LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Infrastructural Crisis and Apocalypse in Serpell's *The Old Drift*

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Abstract:

Infrastructure continues to be one of the templates on which history and world politics are inscribed. This is clear in how contemporary modernisation theories (Donby 2009) divide countries into developed and less developed, with infrastructure as a measure of how developed a country is. As a result, less developed countries are scripted as being in a state of permanent infrastructural crisis (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016) where they get caught up in a race towards that future moment called 'development'. Serpell's (2019) treatment of infrastructure (the hydroelectric dam) in her novel *The Old Drift* opens up dialogue and raises questions regarding the permanence of infrastructural crisis in developing countries by envisioning what would happen if the metaphorical and literal power of infrastructure over society was destroyed. Three youths in *The Old Drift* attempt to stir revolution by subotaging the hydroelectric dam that powers the national communication system using drones they have created. The plan goes wrong when the dam is blown up, resulting in an apocalyptic flood. My aim in this paper is to determine whether preoccupation with infrastructual development exposes gaps in the cultural analysis of society when everyday issues of society are relegated to the shadows in the name of development. This is with specific focusI focus specifically on what happens when infrastructure is illuminated and becomes the slate on which power is inscribed. Furthermore, I explore the idea of 'crisis' and examine how Serpell's apocalyptic flood reimagines it as a conjucture that opens up society to the fluid, dynamic and unpredictable African futures.

Keywords: African futures; infrastructural crisis; apocalypse; *The Old Drift*.

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Namwali Serpell's (2019) *The Old Drift* tells the story of three generations of three families originating from the Old Drift in the Southern part of Northern Rhodesia and then spreading to other parts of the country and the rest of the world. Narrated by a buzzing multitude that doubles as narrator and commentator or chorus, the novel is an interwoven tapestry of epic, myth, fairy tale, romance and science fiction. We witness how the three families become linked through politics, intermarriage, illicit affairs, pregnancies and the fight against HIV/AIDS over a period of approximately 100 years. Events surrounding the Hydroelectric dam are enshrined in the stories of the three generations of characters, starting with some of the grandmothers that witness the building of the dam. For instance, two of the grandmothers, Sibilla and Agnes, find themselves at the Old Drift after eloping and fleeing Italy and England respectively. One of the grandmothers, Sibilla, a young lady born of an illicit affair that her mother has with an employer, has a rare disorder that makes hair grow uncontrollably over her body, making her look like a monster and turning her into a social recluse. Sibillla ends up as a scullery maid in the same house where her mother works as a maid and soon meets Fredrico, the only person who befriends her and who soon becomes a lover. The two elope and flee to the Old Drift after Fredrico murders his brother and later takes up his position at the Old Drift after catching him raping Sibilla. In a similar turn of events, another grandmother, the blind Agnes, falls in love with a black student, Roland who has been visiting the house because of the friendship between Agnes' parents and Roland's benefactor. The duo flees to the Old Drift with the help of a housekeeper when Agnes' wealthy parents refuse to consent to their daughter marrying a black man. The story of the other Grandmother, Matha, is interwoven in the story of the hydroelectric dam and its transfer from colonial to local hands through her active involvement in the struggle for independence, specifically, the 1950's and 1960's guerrilla war for national liberation led by a character called Ba Nkoloso. In addition, among the children of Sibilla, Agnes and Matha, Leonel ends up having two children, Joseph and Jacob, from a marriage to Thandiwe and an affair with Silvia, a prostitute, whom he uses as a subject for his research on creating an HIV/AIDS vaccine. The three families (led by the three grandmothers, Sibilla, Agnes and Matha) are eventually united by the love triangle among the three grandchildren, Joseph, Jacob and Naila, who live in a futuristic Zambia controlled by the Beads technology, an électro-nerve technology powered by the Kariba dam. Every citizen is required to have a Bead implanted on their finger for identification, communication and other transactions. The three youths become politically charged with the desire to put up a rebellion–the second Cha Cha Cha—and sabotage the national Beads system using mosquito-sized drones created by Joseph. However, the sabotage fails when the drones cause the Kariba dam to collapse instead of being blocked just enough to cause power interruption to the Beads. The result is an apocalyptic flood that covers the whole country, leaving only a few survivors marooned on the newly-formed island of Lusaka.

