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Beyond Breakdown: Enacting Infrastructural Life with Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight*

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Alternation between mundane invisibility and spectacular foregrounding is a critical touchstone of infrastructural aesthetics. Infrastructure failures, which often mediate between these states, therefore attract disproportionate attention despite focusing scholarly enquiry on things that no longer function as infrastructure. This article seeks to escape this impasse through analysing cultural artefacts for evidence of processes which are inconspicuous but nevertheless constitute the *happenings* of infrastructure. Through close readings of *Under the Gaslight* (1867), a sensation drama which interweaves melodramatic narratives with infrastructural spaces and temporalities, we introduce three techniques for navigating the representational elusiveness of infrastructural processes and relations. We suggest that following fictional characters' engagements with infrastructures can disclose the experiential textures of mundane infrastructural functioning; that engaging with fiction across historical distance can induce states of alienation which defamiliarise infrastructural processes and render them spectacular; and that examining the infrastructural promises embedded in melodrama can foreground infrastructure's temporalities. **Key Words: aesthetics, infrastructure, melodrama, narrative, spectacle.**

INTRODUCTION

"We may not all know what infrastructure is when we see it, but we do all know what infrastructure is when we see it blow up on screen" – so say Rubenstein, Robbins, and Beal (2015, 576) in their much-discussed introduction to infrastructural aesthetics. Alternation between mundane invisibility and spectacular foregrounding is often a critical touchstone for a burgeoning "infrastructural humanities" which engages in "the study of imaginings of infrastructure across a range of media" (Jaffe and Evans 2022, 19). Across images, texts, and film, representations of large-scale material infrastructures are commonplace. Cutting-edge structures are often displayed as emblems of cosmopolitan modernity, while decaying roads, pipelines and power cables are invoked to express socio-economic dysfunction (Larkin 2013).

However, infrastructural humanities scholarship is often informed by a concern that such representations capture only isolated infrastructural *components*, not infrastructure *as such*. Infrastructures may be composed in large measure of immobile materials, but their function is arguably to facilitate and channel the movement of other bodies – be they people, products or texts – creating new relations not only of connectedness and isolation but of distance and proximity, speed and slowness, motion and rest. These relations might be characterised within the Spinozist conceptual vocabulary increasingly employed by infrastructural humanities scholars as

affording those mobilised through them new (if unevenly developed) capacities not only to travel and act, but to be impressed, shocked, concerned or moved by those who they encounter in the process. That is, to affect and be affected (Bosworth 2023). "Affective infrastructures" are therefore increasingly positioned as key sites in which shared sensory experiences are translated into collective concerns, sympathies and solidarities, that are then reconstituted in ways which reflect, but sometimes overflow, prevailing political rationalities (Hetherington and Jalbert 2023). Such accounts suggest not only that infrastructures are "things and also the relation between things," (Larkin 2013, 329) but that their peculiarly relational character enables them to induce new capabilities and sensitivities in other bodies and thus to exercise the aesthetic role of "producing sensory experience and through that experience constituting political life" (Larkin 2018, 188).

However, the processes of mobility, encounter and exchange that infrastructures occasion – along with the experiences and collective resonances that they engender – are arguably difficult to depict or apprehend, for affect rendered in representation becomes something altogether other, and infrastructures which operate as expected quickly become unremarkable. The representational paradox of infrastructure is perhaps, therefore, that although it is inescapably something which happens, its happening is so uneventful as to efface itself (Hetherington and Jalbert 2023). Indeed, it is an infrastructural humanities cliché that infrastructure remains invisible until it ceases to function *as* infrastructure (Bowker *et al.* 2019, Star and Ruhleder 1996). Yet this condition of invisibility is often considered politically troubling because it threatens to "occult" relations and processes which configure shared modes of sensing and feeling – and which participate in convening collectives from national publics to protest movements – through rendering them inaccessible to scrutiny, reflexive examination or purposive refashioning. Seen thus, the infrastructural humanities' project of exploring how infrastructures are imagined and represented (Jaffe and Evans 2022) can be understood as an urgent enquiry into the conditions under which processes of political ordering and transformation efface or disclose themselves. Seeking purchase upon these dynamics of (im)perceptibility, humanities scholars and geographers alike are often drawn to moments of infrastructure failure or of spectacular destruction because such failures can draw attention to hitherto-overlooked sites and processes through disrupting the mundane conditions of life. In so doing, they promise to expose the obscure apparatuses through which political rationalities are translated first into material form and thence into collective structures of feeling (Larkin 2018).

However, Seberger and Bowker (2021) suggest that making infrastructural breakdown the centrepiece of analysis creates its own representational and analytical impasse. They argue that this strategy focuses attention on situations and experiences defined by people's inability to access or use the "objects" furnished by functioning infrastructures – be this the disgust and indignation induced by the disruption of clean water supplies and sanitation systems (Anand 2015; Hetherington and Jalbert 2023) or the impotent immobility engendered by traffic jams and road closures (Larkin 2018). In this way, an infrastructural aesthetics mediated by breakdown implicitly characterises infrastructural functioning as being merely the opposite of the surprises, frustrations and discomforts engendered by infrastructural disconnection. In precipitating this curiously oblique approach to characterising operational infrastructures, they suggest, a preoccupation with breakdowns can flatten scholarly imaginaries of infrastructural processes and relations into a homogenised experience of predictability, frictionlessness and accessibility. It can also reduce the subjectivities, expectations and ways of living which they afford to particular

ways of encountering and using the "things" which episodes of infrastructural breakdown render jarringly unavailable.

The inscrutability of functioning infrastructures within an aesthetics of breakdown constrains the potential of the infrastructural humanities because it leaves them able to engage only a narrow range of representations and imaginaries of infrastructure. It thus limits the capacities to imagine and experiment with alternative ways of fabricating and relating to infrastructural systems – and thus to intervene in the constitution of shared experiences and dispositions which might occasion political reordering (Bosworth 2023) – which they are sometimes argued to contribute to critical geographical analysis (Jaffe and Evans 2022). These dissatisfactions with the aesthetics and analytics of breakdown brought us into dialogue as four scholars, working across geography and the humanities, with intersecting interests in infrastructural politics and aesthetics.

