Queering Infrastructures of Romance

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Drawing on recent research in both infrastructure and queer studies, this article proposes to rethink romantic love as a mental, social, and cultural infrastructure that has been built and rebuilt over centuries and that continues to shape the ways in which we conceptualise love, relate to each other romantically, and assess our own lives and those of others. This infrastructure of romance consists of abstract concepts and archetypal narratives which frame and determine how we intellectually conceptualise and emotionally experience love, and which shape the principles according to which we lead our lives. It has both material and immaterial aspects, as it is formed by and in turn forms conceptions and dramaturgies of love as distributed in various discourses, genres, and media. This sociocultural and mental infrastructure of romance works in conjunction with established infrastructures in film production, TV networks, literary publishing, and digital communication.

The infrastructure of romance has been under construction for as long as it has existed, and is currently being updated for a number of reasons, including the trend of mathematical, algorithmic matchmaking[1] and forms of 'posthuman romance' between humans and machines as well as attention to the "logistical aesthetics" of desire in late capitalism.[2] This article will focus on a different ongoing

1 For this, see for instance Christina Wald, "Matchmaking and the Infrastructure of Romance: *The One* or *What You Will*?" in *Figures of Pathos / Figuren des Pathos. Festschrift in Honor of Elisabeth Bronfen*, eds. Frauke Berndt, Isabel Karremann, and Klaus Müller-Wille (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2023): 293–305, on which this article partly draws. Wald compares Shakespeare's romantic comedy *Twelfth Night* to its unmarked adaptation in the 2021 Netflix TV series *The One* from an infrastructural point of view. Set in a future in which everyone can identify their one perfect match via DNA data and digital technology, *The One* in a speculative manner interferes in traditional dramaturgies of romance plots marked by confusions, misrecognitions, and obstacles, thus pointing towards a potential future rebuilding of romance's infrastructures.

2 Sam McBean, "Circulating Desire: Queer Logistical Aesthetics," *Feminist Media Studies* (2022): 1–15, 6. This logistical aesthetic connects the capitalist circulation of goods to the circulation of desire and builds on the premise that "the material, infrastructural, and logistical condition the kinds of social structures that can be built, and integrally, dictate what can circulate" (McBean, "Circulating Desire," 7). Desire thus becomes an entity of logistical circulation. In

process with its own considerable history, namely the queer rebuilding of romance's infrastructures. Queering the infrastructure of romance enables an engagement with non-normative expressions and narratives of desire without perpetuating the exclusionary norms of the ideology of romantic love. In a brief case study of how a recent novel has intervened in the sociocultural afterlife of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, we will argue that adaptation offers a powerful cultural practice for rewriting iconic literary narratives and reconceptualising popular notions of romantic love.

Romance and/as Infrastructure

In its broadest sense, romance can, as proposed by literary scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, be understood as "a particular version of the story of love."[3] Berlant's definition not only establishes love as a key emotional experience at the heart of romance, but also draws attention to its discursive quality and the close interaction between social and literary forms to narrate love. Above all, culturally specific notions of romantic love provide a scaffolding for social interaction, a script which our intersubjective relations follow, whether consciously or unconsciously. As literary and cultural historians have shown, the forms and meanings of romance as a European discourse have shifted considerably since the late Middle Ages.[4] Sociologists like Niklas Luhmann have theorised romantic love as a historically evolving "code, a set of rules according to which emotions can be expressed and which is already elaborated before one enters the game of love."[5] For Luhmann, love is not only a powerful emotion but also a medium of intimate communication which has changed with the growing individualisation and complexity of modernity. In his perspective, the European semantics of romantic love shifted around 1800, when European Romanticism idealised love to paradoxically "unify a duality," a union of two individualised lovers primarily based on their mutual, identity-forming love.[6]

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the Netflix series *Sense8* (2015–2018), this circulation is represented as "an imagined global network of connection that looks akin to the supply chains of late capitalism (even runs on them) but that is suffused with sex, desire, and queer utopian possibility" (3).

3 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 6.

4 See for example David Shumway, "What's Love Got to Do With It? Romance and Intimacy in an Age of Hooking Up," in *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. Ann Brooks (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2022): 15–25, 15.

5 Korbinian Stöckl, *Love in Contemporary British Drama: Traditions and Transformations of a Cultural Emotion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 74.

6 Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 136.

This also marks the moment when the idea of passionate romance as part of heterosexual marriage became the new norm which shapes Western societies until today.

