboy pays the housing complex guards small fees that might dispose them toward goodwill, and when police officers storm the basement, sharing Sandayo's money with them is perceived as an unexpected fortune, not just for Fineboy and the other protagonists Chike, Oma, Yemi, and Isoken but also for the police officers: "It was their turn to eat. Who knew when next they would be invited to the table?" (311). Rather than couching such an acquisition as purely self-interested, comedy shifts the tenor to one of distributed opportunity. The police officers each have "many dependents" (309) and the protagonists are able to escape—a win-win situation. This is but one instance of the redistribution happening all over the city. Comedy proposes a distributive economy of surprising windfalls ("their turn") in which distribution nonetheless happens randomly ("who knew when") and must be seized upon when it appears. Fortune will come around, but it may not happen again soon or repeat in this particular way.

The more familiar story of Lagosian redistribution is that it shores up inequality, as with the First Lady's "shoe and handbag" accounts through which political elites in the novel jostle to accumulate state patronage for themselves (Onuzo 270). This kind of redistribution is labeled corruption, a concept that anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith suggests "must be understood in the context of everyday instances of patronage as they occur in networks of kin, community, and interpersonal association" (345).[18] While Nigerian corruption is a recurrent concern in both literature and politics, it is not only a crime or violation but also part of

a larger distributive ethos in Nigeria: "corruption is sustained precisely because people at all strata in Nigeria are invested in, and, in some measure, benefit from the accumulation and distribution of public resources through informal private networks" (Smith 355).

Welcome to Lagos reframes the problem of entrenched material inequality usually exemplified through corruption. It does so by using comedy to reveal larger network of continuous and unpredictable redistributions that upend the status quo of unassailable inequality endemic to corruption narratives.[19] The novel shows that the corruption narrative is not the only one underway, and that assuming a view of set hierarchies renders the everyday distributions of the city *a priori* impossibilities. Corruption narratives, like tragic ones, threaten to overlook or dismiss the comic strategies through which poor Lagosians make the city work for them and wrest its working away from the city's elites. Comic contingency redistributes not only material resources like cash and computers but also symbolic and metaphorical resources like perception, opportunities, and encounters. Anyone might be a winner one day, and tomorrow the winners and losers might change yet again, following the "quicksilver hand" of fortune (Onuzo 148).

IV. Infrastructural Comedy/Comic Infrastructure

Through comedy, *Welcome to Lagos* demonstrates that the futures signaled by infrastructure can be keyed to forward progress or opened to hopeful appropriation despite the coexistence of other generic and affective frames. Indeed, the novel's dominant vision is "the Lagos dream of sudden changes in fortune, the wheel always turning, none secure, top wobbling, bottom grasping, middle squeezed" (Onuzo 148). Infrastructure is central to the unexpected events, chances, and reversals that characterize this comic world as well as the positive affects of hopeful futurity that arise from the unpredictability of everyday life. *Welcome to Lagos*' comedy turns contingency into a guiding principle and resource.

By describing infrastructure as a vehicle for comedy in this way, I draw on Susanne K. Langer's description of comedy as a genre in which the "ineluctable future" is "Fortune"—"an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence"

(331).[20] This is a perspective Joseph Meeker similarly calls "the comic way" of survival and adaptation to the circumstances in which we find ourselves (12).[21] Fortune, in contrast to predetermined closures or unavoidable fate, emphasizes the continuity of new opportunities, unexpected windfalls, and unpredictable events. A comic view of Lagos does not preclude tragic or pessimistic episodes, but the overall action and narrative development of Onuzo's novel follows the expectations of comedy: that life goes on and there is always "more life" (Langer 334), more possibility, and more futurity available for strategic use.

Infrastructures emerge as key sites for *Welcome to Lagos*' portrayal of flux and contingency shortly after the protagonists arrive in the city. Having been driven to living under a bridge due to lack of funds, Fineboy befriends a group of "touts," or gangsters, who also live under the bridge. Through them he finds new accommodations for himself and the novel's other protagonists. The gangsters occupy many spaces: they live not only under the bridge but also in an abandoned building. After Fineboy visits this building, the narrator notes that "[f]rom then, he had begun seeing the abandoned buildings, his eyes now open to the unfinished structures that lay all over the city" (Onuzo 112). Other homeless city residents have taken up these abandoned or incomplete buildings—indeed most of the structures "were already occupied" (112). Incomplete infrastructures become, then, a site of possibility. This possibility is material—in that the buildings offer Fineboy, his companions, and other homeless residents actual places to live—but it is also epistemological and aesthetic. Fineboy's realization that these buildings are in fact not abandoned but repurposed by the city's poor is narrated as an anagnorisis or revelation. Once his eyes are "open" to the possibilities of informal infrastructures, Fineboy can see the city in a new way. Comic reversals and revelations structure the relationships that characters like Fineboy come to have with infrastructure, their fellow Lagosians, and the city at large.