In this paper, I use Serpell's treatment of the Kariba hydroelectric dam to explore the idea of what I call, following Goldstone and Obarrio, 'permanent infrastructural crisis'. I am particularly interested in how the apocalyptic flood that ensues when the dam is blown away disrupts our belief of definite future destinations by raising the question of what happens when the metaphorical and literal power of infrastructure over the future of

society is destroyed. Gupta (2018: 63) examplifies the kind of eschatological development discourse that this paper engages with when he notes that

> infrastructures tell us about aspirations, anticipations, and imaginations of the future: what people think their society should be like, what they want it to be like, and what kind of statement they wish to make about that vision of the future. Infrastructures are concrete instantiations of visions of the future.

This kind of discourse provides a lens through which infrastracture may be considered synonymous with development and as a possible slate on which African futures may be scripted. Nevertheless, what concerns us here is what would happen when this signifier (infrastructure) that is supposed to signify (Derrida 1974) development dissappears. The apocalyptic flood in *The Old Drift* opens up dialogue regarding the role of infrastructure in shaping African futures, when it wipes away the dam which powers the country and the Beads technology. As a result, this paper considers whether it is possible to imagine a stable and singular future destination called development—or to condemn certain countries to a state of permanent infrastractural crisis—in the absence of infrastructure.

Perhaps the best place to open this investigation is with the notion of 'permanent infrastructural crisis.' The widespread belief that some countries are mired in a state of 'permanent infrastructural crisis' begins the moment the future, development and infrastructure are conflated in the politics of modernity. This is because when eyes are set on a prescribed version of infrastructural development, every country that does not fit into that category is assigned infrastructural crisis status (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016). As I argue elsewhere (Siluonde 2020), fixing a pre-determined identity such as permanent crisis or sustaining 'developed/under-developed' dichotomies is synonymous with orientalism (Said 1978) and 'othering' (Lacan 1992; Chiesa 2007). This is because both orientalism and 'othering' are based on a subject appropriating to itself authority to determine what is acceptable and what is not. Those that fit the description of what is acceptable are given member status while those that do not are excluded as 'other' (with their own label or stereotype) and pushed to the periphery (Spivak 1988)**.** Similarly, countries that do not meet the prescribed level of infrastructural development are excluded, 'othered' and cited as being in a state of 'permanent infrastructural crisis'. As such, I explore the other places and voices that emerge when the dam, as a preferred symbol of development in Serpell's novel, is no longer present to conceal them. I further examine how the absence of the dam, as a symbol of the future – development – raises the possibility that infrastructure is never the future but a metaphor performing the role of development. Hence, such an entity, in this case the dam and by extension infrastructure, whose prominence comes at the expense of 'othering' and overshadowing other things cannot provide a stable future destination.

In making this argument, I aim to reconfigure the idea that African countries are always in a state of permanent infrastructural crisis. My goal is to shift the word 'crisis' from its etymological meaning of 'turining point' (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016) to something that indicates the stagnation dictated by the ambitions of modern developmental theories. Crisis is turned into 'an enduring, even "permanent," state of affairs' by the rhetoric of developmentalism (Guyer 2016: 63). So on the one hand, to be

in crisis is viewed as a turning point or conjuncture that ushers people from one temporal moment to another. On the other hand, crisis is a persisitent, permanent destination characterised by a sisyphean interminable effort with no results. To be in a permanent state of infrastructural crisis means taking the second definition of crisis–to arrive at a destination (crisis), but at the same time to be forever on the verge of the kind of infrastructural development the future demands. This is remniscent of Chakrabarty's (2008) notion, in *Provincializing Europe*, of the "not-yet" that underpins developmentalist discourse. I argue against such a view of crisis as a permanent destination in which under-developed countries are scripted to be forever stuck. Instead, I apply Roitman's (2016) reversion to the etymological view of crisis as a temporal juncture. I examine in particular how Serpell's apocalyptic flood reimagines crisis as a temporal conjucture that opens society up to fluid, dynamic and unpredictable African futures. Hence, such an unpredictable entity such as the flood, that acts as a launching pad when the flood ushers in a new society, cannot be relied upon to signify arrival at any destination, including that of infrastructural crisis.