Having developed into well-rehearsed clichés, the discursive expressions, cultural narratives, as well as individual experiences of romantic love have acquired normative status. As such, romance has become implicated in the socio-political negotiations of our time in a paradoxical manner: it has not only served as "a tool for heteronormative" and "patriarchal […] power structures"[7] but has also been turned into a consumerist good through what sociologist Eva Illouz has described as a reciprocal process of "the romanticization of commodities and the commodification of romance" in late capitalism.[8] Against such functions that support the status quo, romance has also been employed to distort and transform social conventions. Critically dismantling and rebuilding the infrastructure of romance can pave the way to new social imaginaries and realities. For instance, inspired by the work of bell hooks, who has conceptualised love not as a script for reproduction and consumption but as an "active and transformative practice," a feminist strand of critical love studies has explored romance as a means of challenging social structures and cultural conventions.[9] Within this context, Berlant has called for a queer perspective on love, which she describes as "a site that has perhaps not yet been queered enough,"[10] as we will show below in greater detail.

Crucially, the power of notions of romantic love is tied to their interdependency with "fantasy" and the imagination.[11] Building on these insights into the social and cultural mechanisms of romance, we argue that processes of constructing, perpetuating, and interrogating romantic love are tied to and dependent on fictional narratives: romance fiction is capable not only of representing, but, more importantly, also of actively shaping sociocultural romantic scripts. Therefore, romance fiction can both reinforce and diversify romance conventions. This intersection between romance as fictional genre and romance as social discourse has contributed to the creation of a complex infrastructure that shapes our social behaviour and forms psychological expectations.

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7 Jennifer Leetsch, *Love and Space in Contemporary African Diasporic Women's Writing: Making Love, Making Worlds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 8.

8 Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), 26. Lauren Berlant, too, connects "[t]he installation of romantic love as the fundamental attachment of humans" to "the normalization of heterosexuality and femininity in consumer culture" in "Love, a Queer Feeling," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 432–451, 440.

9 Leetsch, *Love and Space*, 9.

10 Berlant, "Love, a Queer Feeling," 433.

11 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 69.

Recent research in interdisciplinary infrastructure studies has provided a useful framework for understanding the emergence and negotiation of social relations. Anthropologist Ara Wilson has drawn attention to the interconnection between infrastructures and intimacy, arguing that specific urban material infrastructures are not only "involved in" but also "shape the conditions for relational life."[12] Building on Illouz's sociological and Berlant's cultural analysis, empirical studies by media scholars like Sander de Ridder have elucidated how the algorithms of dating apps shape current patterns of intimacy and romantic love. They belong to "a widely adopted, technologically and commercially driven mathematical mindset to dating" that is characterised by a desire for predictability, controllability, and convenience in romantic and sexual encounters.[13] Urban material infrastructures and digital infrastructures thus shape and are in turn shaped by conventions and narratives of romantic love, which we propose to regard as mental, cultural, and social infrastructures. Just like their architectural and digital counterparts, these individual and collective mental infrastructures are often taken for granted and employed habitually. Regarding this infrastructural quality of romance, Susan Leigh Star's notion of infrastructure as "an embedded strangeness, a second-order one, that of the forgotten, the background, the frozen in place" can explain why lovers are often unaware that they seek and enact a romantic script rather than spontaneous, individual emotions.[14]

One of the most prevalent tacitly accepted scripts on which infrastructures of romantic love hinge is heteronormativity. As Wilson has put it, "[i]nfrastructure involves the very norms that queer and feminist scholarship excavates so ably. It aims for the invisible, taken-for-granted status of the best ideology: when infrastructure works as it should, we often stop seeing it."[15] Yet, if maintenance of infrastructure fails, the invisible suddenly becomes visible and what we have long taken for granted is laid bare to critical re-examination and possibly even repurposing of its original functions. Drawing on literary, filmic, medial, cultural, and technological infrastructures that have shaped our understanding of romance, we argue that paying close attention to these infrastructural mechanisms—to "how [love] actually works

12 Ara Wilson, "The Infrastructures of Intimacy," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 247–280, 247.

13 Sander de Ridder, "The Datafication of Intimacy: Mobile Dating Apps, Dependency, and Everyday Life," in *Television & New Media* (2021): 1–17, 2. See also Thorsten Peetz, "Digitalisierte intime Bewertung. Möglichkeiten sozialer Beobachtung auf *Tinder*," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 73 (2021): 425–450.

14 Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377–391, 379.