Fineboy and the rest of the group initially think that they have two options: occupying buildings officially designated for residence, like hotel rooms or rooms for rent, or homelessness at the beach or under bridges. Once "seen," abandoned buildings appear as heterotopic spaces

of possibility, spaces between home and homelessness that can be appropriated by those without formal residence in Lagos.[22] The urban poor, for whom there is inadequate housing, have instead made their own housing by taking up abandoned buildings: "Abandoned property is for anybody that finds it," as Fineboy asserts (116). When Fineboy later discovers the basement apartment for the group to live in, he again sees opportunities in abandoned infrastructures—a capacity that comes with a comic view of the city. Fineboy's encounters with infrastructure allow him to practice generic repetition, which in turn amounts to new behaviors and forms of social practice. Infrastructure and genre here are mutually enabling, as the novel deploys comedy's "characteristic configurations" or generic expectations to make new use of infrastructure.

Fineboy's basement apartment is hidden within "an incomplete building, falling apart" (116), where he initially expected to "find something uninhabitable" (117). But within this area with "no roof, no windows, no doors" (116) is a surprise, an "iron door in the ground" that leads to a livable space—one far more comfortable than the unfinished buildings the other touts live in (117). This hidden space within a ruined structure, itself embedded in a wealthy neighborhood, makes infrastructure a layered object that cannot be defined by its external appearances or official labels. The basement apartment epitomizes the way infrastructures are "only solid when seen from a distance" (Berlant, "The Commons" 394).

Above I suggest that within linear temporalities of progress, ruin seems inevitable and invites a tragic reading of infrastructure. But Gupta argues that this is only one way to read ruination; ruins like the basement building also constitute their own, separate time. Ruination is a temporal mode not to be understood as a partial completion, overdetermined by linear telos, but rather as "the temporality of the now, between past and future, between potential and actualization. Ruination is not about the fall from past glory but the property of in-between-ness, between the hopes of modernity and progress embodied in the start of construction, and the suspension of those hopes in the half-built structure" (70). However, it may be better to think of ruins not as a specific kind of time but rather as an instantiation of intensified temporal pathways, the overlapping of many times at once.

The processes of ruination and incompletion may result in multiple outcomes: they may be completed, abandoned, destroyed, or—as in the novel—repurposed to new ends that are not coterminous with being completed. Incompletion then is less a distinct temporal mode than a point at which many possible trajectories overlap before diverging, and where divergence may happen many times over at different points in time. Ruins and incompletion open up precisely the multiplicity of possible futures that is aestheticized in comedy. Intensified ruination and abandonment, active destruction, eventual completion, or ongoing repurposing are the trajectories that completion may take, a flexible ongoing flux of use that makes completion visible as a process with many stages rather than a final sanctioned status. *Welcome to Lagos* hitches its affect of futurity both to the repurposing of such informal spaces but also to the ways in which these repurposings make visible the multiple futures and uses always already embedded in informal infrastructures.

While Fineboy's encounters with infrastructural contingency are the most consistent, other characters also make their way in the city through unpredictable changes in fortune. When Chike and Yemi are struggling to find work, the feeling of having a future is triggered by two contingencies: finding the new basement home and finding work in an unexpected way. Chike and Yemi "found work in the end" (103) not by deliberately searching but by being in the right place at the right time, a fortuitous coincidence much like Fineboy's basement discovery. While Chike and Yemi are "at a crossroads, waiting for a gap for pedestrians," a pregnant traffic warden falls to the ground, overcome with heat or fatigue (103). Chike approaches to offer his training, "a smattering of First Aid[,] . . . basic skills in wound dressing and artificial respiration" (104). However, he is able to help not because of his medical skills but because he takes over directing traffic while the woman recovers. Chike here becomes part of the infrastructure of Lagos' infamously congested roads. Directing traffic is itself full of contingency—Chike might be run over by noncompliant cars or motorcycles. But infrastructure again is a vehicle of the novel's aleatory developments, in which Chike and Yemi land their much-needed jobs and incomes not through Chike's

deliberate search or skills but through the happenstance of being at the crossroads and having had military training "close enough" (103) to directing traffic.