As a result, I suggest the need to rethink crisis in terms of an entity that is always on the move (Mbembe 2001; 2021). This cancels the idea of permanent infrastructural crisis (and its attendant investment in a future moment called development). This is because it reimagines infrastructure's lifetime as comprising of unending chains of moments, junctures (of crisis) that do not translate into any form of permanence, such as development or permanent infrastructural crisis. This is what one observes in *The Old Drift*, where the changes in time and context produce moments that are not a destination but launching points to the next moment in the lifetime of the hydroelectric dram. For instance when the dam is first built it is meant to be used for powering the nation electronically, yet this is simply a launching point ushering the reader to the 21st century of the novel when the Beads technology now also has to be powered by the hydroelectric dam. In addition, when the dam is destroyed it becomes as if the initial and later roles of the hydroelectric dam were simply there to pave the way and therefore, launch the next moment in the life of the dam. The idea of never ending chains of temporal junctures that do not lead to a destination is remniscent of Derrida's (1974; 2004) idea of différance. The idea of différance can be extended to the discourse on a future characterised by infrastructural development (signified) which is based on an abstract idea that is always absent in the present moment. This entity, in turn, can only be understood in relation to the changing power narratives that shape the developmental role of the dam in *The Old Drift*, and which lend this "development" different meanings in different times and spaces.

Infrastructure and moving temporal junctures

I consider infrastructure as a process that is characterized by multiple temporalities, fluidity, dynamism and unpredictable futures. Such a movable entity can never be caught up in a static space called crisis or a stable destination to which African futures are predestined. The apocalyptic flood in *The Old Drift* reimagines African futures (defined by reference to infrastructure) and reconfigures them as comprising of different points (junctures) that are not destinations but parts of a fluid unpredictable process. As Gupta

(2018: 74) observes, the future cannot be grounded in infrastrctural development so we must 'focus on infrastructures as emergent, always in process, always shifting, changing, decaying, being rebuilt, and being maintained' (74). This means we are dealing with a space in which other things are always coming up, others going and others being transformed. In like manner, the apocalyptic flood in *The Old Drift* becomes a juncture that ushers fictional Zambia into a new world characterised by hunting and gathering. This is contrary to Jacob, Joseph and Naila's original plan to sabotage the power grid in order to temporarily take overpower from the government through control of the Beads technology. There is an unexpected transformation marked by movement from a society centred on the dam and its governing technology, Beads, to a different technology, when the entire nation is wiped out by the flood. This demonstrates that we are not dealing with a world where infrastructure such as the dam can offer any stable or static destination to which people can either have arrived or aspire to arrive. Rather, we are dealing with points where crisis appears in the shape of epochal aspects such as the flood, ushering the world from one temporal moment to another. It is for this reason that I argue that African futures must not be grounded in anything such as permanent infrastructural crisis.

One way to understand these multiple temporalities of infrastructure is to view the idea in terms of changing chronotopes—that is, changing time and space relations (Bahktin 1981)—rather than as a static site of permanent crisis. According to Appel et al. (2018: 17) 'Looking both across and even within the different phases of infrastructure's life span…—one can see the operation of multiple temporalities and trajectories.' Time does not move in isolation or without any effect on infrastructure. Rather, in chronotopical fashion tracjectories–paths, spaces or contexts–change as time passes. And as they do so, the contexts and spaces in which infrastructure is produced change along with it.

This is the first lesson one learns from how different times and contexts determine whether the hydro-electric dam in *The Old Drift* is viewed as a symbol of development or not. One realises that the completion of the dam in *The Old Drift* could have signaled arrival at the future marked by a great infrastructural and technological development. Yet, the introduction of the Beads technology associated with the dam in the 21st century of the novel disrrupts the feeling of arrival that must have been evident when the dam was first built in 1958. Specifically, the shifting meanings of "development" are clear in that the completion of the dam and its association with development is evidenced by how it provides electricity for the whole country (the mines and everything else). However, when the dam starts being used for the Beads technology, focus is no longer on electricity but on development related to the technological advancements that it makes possible. Once the earlier association with development as an eschatological moment becomes frayed by the coming in of the Beads technology, the dam begins to signify something that is likely to keep changing, as it does when, the permanence and eschatological moment of initially providing electricity is challenged by the coming in of the Beads technology. This means that the context or space in which the dam—and, by extension, infrastructure—is produced is always evolving, and what is considered progress differs at different times. The different perceptions of the dam, resulting from the interaction of different contexts and times, reconfigure the idea of a permanent or static destination or crisis to which Africans subscribe their future or present.