15 Wilson, "Infrastructures," 248.

as a principle of living"—may also untap a radical potential for 'queering' common notions of romantic love.[16]

The question of whether romantic love can be 'queered' at all has been fiercely debated in queer theory. In his influential critique of reproductive futurism, Lee Edelman has attacked love as a "totalizing fantasy, always a fantasy of totalization"[17] that compels us into normative commitments towards futurity and sociality. It is this totalizing commitment that Edelman's queer figure of the "sinthomosexual"[18] defies: "In breaking our hold on the future, the sinthomosexual […] forsakes all causes, all social action, all responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms."[19] Unsurprisingly, this critical stance towards love as a compulsory social form also pertains to its institutionalization in marriage. Accordingly, many queer theorists have scrutinized activism for the legalization of same-sex marriage as assimilation into an inherently oppressive system, rather than celebrating it as liberation therefrom. In their view, expecting social inclusion and political change via marriage rights means participating in the "cruel optimism" analysed by Berlant,[20] as queer activists hope "that the heteronormative, patriarchal, and state-controlled institution of marriage will somehow make up for the legacies of gay and lesbian abjection."[21] While these critiques of gay marriage are important, we argue that a conception of romance as infrastructure will help us engage with romantic love without automatically turning it into a confining ideology which, in the case of non-heterosexual relationships, simply replaces one oppressive normativity, such as heteronormativity, with another, such as the homonormativity of state-sanctioned monogamy in marriage. Instead, by shedding light on the infrastructures that facilitate how we experience and think about love, including queer love, we may uncover ways to rebuild those very infrastructures and thereby allow for a non-normative optimism that is neither cruel nor based on abjection. If "[t]he prefix infra […] flags the intended purpose of conventional infrastructural projects

16 Berlant, "Love, a Queer Feeling," 443.

17 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 73.

18 "Sinthomosexuality" is Edelman's neologism that blends homosexuality with the Lacanian "sinthome", which denotes the "psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (as symptom) nor 'traversed' (as fantasy)" and thereby "represents the final limit of the psychoanalytic process." Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 137. Sinthomosexuality thus embodies the death drive in that its self-shattering jouissance rejects any notion of futurity.

19 Edelman, *No Future*, 101.

20 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

21 Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subject* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 16.

to end up hidden from the view of most users,"[22] then a consideration of queer infrastructures of romance will foreground those expressions of love that have long since laid hidden from view in the shadows of heteronormativity. As our case study exemplifies, "queer romance," which "remains peripheral to most academic accounts of the genre,"[23] provides an important testing ground for such reparative re-figurations of infrastructure, as it offers narrative space to create fantasies of queer love that counter Edelman's debilitating fantasy of totalization.[24]

An infrastructural approach to romance therefore illuminates how the dynamics with which cultural ideals as perpetuated by specific works and discourses can be universalized to the point of obscurity, or rather of infrastructural invisibility. It reveals how, as Berlant puts it, the "the formalism of love is exploited and expressed by the repetitions of intimate conventionality" while also demonstrating that "to change the aesthetic of love, its archive of reference, inevitably animates discourses of instability from anxiety through revolution."[25] In the following brief case study, we will elaborate on the potential of such an infrastructural approach to romance by examining one of the culturally most influential literary stories of romantic love, William Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, and its queer adaptation in Douglas Stuart's novel *Young Mungo* (2022).

Queering *Romeo and Juliet* in Douglas Stuart's *Young Mungo* (2022)

Arguably, few artistic works emblematize the tension in romantic love between normative perpetuation and subversion as powerfully as William Shakespeare's dramatization of the tragic love story of *Romeo and Juliet*, first performed around 1597. In his 2017 Norton Critical Edition, Gordon McMullan suggests that "*Romeo and Juliet* has become, over time, the absolute embodiment, the tragic paradigm, of romantic

22 Wilson, "Infrastructures," 270.

23 Andrea Wood and Jonathan A. Allan, "Special Issue: Queering Popular Romance (Editors' Introduction)," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 1–5, 1.

24 As Jayashree Kamble has showcased, these reparative counter fantasies include "the redefinition of ideal masculinity and 'good' sexual orientation undertaken in popular discourse" in the wake of the gay rights movement and the rise of queer romance publishing. Jayashree Kamble, *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 88, 125. The publishing industry in itself can therefore be considered an infrastructure that conditions the proliferation of queer romance writing. See Len Barot, "Queer Romance in Twentieth-and Twenty-First-Century America: Snapshots of a Revolution," in *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?*, eds. William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2015): 389–404.