The infrastructure of Lagos traffic, like the infrastructure of unfinished buildings, is a material instantiation of the novel's comic form, in which chance, fortune, and opportunity happen randomly but continuously: "From the hotel, to the bridge, to the crossroads, to their underground flat," the characters "had tumbled along with chance" (163). Comic contingency is the generic manifestation of living a provisional life, in which the future is characterized by uncertainty and multiple possible developments, and where moving toward a future is more the result of unpredictable events than it is deliberate action. This is not to say that comedy is deterministic in a simple way but that treating Lagos as a comic world allows the novel to draw out the possibilities of the city that are harder to see outside a comic frame.

Likewise, city underbridges are described as "multipurpose spaces: shade and shelter, house and office" (91). Full of uses, the undersides of bridges are points on the way to elsewhere, zones that collect a multitude of pathways in flux. The long-term residents of the bridges are "moving out soon," (101), and when Chike, Fineboy, and the rest of the group eventually move from the underbridges to the basement apartment, they successfully achieve the goal shared by everyone living under the bridges. Populated by those denied chances for legitimate mobility in Lagos, underbridge residents nevertheless "clamber onto danfos, pushing, shoving, crushing against each other" every morning to pursue different futures (101). Such a narrative is not simply compensatory; rather it indexes the feeling of being able to move toward opportunities and out of current circumstances. While years of staying under the bridge are a kind of pessimistic evidence of the inability to move, such evidence is always contested by desires for other circumstances and plans on how to get there.

Lagos' underbridge dwellers perceive the open-endedness of the future as what Bloch would call a "Real-Possible," something that touches their historical situation, not an abstract fantasy. These people exhibit, in the

words of Arjun Appadurai, the "capacity to aspire," a "navigational capacity that is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations" that are "always part of a local design of means and ends" (189). Such hopes act like a map into the future, rendering the future as a "cultural fact" (Appadurai 185) that one can move toward, between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" aspects of life (Appadurai 189). All the characters in *Welcome to Lagos* work to bridge the gap, or create a map, between what is near and far, between where they are and where they want to go: finding a home, getting married, completing their studies, becoming a radio announcer. While Chike does not see the map of those bridge-dwellers who ascribe to what he calls the "Lagos delusion" (Onuzo 101), it is clear that he and they are similarly aspiring to the fact of the future. This fact is not conveyed through mechanically repeating the past but through an aspirational capacity of pursuing unrealized desires and plans that build on the experiences that have brought them all this far.

At the end of the novel, when the group must abandon the basement apartment and return to an underbridge, Fineboy sees opportunities where the group sees none and suggests that they contact Ahmed, a wealthy newspaperman with access to housing. Chike, who has not learned to fully inhabit a comic mindset despite his own encounters with infrastructure, marvels that Fineboy saw "people lined like instruments in a toolbox, none unusable" (326). This opportunism, which could smack of utilitarianism, is instead used to help the group survive. Fineboy has internalized a comic view of the city and learned to assume that possibilities are embedded in any situation, however apparently bleak, and it is his openness to improvisation, new opportunities, and contingency that largely allows the group to persist in Lagos.

As this distinction between Chike and Fineboy suggests, though comedic principles underlie the narrative's overall logic, individual characters must still opt to make use of the chances available in any given situation. The "[range] of potential strategic responses" (Coe et al. 6) offered by comedy is both a readily available logic and a chosen interpretive act. For a character like Chike, it takes work to see the world comically. In contrast, once his eyes are opened to the contingency of the city,

Fineboy's encounters with infrastructure are consistently structured by comedy, and this generic fix facilitates his ability to make use of the city's infrastructural opportunities.

Learning to aspire—to draw a map between here and there, to have hope, to see the present as a space of movement and possibility—can happen through encounters with infrastructures that are available for reuse and appropriation. Informal infrastructures like danfos, informal housing, and underbridges facilitate an orientation toward the future as open-ended and make it possible to live the process-quality of the world as a quotidian practice. But infrastructures are viewable and usable in this way only because they are seen and situated within a comic generic frame; this view is a resource and interpretive code for living in the city that must be learned and strategically deployed. *Welcome to Lagos* shows that future hope is material and infrastructural, but it is equally an interpretive habit, a generic frame that helps the characters see the built world of the city as a place that can accommodate their hopes for the future.