Ultimately, the future moment that African countries are scripted to be perpetually persuing remains forever suspended. This is because the ever-changing times and contexts gesture towards a future that is forever deferred. For instance, completion of the dam in *The Old Drift* is considered a great developmental milestone because as Agnes, Joseph's grandmother tells him and Naila, it had brought 'electricity near the mines, or perhaps…to keep power near the money' (518). Yet, the changes in how it is perceived across three temporal points—characterised by the completion of the dam, the introduction of Beads technology, and later the apocalyptic flood—demonstrate how the future continues to be suspended indefinitely. The idea of deferral is reminiscent of Derrida's (2004) idea of différance. Deferral is based on the view that the signified or anticipated future-present (characterised by infrastructure) is forever deferred and suspended with no possibility of the emergence of a tangible presence. This is because the idea of infrastructure promising a future relies on a non-tangible concept of the future which lies outside the sign (both the future and infrastructure) in the form of a concept of the future (signified). This can be explicated using the dam in *The Old Drift* and how it is viewed as a symbol of development only by reference to an arbitrary relationship between the idea or concept of development marked by infrastructural development. The desired or signified future is therefore suspended when the reality does not match the assumed arrival. In reality, as Agness, Joseph's grandmother notes, 'the Kariba dam was cursed from the start' (Serpell 2019: 518). Agnes makes this statement to demonstrate that the dam as an eschatological point of development has from the very first assumed the emergence of a signified or desired future – completion of the dam has been marred by other things not aspired for. This is because for the Tonga people the dam was never viewed as development but as the 'curse' that displaced them from the valley and disturbed the river God Nyami Nyami in the act of damming the Zambezi river. One can note how, whether in the case of the initial building and completion of the dam, Beads era or later the apocalyptic flood, the dam as a desired signified or idea of development is never present and never grasped except as an aspiration –always suspended and deferred to the future. Therefore, the assumed completion of the dam is simply a deferral and suspension of completion or emergence of the desired future till the next temporal moment that resembles the future.

The idea of a future that is forever suspended or deferred challenges the idea of being in a state of permanent infrastructural crisis. This is because crisis must be related to movement from one point to another, a movement in which the future is never enunciated but always suspended or deferred further – a future that is always becoming. In *The Old Drift* one observes how different temporal moments—such as the original completion of the dam, the seizing of the dam by Zambians after independence, or, later, the sabotage of the dam by the young trio—are junctures (crises) that usher society to the next future moment. According to the Derridan (Derrida 2004) idea of deferral, the different moments become part of an indefinite chain of temporal moments that continue to be produced while the expected future is indefinitely suspended. When the citizens of fictional Zambia in *The Old Drift* take over political and infrastructural control of the hydro-electrical dam at independence, one assumes the aspired future, marked by infrastructure having been placed in the right hands, has been enunciated. Joseph, Naila and Jacob reflect this positive view of the future in their discussion where they state that the early independence years

under president 'Kaunda are a "utopia" compared to what was happening in Zambia these days' (519). The assumed positive future is later dispelled by Joseph's concern over the performance of both the government and the hydro-electric dam: 'we complain about load shedding…But it's the best they [the government] can do with the situation. Kariba Dam is failing' (Serpell 2019: 517). Joseph's grandmother adds that the Kariba dam is mainly failing because of wear and tear over time, such as the Plunge wall succumbing to gravity, yet the government, which was once associated with a "utopia", is unable to fund its repairs (Serpell 2019). Clearly the dam's failure to provide sufficient electricity means that its original completion did not herald an arrival at the future but an act of suspension.

Similarly, the trio plans to sabotage the power grid (dam) to gain control of the future of society through the Beads and revolution, but their miscalculated plans instead cause an apocalyptic flood that defers further the expected future promised by infrastructure, especially now that the dam has been wiped away. At the end of the novel, the swarm (narrators and commentators) verbalise the kind of deferal in their reflections after surviving the flood:

> We are here, too, in this warm, wet future. What keeps us going? ... Perhaps it's the same old difference. The best kind of tale tells you in the end unveils the unsolvable riddle…Time, that ancient and endless meander, stretches out and into the distance. (Serpell 2019: 563).

Here the swarm describes the supposed end or destination as an 'unresolved riddle' and a manifestation of time as endless, despite meanders such as the hydoeclectric dam whose roles keep changing through time. Hence, the challenges of revealing the expected future (signified by infrastructural development) anticipated when the dam was first built, as well as the futures anticipated after independence and during the sabotage attempt, demonstrate an eternal suspension of the future. In addition, critical moments in the development of infrastructure, such as the completion of the dam, the taking over of the dam by Zambians, and the eventual sabotage of the dam, become critical points that launch us to the next moment. The SOTP rally and specifically Matha's prophesy using the four beasts of the apocalypse from Revelations in the Bible marks a launching or transition: 'End of days is here! ... Have you not seen the winds of change rushing over our lands?' (Serpell 2019: 540). These crisis moments become part of the never-ending cycle of possible enunciation and suspension till the next similar moment. Such a consideration of crisis as different temporal launching points is central to the reconfiguration of the discourse on African futures—which, as Serpell's novel suggests, must be imagined in terms other than that of permanent or infrastructural crisis.