25 Berlant, "Love, a Queer Feeling," 438.

love."[26] McMullan's reference to the long-term nature of that process is telling, considering that the story of the Veronese lovers did not yet occupy its current status in Shakespeare's lifetime. By contrast to other literary couples, the protagonists of Shakespeare's first tragedy of love were relative unknowns, and it was this obscurity and transposability that paved the way for the play to become the cultural icon that it is today.[27]

Just as *Romeo and Juliet* was gradually consolidated as a cultural icon of romantic love, so were the ideological implications which were drawn from it. According to Dympna Callaghan, "*Romeo and Juliet* consolidates the ideology of romantic love" and "has been used to perpetuate" that very ideology ever since.[28] In negotiating different forms of desire, that process of consolidation is faced with love as both a universal and a particular experience. *Romeo and Juliet* straddles the line between being "an apparently benign, lyrical document of universal love" and the idealization of a specifically heteronormative manifestation of love as defined by patriarchal discourses.[29] Callaghan notes that this very idealization positions the tragedy in close generic proximity to comedy and "the possibility of a happy conclusion," indicating that as a dramatic plot, romantic love is entangled as much with the comedic as with the tragic realm.[30]

This generic flexibility is certainly one of the reasons why *Romeo and Juliet* has enjoyed an unprecedented creative afterlife, transcending generic and geographic boundaries. The cultural imprint of Shakespeare's play ranges from opera and ballet to Hollywood films like James Cameron's *Titanic* to Japanese anime series and video games to fan-made web series.[31] Whether direct or indirect, all of these various engagements with Shakespeare's play add to its status as "the iconic text of romantic love."[32] An infrastructural approach can reveal the overt and covert processes

26 Gordon McMullan, "Introduction," in *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare (New York: Norton, 2017): ix–xxiii, xvi.

27 Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 46.

28 Dympna Callaghan, "The Ideology of Romantic Love: The Case of *Romeo and Juliet*," in *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics*, eds. Dympna Callaghan, Lorraine Helms, and Jyotsna Singh (Hoboken: Blackwell, 1994): 59–101, 62, 60.

29 Callaghan, "Ideology of Romantic Love," 88.

30 Callaghan, "Ideology of Romantic Love," 81.

31 Jonas Kellermann, *Dramaturgies of Love in* Romeo and Juliet: *Word, Music, and Dance* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2021); Eric S. Mallin, *Reading Shakespeare in the Movies: Non-Adaptations and Their Meaning* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 85–138; Ryuta Minami, "What's in a Name? Shakespeare and Japanese Pop Culture," in *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Global Appropriation*, eds. Christy Desmet, Sujata Iyengar, and Miriam Jacobson (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2020): 290–303, 295–299; Ariane M. Balizet, *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2019), 144–146.

32 Callaghan, "Ideology of Romantic Love," 88.

through which such cultural icons are constructed and the (subliminal) influence that they exude on our individual and collective imagination.

As Wilson notes, the term "infrastructure" originally referred to "the understructure of railways (land, embankments, bridges) as opposed to their superstructure (rails, stations, and any type of overhead structures)."[33] Considering the influence of artistic productions like *Romeo and Juliet* on our cultural imagination of romantic love, we may likewise consider these productions as the infrastructure upon which that imagination is built—or vice versa. Depending on our interpretative practice of infrastructural foregrounding, we can consider cultural notions of love as the understructure that enables specific literary texts, theatrical performances, and films. This cultural imagination as formed by, and in turn forming, specific artistic productions provides the understructure that shapes our social interactions. The influence of this infrastructure of romance becomes so pervasive that they are effectively rendered 'invisible,' universalizing something normatively specific like heterosexual love to the point where we simply take it for granted, without wasting a second thought where that ideal may have originated from. According to Berlant, "love's function is to mark the subject's binding to the scenes to which s/he must always return;"[34] an infrastructural approach to romance may help us get a better hold onto the origin and maintenance of those scenes and prevent them from falling into the shadowy background of ideological unreflectedness. Using the influential term proposed by computer scientist Geoffrey C. Bowker, we can perform an "infrastructural inversion" that foregrounds the background and focuses on the infrastructure itself;[35] as Bowker points out, this also means that each decision to examine a phenomenon as the ground for something else is an interpretative act of infrastructuring, of turning something into an infrastructure. Understanding romance as infrastructure, even a seemingly unshakable icon of heteronormativity like *Romeo and Juliet* may thereby be appropriated to queer and destabilize the very infrastructures that it consolidated in the first place.