In closing, it is important to note the limits of comic contingency and the hope it facilitates. *Welcome to Lagos* is notably not a novel of social transformation or radical mobility; the characters all remain in their social classes and none, not even Fineboy, proposes a total system to replace the unequal distribution of opportunities and wealth around them.[23] Nonetheless, redistribution does occur on both the large scale of the "education transformation" project before it is shut down and on the small scale of ordinary bribes, haggling, exchanges, and trades. Indeed, comic contingency becomes a formal resistance to set systems of hierarchy and inequality, working against pessimistic affects and entrenched distributions of resources even if these critiques do not amount to a systemic overhaul. In this way, comedy comes close to enacting what Andrew van der Vlies in a different context calls "educated hope" (14): a hope that is cognizant of the failings or limits present in any moment and yet also registers change, however minor or incomplete. Comedy's limitations should therefore be noted without dismissing the genre and its capacities. In fact, comedy and infrastructure can be seen as structuring forms through which hope is lived despite and alongside that which has not yet changed.

V. Conclusion

As soon as one begins looking for infrastructure in postcolonial works, it appears everywhere, in both mundane and sublime forms. Infrastructure is perhaps most easily understood as a symbol of national development, as I note at the beginning of this essay. In some ways, it acts like the material version of earlier postcolonial preoccupations with the bildungsroman, both personal and national. However, if the bildungsroman narrative has by now become exhausted in postcolonial literary attention, infrastructure projects and the developmentalist desires attached to them continue unabated in varied shapes and forms: as dams, roads, energy projects, schools, health clinics, cars. None of these infrastructures can be called boring, exhausted, or affectless.[24]

Indeed, in this article I have argued that it is good to think about infrastructure and genre together in the service of postcolonial affect. Genre and its narrative worlds offer powerful tools for theorizing survival within the constraints imposed by material inequality and infrastructural lack across the global South. As I have shown, comedy in particular aestheticizes provisional life, framing for consideration a processual world of contingent infrastructural uses that happen before, around, and despite the tragic closures of postcolonial urban modernity.

In *Welcome to Lagos*, hope for the future appears most prominently at the intersection of infrastructure and genre, comic worlds and the material forms that populate them. Encounters with material infrastructures concretize the feeling of having an open future and reinforce a comic perspective on the city. In this sense, infrastructure can work like genre, facilitating particular horizons of expectation between present and future and between cities and their residents. Yet these encounters and uses are themselves organized by generic conventions. The compositional dimension of genre works like the infrastructure of infrastructure, a logic that distributes narrative attention, expectations, and plot developments and shapes the interpretations and actions that seem possible or likely in a given situation. A comic narrative frame foregrounds infrastructural indeterminacy to make built environments into sites of multiple temporalities and unexpected uses. Contingency is simultaneously an aesthetic

interpretive frame and a social practice, a structuring principle produced by and through which infrastructure and comedy facilitate hope. In turn, hope as an affect of futurity—the feeling of having a future and in particular a future in which many things are possible—indexes the force of genre and infrastructure as lived structuring forms. Other infrastructural and generic configurations might offer yet different frames on affective life in the global South.

In order to fully attend to the complexities of postcolonial modernity, postcolonial literary scholars must consider infrastructure and the uses and affects that attach to them, whether positive, negative, entangled, or ambivalent. Infrastructures invite attention equally to the material properties of built structures and to the felt affects and interpretive codes through which these structures are encountered and used. As *Welcome to Lagos* demonstrates, infrastructures offer scales of analysis that can include but can also circumvent familiar approaches to national progress and cohesion, as well as narratives of global capitalism, that have been central to postcolonial studies. The heuristic utility of infrastructures lies in the multitude of scales, networks, and systems in which they appear and the ways they foreground the rich multidirectionality of generic, material, and affective life in postcolonial cities like Lagos and beyond.

Notes

1 Larkin also suggests that infrastructures themselves have an aesthetic or formal dimension. Though he largely argues that an infrastructure's symbolic meaning exceeds its technical limits or rules, the provocation to think about infrastructure through aesthetic forms is surely one that humanists can also take up through genre. See Larkin's "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure" and "Promising Forms."

2 See Berlant's *The Female Complaint* for a discussion of femininity as a genre; see also Frow's *Genre* for a more general discussion of genre as a social form that is not confinable to literary genres.

3 See Jauss and Benzinger's "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" and Jauss' *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* for how genres create "horizons of expectations" that change over time and reflect the experience of different readers. Jauss also stresses that these horizons have particular social functions: "Literary

forms and genres are . . . primarily social phenomena, which means that they depend on functions in the lived world" (*Toward* 100).

4 All genres, including comedy, offer "a zone and a field of valorized perception[,] . . . a mode for representing the world" (Bakhtin 28).

