

Race/Genre as Infrastructure

A Workshop hosted by [TP 6 “Race as Infrastructure and Literary Infrastructures of Resistance”](#) of [FOR 5710 “Infrastructure: Aesthetics and Supply”](#)

Conveners: Laura Bieger, Esther Adeyemo, Natalie Erkel

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This workshop explores two world-building infrastructures: race and genre. Building on recent work on race as infrastructure (Nemser 2017, Sherman 2021, Mallipeddi 2022) and genre as infrastructure (Bieger 2024, 2025), it examines the uneven distribution of vulnerability that characterizes race as infrastructure in tandem with genre’s capacity to distribute and regulate knowledge and affect (Dimock 2007, Goyal 2019)—with the overarching goal of gaining a firmer grasp on the entanglements of these infrastructural and infrastructuring operations.

Race as infrastructure has, so far, exclusively been studied from a sociotechnological perspective. Drawing on recent work on the spatio-material and biopolitical dimension of race (Omi/Wienand 2015, Weheliye 2014, Gilmore 2016) as well as a recent shift in the study of infrastructure—from ‘infrastructure as system’ to ‘infrastructuring as a relational form of action’ (Star/Bowker 2002, Simone 2004)—scholars have tracked the material foundations of colonial practices of racialization to grasp their reflexive, i.e., self-reinforcing, effects: The construction of roads, walls, buildings, towns, etc., did not sort already racialized subjects or bodies. Rather, it participated in establishing race as an ordering mechanism, with the effect of creating a “sociotechnical relation” that fostered “specific machinery of extraction and accumulation” (Nemser 2017: 5), which, in ever new forms, determines the value of human life.

Expanding on this line of work, we invite explorations the “soft” or “cultural” components of this infrastructure (Peters 2015: 42). Specifically, we invite explorations of the role of genre in this operation. As groupings of texts or other artifacts within a literary or cultural system that are linked by shared ways of writing, drawing, staging, performing, etc., genres transport and distribute knowledge stored in literary and artistic forms across space and time while also creating affective bonds among (communities of) readers, viewers, listeners. But the links that do the grouping are not simply there; they are produced through sensory and reflective engagement of users—and as this psychosomatic relation elemental to genre’s capacity to function as a world-building infrastructure (Bieger 2024). Conversely, genre is not merely a vehicle “for race as sociohistorical content.” It is part and parcel of an infrastructure in which “[t]he mechanisms of genre and race operate together in making available certain knowledges about and projections of the world”—which, in conjunction with historical, anthropological, economic and legal writings (read: with other genres), institute racist patterns of perception and ways of thinking (Jerng 2018: 2).

These entanglements date back to the early colonial period, where participation in the colonizer’s cultures of letters—from which the enslaved were categorically barred—was a powerful mechanism in the categorization of human life. Indeed, in the framework of Enlightenment thought, being human was fundamentally tied to a Western literary sensibility, with the effect that humanity—like the classification of literary genres—was divided into “genres of the ‘Man’” (Gates 1985, Wynter 2003). And yet, as “fields of knowledge” that always undercut their own mechanisms

and patterns of categorization (Dimock 2007), genre is also a primary resource in rupturing social order and creating alternative infrastructures.

And while infrastructure studies initially endorsed the assumption that infrastructure differs from other technologies in that it operates below the perceived world and is only registered in the case of its breakdown—and is thus usually invisible—(Star 1999), more recent work (Furlong 2014, Rich/Rizutto/Zieger 2022) contends that this understanding normalizes Western experience: In most parts of the world, infrastructural failures and irregularities are so common that, globally speaking, infrastructures do not need to be made visible to be comprehensible. But if dysfunctionality and irregularity are infrastructure’s default operational modes, then collective acts of care, repair and resistance take on new significance: infrastructures become porous and often improvised generators of new collectives, forms of agency and ways of belonging (Rich/Rizutto/Zieger 2022: 3-4)—with genre as a crucial agent in this operation.

Speakers:

- Esther Adeyemo (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)
- Tomaz Amorim (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)
- Laura Bieger (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)
- Farai Chipato (University of Glasgow)
- Dominic Davies (City St George’s, University of London)
- Natalie Erkel (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)
- Lee Flamand (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)
- Henry Ivry (University of Glasgow)
- Mark Jerng (University of California at Davis)
- Claas Oberstadt (Humboldt Universität Berlin)
- Kerstin Schmidt (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)
- Susan Zieger (University of California at Riverside and Mercator Fellow at FOR 5710 “Infrastructure: Aesthetics and Supply”)

The full program will soon be available at <https://infra-aesthetics.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/news/>

Attendance is free of charge. If you want to attend, please send an email to Hildegard.Sicking@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

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