Douglas Stuart's sophomore novel *Young Mungo* (2022), for example, relocates the early modern feud between the Capulets and Montagues to the confessional conflict in 1980s Glasgow. Against all odds, the Protestant Mungo falls in love with the Catholic James; together, the two boys try to keep their relationship a secret from Mungo's alcoholic mother, his violent Tybalt-esque brother Hamish, and James's homophobic father. The novel affirms its obvious thematic indebtedness to Shakespeare halfway through when Mungo's sister Jodie confronts her visibly enamoured

33 Wilson, "Infrastructures of Intimacy," 267.

34 Berlant, "Love, a Queer Feeling," 439.

35 Geoffrey C. Bowker, "Information Mythology and Infrastructure," in *Information Acumen: The Understanding and Use of Knowledge in Modern Business*, ed. L. Bud-Frierman (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1994): 231–247, 235–236.

brother with the words "But, soft!, what light through yonder window breaks," directly alluding to the perhaps most famous love scene of all time, and even calling him "Romeo" moments later.[36] The novel thus forms part of a larger spectrum of global adaptations that "illuminate[] *Romeo and Juliet*'s queer and transcultural possibilities."[37] More specifically, it self-reflectively sheds light on its Shakespearean intertext and raises expectant questions whether the star-crossed love of Mungo and James will automatically meet the same tragic fate in the violent setting of working-class Glasgow as their Veronese counterparts. Stuart thus makes visible and explicit the cultural understructure upon which his novel and its representation of queer love are built, highlighting the Shakespearean myth of star-crossed love as an infrastructural script with a potential for subversively creative license.

Furthermore, *Young Mungo* also emphasizes the degree to which infrastructures themselves facilitate intimate encounters and relationships. On the one hand, James talks about his experience of calling a hotline that connects him with other anonymous gay men in a time prior to digital dating platforms like the appositely titled *Romeo* (previously *Gay Romeo* and *Planet Romeo*).[38] Ironically, the hotline that was intended to grant James secret intimacies with other men eventually leads to the reveal of his sexuality to his homophobic father who receives an unusually high phone bill.

On the other hand, when Mungo and James decide to leave their tenements to spend an afternoon together that eventually culminates in their first kiss, Stuart emphasizes the infrastructures that they pass on their way out of the city:

> They debated whether to cross a bridge over the roaring motorway. Mungo had a distrust of bridges, it was only an overpass that separated the Protestant Billies from the Catholic Bhoyston. On the far side he could see another housing scheme, but beyond that was a low line of trees, and there were no tower blocks, nor gasworks, to spoil the horizon.[39]

The bridge fulfils several functions in the novel. It not only connects the Protestant and Catholic housing schemes—and serves as location for the catastrophic gang fight towards the end of the novel; it also promises access to a seemingly pastoral sanctuary beyond the city where Mungo and James can live out their love undisturbed, exemplifying how infrastructures as potential sites of intimacy eschew conventional demarcations of the public and the private.[40] Paradoxically even, then, the novel's urban material infrastructures point towards a utopian existence *without* any

36 Douglas Stuart, *Young Mungo* (London: Picador, 2022), 246–247.

37 Ja Young Jeon, "Romeo at the Girls' School: *Fantasy of the Girls*' Queer Teen Adaptation of Shakespeare," *Adaptation* (2022): 1–21, 3; cf. Balizet, *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies*, 144–146.

38 Stuart, *Young Mungo*, 230–234.

39 Stuart, *Young Mungo*, 225.

40 See Wilson, "Infrastructures of Intimacy."

infrastructures and religious division. Yet, this infrastructure-less utopia is simultaneously subverted by the novel's second plot. After Mungo's relationship to James becomes known, two men that his mother met in an AA meeting force him to go on a fishing trip with them to the Highlands. In the deserted wilderness of the north, Mungo is sexually abused and eventually has to kill his tormentors to find a way back into civilized, 'infrastructured' life. In the end, both Mungo and James survive, unlike their Shakespearean predecessors, yet whether or not the boys will possibly have a future together beyond their wordless greeting that concludes the novel remains open. If "[f]iction provides models of the relation between love's utopian prospects and its lived experience," then *Young Mungo* uses its intertextual and intratextual infrastructures to showcase the fragility but also the hopefulness of that relation and the extent to which our ideological scripts of romantic love may be rewritten after all.[41]

In conclusion, this article has suggested an infrastructural approach towards romance that highlights how our mental, social, and cultural understandings of romantic love persistently inform (in often subliminal ways) our contemporary experience of love. These understandings provide the infrastructural foundation upon which both our romantic interactions in everyday life and artistic representations thereof rest and build. Yet, the required use and maintenance of infrastructure also leaves space for its subversive re-purposing. In the current moment of diversifying sexualities and gender identities, infrastructures of romance are once again reconstructed. Heteronormative ideologies of love as perpetuated by iconic narratives like *Romeo and Juliet* are 'queered,' showcasing the exemplary potential of adaptation as a cultural instance of infrastructural inversion and transformation.

41 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 97.