Seberger and Bowker (2021) seek to escape the limitations of what they call "objectival" analysis (the tendency in infrastructure studies to posit humans as objects) by attending to incidents of "infrastructural hyperfunctionality" in which the quotidian operations of functioning infrastructures produce unsettling encounters such as the appearance of personalised advertisements for unexpected and unwanted products which prompt the recipient to reconsider their identity and worldview. Such situations, they argue, induce a state of alienation – a disorientating dissonance between the possibilities to act or be affected which an infrastructure is habitually expected to afford and the surprising affects or encounters which it actually furnishes – which can induce heightened attentiveness to and reappraisal of (hyper-)functional infrastructures. In this paper we are inspired by Seberger and Bowker's critique of objectival infrastructural analysis to attempt to harness such perception-heightening states of alienation as a means of sharpening our engagement with functioning infrastructures. However, we depart from their methodological prescriptions by seeking to accomplish this through experimentation with the analysis and interpretation of narrative drama. Typically focused not on infrastructures themselves but on subjects who inhabit the places, cultures and social formations which their functioning undergirds, imaginative fictions often foreground precisely those broader infrastructure-enabled experiences and relationships which can evade objectival accounts. Approaching fictional stories (for example) as lively actors in the circulation of infrastructural meanings and experiences can thus assist scholars in better understanding the happenings of infrastructure – its human-level processes and effects, spectacular or otherwise. For they offer (sometimes despite themselves) fresh means of approaching and apprehending the mobilities, qualities of place and relation, and ways of life constituted through the operation of infrastructural systems.

In this article we develop our methodological approach through engagement with Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867). This play is an example of Sensation drama, a genre of popular theatre derived from melodrama and known for its pioneering use of stage technology to create exciting climactic effects. Combining violence, crime, mystery, unconventional gender roles and representations of emotional extremes, Sensation dramas frequently thrilled audiences by staging realistic representations of transport technologies (Hofer-Robinson and Palmer 2019). Today, *Under the Gaslight* is remembered chiefly for having introduced the climactic set-piece of an innocent victim bound to railway tracks and rescued in the nick of time. Although this effect, created by concealed stagehands, was not always successfully realised on stage, the device quickly took on a transnational life of its own. Alongside unauthorised productions and adaptations of the play for British audiences, Dion Boucicault soon relocated the action from New York to London when he reimagined the scene for his play *After Dark* (1868). Subsequently,

this set piece featured prominently in films including *The Bad Man* (1907), *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* (1913) and *The Fatal Ring* (1917).

Set in New York City and New Jersey in the aftermath of the American Civil War, *Under the Gaslight* explores the entanglement of New York's high society with the city's impoverished underclass of homeless street-sellers, jobbing messengers, and criminals. Early in the play, eligible gentleman Ray Trafford breaks off his engagement to heiress Laura Courtland upon learning that she was originally a child pickpocket before being adopted into a wealthy family at the age of six. Although Ray quickly regrets his decision, his actions alert New York society to Laura's secret, ranks close, and Laura is ostracised. Two villains, Byke and Judas, plan to make money by abducting and ransoming Laura. Thus begins an extended chase through the city's infrastructural underbelly as Laura attempts to escape her pursuers by river and rail. In Laura's absence, Ray has become engaged to her coquettish sister, Pearl. But at the play's end it emerges that Laura and Pearl were swapped in their cradles, making Laura the true heiress and Pearl the interloper. Ray and Laura reunite, Byke is banished, and Judas dies in a freakish horse-riding accident.

Under the Gaslight's narrative is permeated by entanglements between urban infrastructures, social relations and cultural preoccupations which are specific to Reconstruction-era New York City. We suggest that the play's conspicuous situatedness within this particular historical moment and ordering of urban space make it an especially instructive case through which to explore how creative works interweave infrastructure's materiality with its metaphoricity and to experiment with their affordances for apprehending the affects and interactions generated by infrastructural functioning. Engaging with these characteristics of *Under the Gaslight* enables us to expand upon existing scholarly conversations within the infrastructural humanities in three ways which, we suggest, can be mobilised to assist geohumanities researchers in navigating the representational elusiveness of infrastructural processes and relations.

First, we ground our analysis in Jaffe and Evans (2022) observation that the visibility of human characters in literary texts is often linked to that of the infrastructures which they use and sometimes inhabit. Mobilising this insight, these authors develop a method of reading literary texts which excavates the stories of characters from marginalised (and frequently invisible) social groups through close examination of the ways in which fictional narratives represent the infrastructures through which they move and around which they gather. Taking the stormwater drainage channels (or "gullies") of Kingston, Jamaica, as their "infrastructural lens," they follow the passageways carved by the gullies through Hazel Campbell's short story *The Buggu Yaggas*. They thus render visible both the corporeal mobilities and the social positioning of subaltern characters who traverse and dwell within these conduits, surfacing the often-suppressed stories of displaced youths and LGBTQ+ Jamaicans.

Although this paper similarly attempts to read *Under the Gaslight* through an "infrastructural lens," we approach the relationship which this text weaves between infrastructures and characters from the opposite direction. Rather than harnessing the play's representation of a prominent *infrastructure* to excavate the stories of socially "invisible" *characters*, we follow human characters through a text which renders their relationships and struggles spectacular in the hope that tracing their stories will disclose the functioning of the easily-overlooked infrastructures which underlie their movements and activities. We therefore engage with a melodramatic text which relies on an audience's identificatory emotional engagement with its (largely privileged) protagonists to construct meaning. Melodramatic fiction's emphasis on human struggles, relationships

and emotions means that infrastructure often comes to matter within it less through evocations of its physical "hardware" than through its capacity to afford, impede or disrupt the concerns and relationships around which a plot revolves (Singer 2001, 185). We therefore follow *Under the Gaslight*'s characters through the play's plot to explore how infrastructural systems, from railways to gaslight, become drawn into their plans, preoccupations and emotional arcs. Through thus reversing Jaffe and Evans (2022) infrastructural lens, we aim to develop interpretive techniques for drawing scholarly attention away from the *objects* of infrastructure and towards its social and emotional currency. In pursuing this goal we leverage two forms of entanglement between infrastructure and aesthetics which characterise the time and place in which *Under the Gaslight* originated.