5 Bloch discusses hope as a cultural and historical force at length in *The Principle of Hope*.

6 Quayson makes a similar point about the clash of order and contingency in postcolonial cities like Lagos' neighbor Accra, where traffic stops are both "rule bound" and "actively and regularly distorted" by other uses (22). For him, "colorful and culturally saturated" (22) interactions constantly exceed hegemonic spatial uses so that even urban spaces that appear fixed "[do] not remain static" (20).

7 In this way, the novel extends a common motif of urban poverty and closed futurity found in other African novels like Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* or Abani's G*raceLand*. See Dawson's "Surplus City" for a discussion of failed futurity through the failed bildungsroman in *GraceLand*. Davis' *Planet of Slums* is also exemplary in its pessimistic take on urban infrastructures, which he argues are inadequate, dangerous, or altogether lacking in the global South's enormous slums. These works stress the poverty that accompanies incomplete urban infrastructures rather than new ones.

8 Anthropologists assert that developmental narratives also "hang out ethnographically" (Appel 46), appearing not just in literature but in everyday life across the global South.

9 For the invisibility of infrastructure, see Star's "The Ethnography of Infrastructure" and Rubenstein, Robbins, and Beal's "Infrastructuralism." See Anand, Gupta, and Appel's *The Promises of Infrastructure* for a discussion of the "infra" within Althusser's usage of "infrastructure" and "superstructure."

10 See also Rubenstein's *Public Works* for further critiques of infrastructure's invisibility and discussions of how narrative reveals infrastructure and the state's reach into everyday life.

11 These assumptions are also classed and raced, since infrastructures have long been breaking down, or simply broken, for poor and nonwhite populations even in the United States.

12 See Haraway's "Situated Knowledges" on the importance of accounting for the standpoint from which one speaks and encounters the world.

13 See Anand's *Hydraulic City* for a discussion of how local officials and citizen groups wrangle water delivery and services in Mumbai.

14 Indeed, nationalist critiques of colonial infrastructures have long claimed that infrastructures were built to better extract raw materials and not to benefit the colonies. See Gupta's "The Future in Ruins" and Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.*

15 Genre frames offer a particular interpretation or "fix" on the world, as Colie notes in *The Resources of Kind*. Frames are not all-encompassing; all frames will

leave something out. But their partiality is also their strength, for they offer foregrounding and emphasis; they bring certain interpretations into view even if they obscure others. And as in *Welcome to Lagos*, a given genre frame can accommodate or include other very different generic frames.

16 Outside generic specificity, Graham and McFarlane insist that infrastructure must always be understood as a process: "infrastructure is a complex social and technological *process* than enables—or disables—particular kinds of action" (1; emphasis in original).

17 For a discussion of socialites and economic redistribution in another highly stratified city, Johannesburg, see Simone's "People as Infrastructure."

18 Smith's writing is part of recent revisionary anthropological work on corruption. See also Gupta's *Red Tape*.

19 Though Smith claims that large and small scale corruption are all part of the moral economy of redistribution and mutual obligation between Nigerian patrons and clients, Griswold's *Bearing Witness* distinguishes between scales of redistribution. Corruption narratives are separated out from smaller, more petty crime narratives in which everyday stealing is distinguished from large-scale theft by public officials. Obunzo's novel shows both the entwinement and the potential distinctiveness of these scales.

20 This emphasis on comic contingency does not of course encompass all the generic qualities of comedy, which is often also associated with embodiment, humor, or the profane.

21 Meeker describes "the comic way" as the strategies of survival adopted by those without power—women, the poor, and the enslaved. While Meeker is not a postcolonial critic, the comic way also has some shared elements with what postcolonial scholar Scott has called the "hidden transcripts" of resistance to hegemony that happen within circumstances dominated by powerholders (*Domination*). See Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* and *Weapons of the Weak*.

22 On heterotopia, see Foucault and Miskowiec's "Of Other Spaces."

23 This comic redistribution is critical but not revolutionary. However, while it may seem conservative, comedy's critique of inequality and the strategies of survival and everyday redistribution it enacts and champions must still be understood as an important resource and mode of everyday resistance, a material refusal of existing inequalities; or, indeed it may be seen as a demand for the right to own's own share of wealth.

24 Jawaharlal Nehru's famous declaration, at the opening of the Bhakra Nangal dam, that "dams are the temples of modern India" is routinely taught in Indian schools, and anyone who has read Roy's scathing critique of the displacements of the Narmada Valley Dam in Gujarat, "The Greater Common Good," will understand the mobius strip of triumphalism and abjection that still attends infrastructure's discourses and material effects in the global South. Infrastructure is a lively site of political struggle, embroiled in both affective and material life.

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