Part of the reason why these imagined futures ultimately cannot be achieved is that the present is always characterised by fleeting moments that pass by too fast to be grounded. This means that before the present and expected future are completely actualised via the workings of infrastructure, the moment fusing together infrastructure and future has already expired. As Bhabha observes in his idea of belatedness (1994; 2004), the future always arrives too early for the present to be lived or grasped. Such a present moment (which was an expected future at some point) 'is always the unlived element… a

present where we have never been' (Lawrence 2016: 245). This is illustrated by the quickness with which any moment related to the dam in *The Old Drift* passes without becoming a stable reality or expected future. The dam is almost complete when we are told: 'Now that the dam was nearly complete, the river was flooding earlier than usual in the season' (Serpell 2019: 70) […] 'We are told that this is …too soon.' (76). Clearly, the builders of the dam had timed their work in such a way that they would be done with building by the time the Zambezi river began to flood or fill up the dam. That is the reason they are caught unaware when the flooding occurs earlier than usual, forcing the hydroelectric dam to prematurely play its designated role. Similarly, the plan to sabotage the power grid is prematurely launched when the two young men (part of the sabotage trio) are too occupied with their fight over whether to warn people about the temporary nationwide power cut that will take place when the power grid is temporarily halted to facilitate the subotage of Beads. The argument soon escalates into a fight as many other issues between them come to the surface. They lose focus and fail to notice when one of them starts the sabotage: 'Jacob reached forward and at the same moment Joseph reached his hand out to the table. CLICK…it was clear that one of them or both of them had pressed the button on the controller. The drones acended, glittering bits rising from the box' (557). The present eludes its own emergence as present by prematurely becoming the future in both the completion of the dam and the sabotage attempt. This is because the normal sequence of temporal events is such that the present always preceeds the future but in Joseph and Jacobs case, the release of the drones earlier than expected means the future creeps into the present before the present can fully enunciate itself. It is the elusiveness and diversion of both the present and the future in the completion of the dam and in the sabotage plans that leads to the suggestion that we consider the present and future as "not a thing," but rather as 'a thing-in-motion, ephemeral, shifting, elusive, decaying, degrading' (Gupta 2018: 62). It is my view that a future that cannot be grounded or tamed cannot offer a stable entity to which anyone can attribute arrival at a destination—or even suspension in a state of permanent crisis.

The kind of future that eludes linear time as we know it must be thought of in terms of a multi-temporal entity. The early arrival of the future, together with one's subjective understanding of whether we have arrived at the future or not, determines the temporality of any event. Such moments must be considered atemporal because they operate outside the confines of linear time by combining multiple temporalities. This is illustrated in *The Old Drift* through the introduction of the Beads technology, which may be considered as the emergence of an anticipated future (as the novel's present). Yet arrival at such a destination is disrupted when other temporal moments from the past are announced at the same time. This problemetises how African futures are often envisioned as a single distinct future moment marked by infrastructural development. Such a moment that imagines a natural linear transition from past to present to future is impossible because, as Bhabha (2004: 24) notes, the present can never be presented as a single tangible thing and the 'present can only become representative…through a splitting in the signification of the subject of representation; through an ambivalence at the point of the enunciation.' The same would apply to enunciation of the Beads technology (and the dam) as the aspired future (now present). This is because the emergence of the present is paralled by the

emergence of alternative antagonistic temporal moments from the past. When the Beads technology emerges in the novel's 21st century, it is a symbol of arrival at the temporal point 'development'. As Joseph observes: 'development is a good thing,' … 'Take AFRINET and Digit-All. Those technologies helped us leap ahead' (Serpell 2019: 480). However, just after this affirmative statement, the narrator explains that 'Kaunda's One party State … seemed like a utopia compared to what was happening in Zambia these days' (481). The comparison between the present (characterised by Beads technology) and the past (Kaunda's era) gives the present two temporal moments. On the one hand, the Beads technology (related to the dam) has already arrived at the anticipated future moment marked by infrastructure (the dam and its related technology). On the other hand, the idea of the technology as an anticlimax compared to the Kaunda era—with political suppression increasing instead of alleviating, alongside technological development—means the future (as "utopia") remains in the past. This further means that the Beads technology would have to be considered as past, present and future: as past in relation to not having yet enunciated the desired future (utopia); as a present emergence of the Bead's technology; and as an envisioning of the future idea of infrastructural development (i.e., the dam and the Beads technology) respectively. Such a mixture of temporalities based on different perceptions related to the Beads technology leads to my suggestion that infrastructural development belongs to an atemporal time. A view of time as equaling infrastructural development and African futures cannot be conflated into a singular future moment marked by arrival at a destination called "development" – and the corresponding notion of a present marked by permanent infrastructural crisis is radically insufficient for understanding the connection between infrastructure and futurity.