Under the Gaslight's mid-nineteenth century origins make it an apt text through which to further develop strands of geohumanities scholarship which characterise infrastructures themselves as relying upon and being constituted through storytelling in the form of promises. While Anand, Gupta, and Appel (2018) observe that the building of infrastructure is often inextricable from narratives of future prosperity, opportunity and mobility (which they describe as the "promise" of infrastructure), nineteenth century "public works" projects were perhaps especially imbued with these cosmopolitan expectations. As Kaika and Swyngedouw (2000, 130) observe, during this period new infrastructural networks were seen as embodying the promise that technological development would create a more emancipated, civil and equal society which underwrote prevailing ideologies of progress and modernisation. In consequence, during the period of *Under the Gaslight's* writing: "networks and their nodal infrastructures were not just carrying water, electricity etc. into the city, but also embodied the promise and the dream of a good society." Such promises were particularly characteristic of the American Reconstruction period during which the play is set, during which new communications networks from railroad tracks to telegraph wires emerged from the aftermath of conflict and alongside the dismantling of slavery in the Southern States (White 2017, 477–517). This context situates the work's engagements with infrastructure within pervasive (if exclusionary and unequally distributed) promises of opportunity, building and formation whose unusual intensity perhaps assists scholars in articulating how infrastructures themselves function in registers which are as much textual as material and in disclosing their role as both storied and storying things. In so doing, it offers an alternative both to the common emphasis on breakdown as an entry point for understanding narrative representations of infrastructure and to more recent thematisations/fetishisations of infrastructural ruination as "a 'counter-dream' to the dominant progressive narrative of industrial modernity" (Dobraszczyk 2017 4), which has itself been criticised for becoming calcified and unproductive.

Finally, this characterisation of nineteenth century infrastructures as materialized promises is doubly significant because it is a key reason why the 1860s systems that Daly stages in *Under the Gaslight* were typically neither conceptualized nor materialized as being "infra" or operating beneath the surface of social activity or development. Not only did these networks frequently attract public scrutiny as objects of political controversy but their visible trappings were often displayed prominently as emblems of urban pride and modernity. As Kaika and Swyngedouw (2000, 129) have it: "The urban became saturated with pipelines, cables, tubes and ducts of various sizes and colours; things that celebrated the mythic images of early modernity (…) and were marvelled at in themselves." As sewers were dug, railroads laid, roads paved and telegraph wires strung, Reconstruction-era New York City came to exemplify this aesthetic of the "technological sublime," in which the contemplation and depiction of new public works

expressed "the urbanization of nature and the naturalization of the urban" (Gandy 2002, 34). *Under the Gaslight* thus dramatises a place – and an ordering of perception and sensation – which crystallises the intense expansion and aestheticization of urban civil engineering which preceded the term "infrastructure" entering anglophone discourse.

As a Sensation drama which was set (and initially staged) in this hub of the infrastructural sublime, *Under the Gaslight* required both real-world and generic sites and structures to be represented faithfully enough to be recognizable and/or meaningful to audiences who might personally have visited them in order for performances to appear "natural" or indeed plausible. However, contemporary readers who encounter the play from across a significant historical divide may sometimes find its depiction of this infrastructural sublime distinctly *un*natural or uncanny in its very faithfulness – lingering as it does over structures long-since demolished, disused technologies and long-abandoned practices. In this paper we argue that such discomfort can be mobilized to induce the states of alienation which Seberger and Bowker (2021) argue can bring functioning infrastructures to notice and facilitate reflection upon them. In so doing, we draw inspiration from geohumanities literatures which attend to speculative fictions which provocatively depict currently-functional infrastructures as future ruins in order to render alternative ways of using and inhabiting infrastructure conceivable (Randle 2022; Carter and Acker 2020). However, we extend this strategy of temporal alienation by engaging with a fiction which depicts historical infrastructures.

The remainder of this paper is organised in four sections, each of which was written individually by one of the authors. Three engage in depth with a single scene from *Under the Gaslight*, while the fourth reviews the play as a whole through its eponymous infrastructure, gaslight. The first section examines the circulation of a letter containing the secret of Laura's true identity, whose inadvertent release at the end of Act I triggers her descent into New York's infrastructural underbelly. Following processes of interpersonal communication among the play's characters, it argues that the scene has something of a gap where narrative convention might normally have information circulate more independently across different print and media networks. Meanwhile, the second explores *Under the Gaslight*'s use of set design and visual effects to replicate Reconstruction-era New York's infrastructural spaces and edifices, focusing on scenes from Act 3 set on and within the city's waterfront wharves. Tracing the detailed stage effects used to reproduce these monumental but obscure spaces in a form recognisable to the city's denizens, this section highlights how the passage of historical time renders the exhaustive duplication of spaces once considered mundane (or hidden away as unsightly) arresting and thought-provoking.

The third section analyses the climactic sensation scene which concludes Act 3 of *Under the Gaslight,* arguing that its scripting and stagecraft makes railroad infrastructure present less through replicating the physical paraphernalia of locomotive transport than by mimicking the rhythms of railroad time. It argues that Byke's murder plot is predicated upon a distinctive form of predictable, calculable and regular time associated closely with the railroad's infrastructural promise. The fourth section brings together elements of all three approaches in a summative discussion of gaslight's role in the play. Attending to gaslight's expressive and metaphorical resonance, and to its material and social life in Reconstruction-era urban infrastructure, this piece demonstrates how engagement with dramatic fiction can build an integrative grasp of infrastructural pasts, presents and futures. Finally, a short conclusion reflects on how our exploration of the affordances of dramatic fiction assist geohumanities scholars in engaging with a broader range of infrastructural imaginaries and formulating alternative infrastructural aesthetics.