Apocalyptic Flood and Ilumination of Other places

If the real or imagined future promised by infrastructure is always deferred indefinitely, we quickly become aware of the extent to which the idea of infrastructure is functioning simply as a metaphor of development. Indeed, the removal of the dam through the apocalyptic flood demonstrates precisely that the dam was only ever a metaphor for future development. When the apocalyptic flood wipes away the dam we see that the dam was never the anticipated future but simply a metaphoric sign standing for the concept of African future and development. Derrida (1974; 2004) postulates that pseudo presences always appear in the absence of the real thing. Such substitute presences conceal the fact that the 'real' does not exist (Baudrillard 1988) except as an abstract idea or concept of a future set on infrastructure. It is my view that that this is the underlying assumption behind the modern idea that infrastructure 'becomes synonymous' (Appel et al. 2018: 15) with its 'imagined materialization' (Schnitzler 2018: 149) and therefore comes 'to stand metonymically for development itself' (Appel 2018: 50). The challenge with imagination, synonyms, and metonyms is that they can only be implied comparisons and never the actual thing. This is what one witnesses in *The Old Drift*, in which Beads technology (powered by the hydro-electric dam) comes to stand for the idea of development but not the thing itself. Yet, as Naila (part of the trio that plans to sabotage the country), comments:

the country has become a dictatorship. The rich are richer, the poor are poorer. Government is controlling us…We held out our hands out to them and said PLEASE BEAD US! We can't even frikkin take them out of our hands or deactivate them. It's the perfect system to monitor us. (Serpell 2019: 523)

This suggests that a desire to be considered developed and progressive leads people to get the Beads technology, and yet the reality that Naila reveals is contrary and opposite to the progress expected from the technology. The conflict between what is promised to the people and what Naila tells us they get compels us to settle for the technology as a metaphor, with Beads technology theoretically and abstractly standing for development. This is the only way one can avoid the delusion that comes with fixation on African futures that are imagined through the figure of infrastructural development and its attendant technologies.

It must futher be noted that for a metaphor to fit the description of the anticipated signified it must always take up a performative role. Such performative roles are determined by the person or people controlling infrastructure at any given time. This suggests that the relationship between infrastructure and development is never a natural one. It also unsettles the idea of infrastructure as a stable entity to which society looks as an emblem of the future. Such instability related to the performative roles of the dam are noted in *The Old Drift* when control of the dam changes hands in the fictional Zambia. For the 21st century government the dam, along with its attendant power grid, plays the role of contolling people (by powering the Beads) and not just providing electricity as it did in the past. The government's ability to control the power grid makes them able to control people through the Beads, on which people depend for almost everything. That is why the trio's plan to sabotage the Beads and particularly the source of their power comes from a realisation that the one who controls the dam, controls the world.

As Appel et al. (2018: 9) observe, 'material reality cannot exist independently of or prior to representational practices: discourses, narratives, and language give form to infrastructure as much as concrete, wires, or zoning regulations". As this observation shows, it is the performance aspect that gives any infrastructure its identity. Furthermore, narratives of power and authority warrant the basis on which infrastructure becomes the yardstick of development. The manner in which epistemes (Foulcault 1980) of power become inscribed on infrastructure and its developmental aspects is echoed by Naila in *The Old Drift* with her statement that: 'Progress is just the word we use to disguise power doing its thing' (Serpell 2019: 506). She makes this comment especially to pour scorn on the government who have been using the dam to perform the role of development through Beads technology. Jacob, Joseph and Naila's plan to sabotage the dam and the country is also based on dissatisfaction with the government. Yet what the trio does not realise is that taking over the dam would not only initiate a change of power but also a change in performative roles because they would now dictate what role the dam would play – 'power doing its thing'. The fact that the discourses and narratives of power determine the performative role of infrastructure, as seen in *The Old Drift*, challenges the assumed natural link between infrastructure and development. This is because we now realise that the assumptions surrounding our belief in infrastructure as markers of development is based

on the narratives and discourses surrounding it, which determine what role it must perform.