"TELL IT EVERYWHERE"

The setting is Delmonico's, an evening club where a good portion of *Under the Gaslight*'s characters (those in Society) meet in Act I. By this point, Ray has learned from Pearl that his fiancé, Laura, had an ignoble past as a young pickpocket before being charitably adopted by Pearl's mother. Ray has fretted over this discovery, initially telling himself that it disqualifies Laura from marrying him, before revising his judgement and deciding to marry Laura and live in Europe. However, Ray has failed to destroy a letter which he wrote to Laura during his first, instinctive flurry of shame and has now accidentally brought it with him on his evening out. Inevitably, the letter is mislaid and read, its contents gleefully disseminated by Mrs. Van Dam (a mean-spirited acquaintance and rumourmonger). The scene warrants attention in the context of an infrastructural reading of *Under the Gaslight* less because of what it displays or discusses than because of what is absent from it.

Before addressing such detail, it is helpful to consider the actual and potential status of letters in narratives – fictional and otherwise. Maria Tamboukou (2011, 628) notes that the very act of writing a letter begins to transform the correspondents into characters within an emerging and unresolved plot. Not only is such a plot one in which the letter writer holds considerable power, but it is also one in which momentary thoughts and emotions are snatched from the flow of time and experience and elevated to the function of defining (or at least revealing) characteristics. Ray and Laura are of course narrative characters before the letter is written. However, they are further (and more restrictively) *characterised* by the letter – he as a credulous victim, she as an imposter. Moreover, this dual characterisation can be circulated with ease, and through reproduction can achieve a vividness and self-sufficiency which outstrips and overpowers the couple's (and especially Laura's) present-tense agency. In his fascinating study of gossip networks and female communication in films and literature, Ned Schantz (2008, 6) notes how in many narratives, from Jane Austen to *Mean Girls* (2004), "the control of the female subject lies in restricting – or flooding – the channels of information." From the moment Mrs. Van Dam determines to release *this* version of Laura into society, and triumphantly tells Ray that she has done so, the process becomes irreversible. A terrible fate for Ray and Laura, but a very compelling narrative mechanism with which to conclude *Under the Gaslight*'s first Act.

Because the play's narrative materialises on the stage, this scene not only *describes* the passing on of information, but must also find a means of physically representing and enabling communication. It is in this sense that a twentieth- or twenty-first century audience of *Under the Gaslight* might wonder about infrastructure, or about its absence. Mrs. Van Dam does not find the letter herself but is shown it by Miss Earlie and another a young lady, who behave here like her underlings. (The character list describes Mrs. Van Dam as "one of the voices of Society," and Miss Earlie as "one of the echoes of the voice" [A. Daly 1867, 171].) "Go, girls, tell it everywhere" instructs Mrs. Van Dam, and the play's stage directions state that the young ladies "*distribute themselves about the groups*" (A. Daly 1867, 191). This is a dramatic set piece in which the spreading of information should, in terms of narrative logic, take on a life of its own - but the staged drama does not quite achieve the effect of automation we, as twenty-first century readers and audiences, have become accustomed to. Here we find an opportunity to experience the (instructive) infrastructural alienation which results from historical distance – of the kind discussed by Seberger and Bowker (2021).

One could argue that the face-to-face gossiping of Mrs. Van Dam is as efficient as it needs to be in reaching its desired audience, and that the close-knit social cliques gathering at Delmonico's function as their own kind of social infrastructure. In this vein, Friedrich Kittler (2013, 139) is right to insist on the historical continuity from non-mechanised forms of connection to more recent and recognisable infrastructural systems:

> No matter whether […] networks convey information or energy—that is, whether they are called "telephone," "radio," and "television," or "water supply," "electricity," and "highway" – they all are information (if only because every modern stream of energy needs a parallel control network). However, even before recorded time, when energy still needed physical carriers like Sinbad and information required messengers like the runner from Marathon, these networks did not *not* exist. They simply had not been built yet – or "implemented," as one says in technical jargon. The meager mule trail leading through the wild was replaced by train tracks and highways, which in turn were replaced by copper wires or fiber optic cables (which are no less ephemeral).

But there is nevertheless a significant and meaningful difference, when it comes to narrative, between information travelling manually within a delimited story space, and it being reproduced and circulated far beyond the drama's discernible horizons. In many Classical Hollywood films (roughly between 1930 and 1960) a short montage sequence of newspaper headlines being printed became a shorthand for this second kind of effect. These moments announced that a certain version of events (an escaped outlaw, a jury's verdict, etc.) was now concretised, and was travelling far and wide beyond the sphere of the characters. *Under the Gaslight*, although written and set in a time and place when such media networks existed, offers no equivalent device and its characters' urge to spread information is not supported by the technological capacities for dissemination.

This is not a shortcoming in the play, but an insight into the unstable dynamics between narrative, infrastructure and representation. Star and Ruhleder (1996) argue that infrastructure is always constituted in relation to the conventions of a community. In the case of fictional narratives, we must consider both the communities *in* the story, those creatively presenting it, and those watching or reading it. On all counts, this short sequence in *Under the Gaslight* could be considered revealing in its incongruity. In a play whose world is in many ways underpinned by a familiarly modern infrastructure (as discussed throughout this article), Mrs Van Dam's relaying of the letter's contents stands out as a gesture conspicuously lacking the material and procedural underpinnings of conventionalized systems.