Potential multiplicity of performative roles leads to the realisation that there are always other possible realities behind the mask of performance. The challenge is that these other roles are always concealed and overshadowed by a fixation on building and sustaining infrastructural development. Yet, the question is no longer whether the other, subaltern voices (Spivak 1988)—those that contest the discourses of power—can speak, but whether they can be heard (Maggio 2007). This is clarified by the manner in which focus on the dam as a symbol of progress and development in *The Old Drift* overshadows other aspects which are present. Once the apocalyptic flood forces our attention away from the dam, we realise that we are not only looking at the dam for the symbol of development that it was. Rather, we recognize other perspectives, such as what happens when the delicate balance between nature and humanity is disrupted by massive infrastractural development (James and Morel 2018). This is because infrastructural development and its various afterlives depend heavily on controlling, taming and harnessing nature for its survival. As Appel et al. (2018: 8) note, the efficacy of major hyroelectrical projects 'depends on the degree to which engineers, hydrologists, and politicians can consistently mobilize the water that it needs to work'. Yet it must be stressed that continued reliance on nature has detrimental effects because nature may not always serve as "infrastructure's infrustracture," as Appel et al. (2018) put it. It is from this perspective that the apocalyptic flood may be viewed as an illustration of the adverse effects of human exploitation of nature. This makes the continued stress on infrastructural development specially perilous, as it makes us ignore other things happening, such as disturbance and detoriation of nature.

Failure to attend to the silenced voices discussed above may have disastrous effects on infrastructure and its promises of African futurity. This comes after the realisation that in many cases infrastructural development is inversely proportional to the possible enunciation of the future promised by infrastructural development. For instance, detoriation of the dam (and nature) and the resulting apocalyptic flood awakens us to the fact that as the dam is proving itself more and more productive over the years, conversely, nature is detoriationg. This means the push towards infrastructural development may be a push towards the death of any semblance of the future (including the one promised by infrastructure). As Appel et al. (2018: 8) note, 'As humans intervene in the climatic, geological, and evolutionary processes of the Anthropocene, both the effects and futures of modern infrastructuring projects appear increasingly tenuous'. Infrastructural development modifies and takes away nature's ability to sustain itself and the earth. The damage and disturbance of infrastructural development on flaura and fauna through activities that include the displacement of animals and emission of harmful gasses cannot be over emphasised. This is because, as the chorus in *The Old Drift* comments, the effects of global warming and other related climatic elements are so disastrous that both infrastracture and the earth may not survive long enough to enjoy the future that infrastructural development promises. We are drawn to the fact that one of the reasons the apocalyptic flood takes place is the unprecidented changes in weather patterns that have resulted from global warming. This is the point Jacob, Joseph and Naila miss as they plan their sabotage:

their mistake-their Error of Errors- was simply forgetting the weather. Tabitha had warned them all about The Change, and that season was ultra disastrous. The rainfall that came was ten times the norm and the damned wall was already failing. When the drones blocked the flue, the Zambezi pushed through, and the Kariba dam tumbled down after. (Serpell 2019: 563)

Had they listened to the warnings about the weather they would have realised that the future did not lie in trying to control infrastructure. This is because carrying on the pursuit for infrastructural development was pointless as long as its progress led towards a potential destruction of nature and the earth. This is because, as the apocalyptic flood demonstrates, the continued stress on nature through infrastructural development is bound to eventually destroy any potential future that infrastructure may promise.

If nature is the disavowed other that is constitutive of infrastructure, then this shows us the degree to which the very idea of infrastructural crisis is based on 'othering.' This is because fixation on an eschatological future point marked by infrastructural development creates an image of the future in which infrastructural development is always tied to arrival at a particular type and level of infrastructure. Anything that does not fit into the prescribed category is excluded and pushed to the periphery (Spivak 1988) as other. In *The Old Drift*, such othering is evident in how only the dam and its attendent technologies are considered as signs of development. Any other thing that resembles development is pushed aside and not considered in the same light as the dam. The idea of 'othering' is based on Said's (1978) view of how colonisation was justified through othering—that is, through the building of stereotypes that proved the colonized, in this case Africans, were different, handicapped and perpetually in need of 'saving'. One can point to this prevelant discourse in

contemporary accounts of globalization that exclude the continent from transnational economies and a world citizenry, [in which] Africa has often been portrayed as not being in sync with the pace and direction of planetary history, and its localities presented as remote spaces frozen in time, precariously governed by custom and calamity. Whereas the continent has been and still is a formidable laboratory of modernity, this gesture continues today in the presentation of the historicity of crisis as an abstract and perpetual state that casts the continent as ahistorical. (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016: 16-17)