"A PIER PROJECTING INTO THE RIVER"

Famous for its sensation scene, in which the timetabled punctuality of railway travel affords both a suspenseful delay and the split-second timing of a lastminute rescue, *Under the Gaslight* has been interpreted as a form of spectacular theatre which "aligns the audience with industrial time," because its effectiveness relies on "a new kind of temporal consciousness" (N. Daly 2007, 13). As the following section discusses, in this play the railway's very predictability signifies an oncoming urban modernity that is simultaneously banal, exciting, and threatening. In this sense, the play's sensation scene is a forerunner to later action films which convert large, but imaginatively "invisible," material forms through spectacular destruction or weaponisation (Rubenstein,

Robbins, and Beal 2015, 576). However, *Under the Gaslight* deploys infrastructure for various effects and species of entertainment, beyond its facility to engender suspense and fear, and which beat to other rhythms than railway time.

Act III scene iii is set at the "*Foot of Pier 30, North River*" (A. Daly 1867, 222). Aiding the narrative action, the dockland setting facilitates the characters' coming and going, and consequently their further entanglement. Opening when Byke "*enters sculling a boat*," he and Judas discuss their plan to blackmail Ray and Pearl (A. Daly 1867, 222). However, the pair retire to avoid being overheard when they hear "the market boys coming down for a swim" (A. Daly 1867, 223). Enter Snorkey, the comic characters Bermudas and Peanuts, and a chorus of dock boys. Changing the scene's tone from one of foreboding to entertaining revelry, the boys perform a non-diegetic set piece featuring music and dance, "*given according to capacity and talent*" (A. Daly 1867, 224). This mixed bill of fare, typical of nineteenth-century popular theatre, offers the audience relief from the buildup of dramatic tension, as stage acrobatics give way to an amusing exchange between the boys and a policeman, whose futile attempts to control their merriment are met with teasing and song. In another abrupt reversal, Ray's anxious appearance quickly refocuses attention on Laura's abduction by the villains, and on his and Snorkey's efforts to find her. The scene ends with the first of the play's climactic rescues: Laura is thrown from the pier and Ray dives into the water to save her.

The dockland setting adds to the play's concern with how infrastructure mediates the advance and experience of industrial modernity. Stage directions suggest that the set design featured built-out scenery which enabled the action to unfold on multiple levels (above and below both the pier and the water), along with other visual effects: a sea cloth to imitate the movement of water, boats being rowed on and off stage, and dramatic plunges into the waves. Dependent on the stage technologies of nineteenth-century theatre for its effectiveness, in this sense, as well as in its evocation of steam-driven trade and travel, industrial modernity is part of this scene's spectacular appeal, just as it is in the railway rescue.

The pier is one of those specific local settings, "familiar to explorers of Old New York," that the set design recreated as a further entertainment for contemporary playgoers (J. F. Daly 1917, 239). Representation of well-known urban scenes was not uncommon in Victorian spectacular theatre (Booth 1981, 3–4), and *Under the Gaslight* was not unique in capitalizing on the visual gratifications offered by realisation of colossal infrastructure (Hofer-Robinson 2018, 59). Unlike the railway scene, which creates suspense and excitement because of what the train promises to do, even before it appears on stage, the pier is available for contemplation throughout the scene. It is a stand-alone visual spectacle as well as a story-telling mechanism, offering both the thrill of possible recognition and an attention-grabbing backdrop. Playgoers are positioned as tourists, interested in this working urban infrastructure for its own sake, making performances an extension of the practices of display and contemplation which characterised Kaika and Swyngedouw (2000) technological sublime aesthetic rather than simple representations of its focal objects.

Nevertheless, the pier, and the action that it affords within the play, is simultaneously anterior to the urban modernity that the scene purports to represent. Despite the specificity of this named location, the riverscape is presented as a liminal space, which enables the development of both ludic interludes and an uneasy sense of precarity. Claimed by Bermudas as "just the place for a quiet roost" (A. Daly 1867, 219), the pier is imaginatively, if bathetically, transformed from industrial infrastructure into a "hotel" (A. Daly 1867, 223). On the one hand, calling the pier by another name approaches "infrastructure as living systems," to which spatial practices are as

important as material forms (Shove 2016, 243). On the other, its renaming means that the pier is envisioned not as a working facet of the modern city but as a curiously peripheral space open to cooption by people whom "Uncle Sam has forgotten" – something that is emphasised by the urban picturesque aesthetic suggested by the stage directions (A. Daly 1867, 178). The scene unfolds by "*starlight*" and opens with "*Music of distant serenade*," suggesting that the setting appeared out-of-time, rather than cutting-edge (A. Daly 1867, 222).

The dialogue also emphasises the unnavigability of New York's vast system of piers, indicating that – rather than regulating time and place – this infrastructure creates confusion and possibilities for misdirection: "Which Boston Pier is it, Cap'n? there are three on this river" (A. Daly 1867, 224). Frustrating Ray's attempts to trace Byke and Laura, the pier system facilitates the movement of characters between known and unknown, specifically realised and unsettlingly vague city spaces. Pier infrastructure thus creates suspense precisely because it is not predictably routinised or regulatable. Instead, it evokes heterosynchronic temporalities – the modern beside the anti-modern – and troublingly inscrutable and dangerous spaces beyond the play's several parlor settings.

Oliver Coutard and Jonathan Rutherford argue that infrastructure is "a relational process before it is a 'result'" (2016, 8). As characters coalesce at the pier in this scene, we might suppose that the play represents infrastructure similarly, as a complexly networked interplay between social practices and material structures. Redolent, moreover, of the networked movement of people and goods across oceans, the pier evokes processes and connections beyond those represented on stage. However, the confusion and obscurity generated by the pier system points to the fact that emphasising infrastructure's "relational" qualities has limited utility for understanding how it is conceived in this play. Certainly, the plots featuring romantic and comic characters are interwoven via their encounters at the pier. But, as a liminal space where non-diegetic entertainments are not out of place, the pier simultaneously disrupts the forward momentum of the dramatic action, as the dock boys' antics derail and stall its progress. We are, consequently, led to question the extent to which the characters and the action relate to each other, just as the pier system's unnavigability reveals the "limits of human power to govern, regulate and control obdurate material infrastructures that structure the city" (Anand 2015, 310). We see instead an uneasy shifting between connection and disconnection which creates narrative uncertainty and troubles the regular, onward march of railway time. If infrastructure mediates the advance and experience of industrial modernity, then, its effects are not only represented as dramatically uneven, but also as highly specific.