This explains how African countries continue to be excluded or othered from public transcripts (Scott 1990) of economic progress. African countries are considered to be in a state of permanent, backward, frozen infrastructural crisis, perpetually playing catch-up (Musila 2008) with the more advanced societies. Similar exclusion and othering tendencies manifest themselves in *The Old Drift*. For example, innovations such as Jacob's miniature drone-moskitozee and Dr. Lee's HIV/AIDS vaccine are pushed to the periphery in favor of a vision of the dam as the sole horizon of progress and development. Dr Lee travels all around the world to demonstrate the authenticity and potency of his vaccine. Yet the world only accepts the vaccine when a Chinese company steals the technology and puts it

out on the market (including, ironically, the Zambian market). The lack of interest expressed in the two technologies can be related to the 'othering' resulting from prejudice and the focus on infrastructual development. This is because countries such as the fictional Zambia in the *Old Drift* can only be considered modern in the company of infrastructural development—otherwise, they are excluded from developed status. The ease with which progressive technologies such as drones and vaccine can be excluded and othered by prejudicial insistence on infrastructure breaks down the modern and unyielding fixation on infrastructural development as an aspired future.

Conclusion

I have argued that the apocalyptic flood in Serpell's *The Old Drift* demonstrates that the future can never be grounded in any eschatological destination marked by infrastructural development. This is because, on the one hand, such a view promotes the idea of abstract destinations, in which countries that meet a set level of infrastructural development are considered modern. On the other hand, those that do not fit into this category are said to have arrived at a permanent static destination and are eternally caught up in a moment of failure. I argued against both views by suggesting that the idea of desinations is flawed. The apocalyptic flood in *The Old Drift* reimagines the infrastructural status of the dam as something that is not arrival but part of a chain of junctures that usher us into another world order when the dam is wiped away. The idea of crisis is reconfigured from a static entity to an entity that is eternally on the move. And as time changes, context and space also change. We observe the varying time and space relations in the way the dam signals arrival at a future developmental moment when it is first built. Yet when Beads technology emerges in the 21st century as the latest advancement related to the dam it is under a different context from the initial completion of the dam. It is for this reason that I suggested that Derrida's idea of deferral best explains different temporal moments—such as the initial completion of the dam and later the beads technology—as temporal junctures. The temporal junctures facilitate eternal deferral and suspension of the expected future, while the future remains an abstract aspiration. In reality, the present (and its enunciation as the future) is in a sense atemporal because it often eludes linear time by manifesting more than one temporal moment. We witnessed how the Beads technology is viewed as an arrival of development, but Naila (one of the trio that sabotages the dam) informs us that the past seems more exemplary of the aspired future by comparison. I have demonstrated that what we witness in the chronotopical differences, a mixture of temporal moments, means that the future often arrives too early to be fully enunciated. This is what one observes when the trio's sabotage plan is accidently launched prematurely. Therefore, I propose that the lifetime of infrastructure must be considered as a series of fleeting moments that pass by too fast to be grounded as an expected future.

Furthermore, I have argued that the literal and metaphorical removal of the dam as a symbol of development exposes gaps in the discourse on the future insofar as it is scripted as infrastructural development. This is because while our eyes are focused on the pursuit of a future developmental moment marked by infrastructure, other things and places lie concealed in the shadows. My thoughts have been anchored by Said's (1978)

ideas of orientalism and 'othering,' whereby those countries or situations that fit the category of infrastructural development are included while those that do not are excluded and othered. When the apocalyptic flood momentarily shifts attention from the dam as a symbol of development, one realises that the dam was not the future but only a metaphor playing the performative role dictated by the discoures of African modernity. It is from this perspective that I discussed how changing narratives of power demonstrate that discoures have the ability to determine what role infrastructure will play in any situation. As the custodian of authority in *The Old Drift*, the government disseminates the public narrative that Beads technology signifies development, even while underneath the country is marred by poverty and corruption. Anything other than infrastructural development, such as Jacob's miniature drone technology or Doctore Lee's HIV/AIDS are excluded, othered and ignored because they do not signify the abstract signified of development – infrastracture. This means that as long as development is slated as the yardstick of future development, countries that have other signifiers of progress will not be considered modern without infrastructural development. I have further discussed how ignoring other voices while our focus is on the eschatological moment of development may have disastrous consequences, such as what we observe when the people in *The Old Drift*— including the trio—fail to notice how nature is being detoriated. It is for the reasons above that I question the discourse on modernity and African futures, insofar as they are dependent on development. This is because the future point that infrastructure promises is belied by the fact that its pursuit is at the expense of other things, ignorance of which can in some cases be precarious to human life and the future itself.

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