"DEAD ON (RAILROAD) TIME"

A body tied to the rails. A race to undo the victim's bonds. The roar of a passing locomotive, followed quickly by the capture of the would-be murderer. This now-familiar sequence of events constitutes the substance of *Under the Gaslight*'s celebrated sensation scene. By the climax of Act 3, Laura has escaped her pursuers' attempts to capture her at the docks and – known only to Ray and Pearl (who have become engaged) – has concealed herself at the Courtlands' property in Long Branch, New Jersey. Laura soon resolves to return to New York City to avoid disturbing their courtship and finds herself locked overnight inside the local railroad station while awaiting the morning train. Meanwhile Snorkey confronts Byke (who has followed Pearl to Long Branch

intending to blackmail her) outside the seemingly deserted station. Byke quickly subdues Snorkey before tying him to the tracks in the expectation that he will be crushed by an approaching train. Throughout the ensuing scene Laura struggles to escape the station and rescue Snorkey – finally freeing him moments before the train arrives.

Variations upon this scenario recur in works spanning a century and a half of popular culture. Yet this well-worn scene deserves analytical attention because, as it unfolds, the routine operation of a railroad line ceases to form an unremarked backdrop to dramas of moral judgement and interpersonal conflict and assumes centre stage as the engine of a narrative's dramatic climax. It thus exemplifies one set of techniques for apprehending infrastructure without invoking the aesthetics of breakdown. This achievement is remarkable considering the difficulties posed by representing a railroad convincingly onstage at the time of *Under the Gaslight*'s writing. For most of the scene, the railroad's physical presence consists largely of the tracks to which Snorkey is tied, while the train appears on stage only briefly. Moreover, the visual effects used in the performance could be distinctly unconvincing (N. Daly 1998). Notably, during the play's first performance "the 'railroad train' parted in the middle and disclosed the flying legs of the human motor who was propelling the first half of the express," provoking laughter from the audience (J. F. Daly 1917, 75–6). How might a handful of basic props and scripting instructions bearing little physical or topological resemblance to a railroad, nevertheless have made railroad infrastructure present in a fashion which exhibits such cultural durability?

Perhaps the answer lies partly in Byke's sinister pronouncement, upon capturing Snorkey, that in less than ten minutes he will be dead. This promise encapsulates much of the novelty of nineteenth-century railroads, whose expansion across (and beyond) North America was often signalled as much by new technologies and practices of timekeeping and expectations about the future as by the appearance of rails, platforms and locomotives (N. Daly 1998). As pre-existing local time zones defined by the timing of sunrise, sunset and noon in each town gave way to "standard railroad time," railroads and railroaders became bywords for punctuality and predictability. Railroad timetables thus came to exemplify a promise that customers could afford to make precisely-timed plans both for long-distance journeys and for the circulation of goods, safe in the knowledge that the transport they required to fulfil time-bound promises of their own would be available (May and Thrift 2001; Cronon 1991).

These same promises of regularity and predictability pervade Byke's murder plot, which depends upon his ability to calculate confidently that tonnes of speeding metal will carve through Snorkey before he can be rescued. Byke's prediction of Snorkey's imminent demise thus implicitly invokes the entire unremarked apparatus of railroad time, embedding into the scene's dramatic architecture not the tangible trappings of railroad infrastructure but the *rhythms and expectations* which coalesce around it. It simultaneously transforms the train's impending arrival from a mundane expectation into a dramatic threat, transmuting routine infrastructural operations into an object of dread. The railway rescue scene thus mobilises the jarring realisation that the fastidious choreography of railroad timetables will deliver not mundane mobility but violent death to transform the elapsing of railroad time's meticulously measured minutes into the stuff of suspenseful drama.

Ironically, Byke's very confidence that the railroad will execute his plot for him facilitates Snorkey's escape. Assured of the train's imminent arrival, he departs the scene, enabling Laura to free Snorkey. Yet the fixed and foreseeable future which Byke has forged using the railroad's timekeeping apparatus looms large over the scene and dictates its tempo as signs of the train's

approach punctuate Laura's efforts and time ticks remorselessly away. Subtle at first – a far-off steam whistle – these portents grow increasingly urgent as the scene progresses. As Laura cuts through the station door, the rails vibrate. The locomotive's lamps spotlight her emergence from the station. As the precise calculations of position, proximity and mobility encapsulated within Byke's chilling promise fuse with the affects of urgency and anxiety evoked through Laura's race to retrieve Snorkey from the tracks, the temporal relations which emerge through a railroad's operations become palpably present even while the train itself remains offstage. Perhaps contemporary audiences had this temporal texturing in mind when they judged *Under the Gaslight*'s sensation scene a success despite well-documented technical mishaps on the grounds that "the effect of the scene depended […] upon the suspense and emotion created by the whole situation" (J. F. Daly 1917, 75-6).

Such assessments suggest that *Under the Gaslight*'s sensation scene makes a railroad infrastructure present and perceptible less through representation or physical resemblance than through rhythms of theatrical performance which evoke *railroad time*. In so doing, it perhaps demonstrates one means of escape from the double-bind of representational aesthetics, in which infrastructures become perceptible only through breakdown or reduction to spectacular but static objects (Rubenstein, Robbins, and Beal 2015; Larkin 2013). For it suggests that the atmospheres and processes of infrastructural functioning may become most present and most palpably perceptible in dramatic works not when their characteristic components are faithfully reproduced but when their relations of speed and slowness, of expectation and delay, are translated through performance. This mode of presencing sidesteps visual resemblance and expresses something of the ways in which a railroad *happens* through weaving its infrastructural promise of temporal regularity and calculability into the machinations which compose both Byke's and the wider play's plot. In so doing, the instantiation of the railroad within and through this sensation scene points towards narrative fiction's potential – as an intrinsically temporal medium – to express the processual unfolding of infrastructure.

WHOSE GASLIGHT? ENTANGLED INFRASTRUCTURES IN DALY'S DRAMA

There would be little to *see* in *Under the Gaslight* without the infrastructure invoked in the title illuminating the stage. Augustin Daly foregrounds a utility that – however unevenly distributed – was even more entangled than railways with urban and suburban social experience during Reconstruction. While Steven Connor (2008, 2) argues that gas infrastructure connotes a "dichotomy between the material and the immaterial, iron and gas, inertia and evaporation," our intersecting readings of *Under the Gaslight* confront the challenge of conceptualising infrastructure within such binaries. Gaslight, like the railways, carries a volatile conceptual instability; any comforting illumination provided carries the risk of explosive force.

Daly introduces this system's effects rather than the extensive engineering that enables illumination by opening the play with a scene doubly lit from within and without: "*Parlour at the Courtlands; deep window at the back showing snowy exterior; street lamp lighted; time, night; the place elegantly furnished; chandelier*" (A. Daly 1867, 172). Although we may simply align the presence of gaslight here with progressive stability, and its subsequent absence with unenlightened stagnation, the repeated revelations concerning Laura's and Pearl's true parentage undermine this superficial reading. Things are not as they appear, and gaslight fosters a

complacency of knowledge and familiarity, rather than a deep understanding of social status and interconnection. Gaslight was increasingly imbricated with Manhattan's leisure districts throughout the nineteenth century, as the generous gaslight in the opening scene demonstrates. This matched Daly's lavish letterhead from the New York Theatre's sister venue during the 1870s which promised audiences a gas-lit welcome at street level and a well-lit interior above the entrance.

Maintaining a city of such lights demanded extensive infrastructure. Just over a mile away from the New York Theatre, the Manhattan Gas Light Company loomed over several blocks on the North Hudson River (Colton 1865). The New York Gas Light Company held similar territory to the east, meaning that the modernity of Daly's Manhattan was winged by large-scale and imposing infrastructures. Storing even a fraction of a city's gas supply required infrastructure that was spectacular in scale if not in cultural prominence, and waterfront gas works dominated the skyline. Pier 30, the setting for Act III, sc. iii was located just south of the Manhattan Gas Light Company's works. Yet Daly aligns this site – and its itinerant inhabitants – with the darkness of the Hudson River, rather than the artificially lit leisure districts, with the dark foreshore giving way to "*a view of Jersey City and the river shipping by starlight*" (A. Daly 1867, 222). On these dimmed margins, Daly presents those sleeping rough under the pier as well-adapted to darkness, with Bermudas cheerfully lauding "hot and cold saltwater baths at the very door of your bedrooms" as an amenity (A. Daly 1867, 223). The police who intrude on Snorkey, Bermudas, and Peanuts adapt less quickly than these marginal figures to escalating violence on the waterfront. Arriving on a "*patrol boat*" (A. Daly 1867, 224), the police make little difference to the ensuing struggle, while the one-armed Snorkey and "sidewalk merchant prince" Bermudas (A. Daly 1867, 170) fight more effectively. Throughout *Under the Gaslight*, privileged access to artificial light does not guarantee any advantage in agency or understanding, upending Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1860 maxim that "gaslight is found to be the best nocturnal police" (1884, 176). Indeed, natural light prevails with Daly's note at the end of Act III: "*Moonlight on during scene*" (A. Daly 1867, 226). In his fleeting use of binary terminology (on/off), Daly highlights the artifice of moonlight on stage, and the impossibility of getting out from under the gaslight even when featuring natural light sources in his drama.

Later, gas light becomes entangled with New Jersey railroad infrastructure and provides a false impression of systematic safety in the scenes preceding the play's climactic rescue on the tracks. The stage directions note "*Night. Moonlight. The switch, with a red lantern and a Signalman's coat hanging on it* L. C. *The signal lamp and post beside it*" (A. Daly 1867, 239). Appearing together, moonlight and gas lamps dim one another's potency, casting an uncertain light over Laura's decision in this scene to use the station as a makeshift hotel. Daly's characters use infrastructure disobediently and creatively, expanding our insight into "form's affordances [...] potentialities [that] lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic and social arrangements" (Levine 2015, 6–7). While we do not see gas light used to similarly adaptive effect, we do see its purpose in railway infrastructure go unfulfilled due to a lack of shared access. A Signalman refuses Snorkey's request to wave "the red signal for danger," rejecting the itinerant's anticipation of disaster in favour of the railway company's "orders" that he use the lamp for professional purposes only (A. Daly 1867, 242). A loose end of railway infrastructure, this agent then exits the stage without further involvement in the attempted murder and rescue unfolding noisily around his own station. He disappears in accordance with his role in the

system, while Byke's unsystematic use of infrastructure (tying Snorkey to the tracks) leaves the line at risk.

For all the "promise of infrastructure," then, gaslight plays a role that is at times muted or ineffective when viewed alongside the resourceful ways in which Daly and his characters make the most of naturally lit transport infrastructure (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). Such inventiveness may be undercut by the relatively conservative resolution of Daly's drama which, like many nineteenth-century fictions, concludes by asserting long-standing and hierarchical social values. Yet tracing gaslight as it (sometimes) operates within the text opens up new ways of understanding what Kittler (2013, 139) describes as "margins, points of tangency, and frayed edges" of Reconstruction infrastructure. Whatever the extant systems and technologies, those at the margins of society forgo their intended uses to find makeshift solutions to immediate needs.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of *Under the Gaslight* has demonstrated that engaging with infrastructure via fictional texts can help geohumanities researchers to navigate between the opposing poles of invisible infrastructural functioning and spectacular breakdown and to disclose more varied modes of infrastructural being and becoming. It can thus amplify and augment their capacities to imagine alternative ways of fabricating and ordering infrastructural systems, opening up novel sites and modes of experimental intervention. In this article we sought to expand geohumanities scholarship's potential for undertaking such engagements through demonstrating three analytical techniques for attuning scholarly attention to the ways in which infrastructures occur, function and intervene within fictional texts. First, we followed human characters through a melodramatic text whose affective project (audiences must be moved!) locates the making of meaning less in infrastructure's physical "hardware" than in the relationships, emotions and encounters among people which it affords or impedes. Inverting Jaffe and Evans (2022) strategy of excavating hidden human stories through following the visible infrastructures with which marginalised characters are entangled, we instead followed archetypal melodramatic characters through *Under the Gaslight*'s narrative to explore what modes of infrastructural functioning might be expressed through their activities and encounters. Tracing how the play's plot draws the quotidian functioning of unspectacular infrastructures such as gas light into such characters' exaggerated intrigues or transforms them into unexpected impediments to their ambitions, we demonstrated melodrama's capacity to render the mundane dramatic and suspenseful. Similarly, through following *Under the Gaslight*'s characters into hidden spaces within and beneath New York's wharves which afford obscure mobilities to their marginalised denizens and precipitate confoundingly irregular temporalities, we showed how this approach might unfold unexpected infrastructural forms and rhythms.

Second, building upon this technique, we drew upon existing studies of infrastructural promises (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018) to explore how the expectations about the future embedded in infrastructural systems organise *Under the Gaslight*'s plot and the machinations of its characters, and how the play makes infrastructures present through translating their organisation of *time*. This enabled us to go beyond some recent geohumanities scholarship's emphasis on using fictional texts to trace the *spatial* relations and (dis)connections enabled by infrastructure (Jaffe and Evans 2022) and illustrate how narrative fiction as a medium whose stories unfold over time

also discloses infrastructure as a thoroughly *temporal* phenomenon. Importantly, however, the temporalities conjured through this text overflow the regularised schedules and uninterrupted circulations which permeate objective accounts of infrastructural functioning (Seberger and Bowker 2021). While the railroad's meticulous timekeeping practices and promises of a predictably timetabled future (Cronon 1991) are certainly made present, and are rendered the subject of high melodrama during the play's climactic sensation scene, these familiar stereotypes of modern infrastructural time are situated alongside engagements with contrasting and often confounding temporalities. For instance, the hidden spaces below Pier 30 are presented as promising shelter and refuge to their "forgotten" inhabitants. They thus afford modes of dwelling which exist both alongside and *outside* the regularised routines of the modern metropolitan spaces which these networks connect and subtend, confounding the predictability and unilinear progression often associated with industrial time. In shifting between these divergent infrastructural promises and temporalities, texts such as *Under the Gaslight* can help geohumanities scholars to unsettle objective accounts' tendency to homogenise infrastructural functioning, demonstrating the capacity of engagement with narrative fiction to multiply our infrastructural imaginaries.

Our final analytical technique – mobilising historical distance – draws together these strategies of approaching unspectacular infrastructures through following fictional human characters and attending to the temporalities of infrastructural promises. In attending to the infrastructures woven into a nineteenth century narrative fiction, we have demonstrated how historical distance can defamiliarise infrastructural arrangements which were once considered mundane and induce states of alienation which render the unremarkable startling and captivating. Indeed, we have argued that even the *absence* of familiar communications infrastructures such as newspapers from scenes in which audiences might now expect to encounter them can draw unexpected attention to such commonplace processes as the circulation of letters. We have thus shown that infrastructural geohumanities scholarship need not achieve this critical historical distance through analysing speculative fictional accounts of future infrastructural ruination (see Randle 2022; Carter and Acker 2020). Exploring narrative fictions which encompass past infrastructures, since superseded or transformed, may also render quotidian technologies, processes and spatial orderings sufficiently unfamiliar and arresting that – like Seberger and Bowker (2021, 1721) hyper-functional infrastructures – they intrude unexpectedly upon readers' attention, disrupting "shared understanding[s] of 'how things work'" and sparking critical reflection. Such engagements with historical fictions may thereby unsettle prevailing infrastructural imaginaries and aesthetics, helping to render alternatives accessible to thought and apprehension, and equipping researchers to "ask the questions of infrastructure systems (…) to reflect upon how our powers of acting might be modified through our reflection on their composition" (Bosworth 2023, 65). Geohumanities scholars might mobilise these affordances strategically in future research to fashion experimental spaces and practices in which to explore alternative orderings of spatio-temporal mobility and encounter, affect and consciousness, which might (ultimately) contribute to the recomposition of political collectivities.

Cases such as *Under the Gaslight* require us to be alive, imaginatively and critically, to infrastructure's social and emotional currency. Engaging with this text enabled us to illustrate how creative practice can draw attention towards functioning infrastructures by entangling their operations into the dramatic relationships, plans, and emotional arcs of its subjects – subjects who navigate a world located in social space and historical time. *Under the Gaslight* is characterised throughout by spectacular contrivance. However, this does not detract from its potency or

validity as work about (or marked by) infrastructure because what this play *shows* or *tells* us directly about infrastructures might, ultimately, be less significant than the way that it makes an affecting story out of people's experiences of those systems and networks. As such, our engagement with this text both illustrates that infrastructures need not break down in order to compel our attention and challenges geohumanities scholars to mobilise narrative fiction's capacity to catalyse shifts in perceptibility and sensibility which might render alternative infrastructural orderings imaginable and thinkable. In so doing, this article attempts to contribute to an expanded and politicised engagement with infrastructural aesthetics, but it also poses new questions for scholars and practitioners. What material forms (props, sets, movements and/or gestures) might dramatize stories which are both affectively charged and infrastructurally bound sufficiently to catalyse such shifts in attention and awareness? What narrative and material apparatus might be capable of drawing hitherto unimaginable infrastructural orderings into the realm of perceptibility, thinkability and even plausibility? As an interdisciplinary team, we have sought not to answer these questions directly, but to exchange between us (and our differing sets of knowledge) some revealing observations about this text's porous boundary between a drama and its infrastructural conditions.

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