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DWELLING IN RELATION: Infrastructure, Refusal, Repair

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This series offers a theoretical and methodological reconsideration of relationality as it unfolds within racial capitalism, infrastructure, and global geographies. Rather than treating infrastructure as a neutral conduit for connection or development, the contributions expose how it functions as a racialized ordering system that produces, stabilizes, and legitimizes uneven life chances. Across diverse case studies, from Dakar to Algiers, and from the toxic maritime circuits of the Mediterranean to fugitive zones in Nairobi, the essays chart the geosocial itineraries through which relationality is not only enabled but conscripted into regimes of extraction, dispossession, and capture. These are not incidental complications, but structural effects.

Relationality here is not simply a principle of mutual recognition, but a historically and materially embedded condition that sustains and opens possibilities for alternative modes of connection even amidst domination. Through a shared and varied attention to infrastructure, the contributors show how ports, roadways, housing schemes, and surveillance corridors are not merely the backdrop to social life. They are sites where relational norms are organized, enacted,

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and contested. The articles together insist that relationality is neither inherently liberatory nor always redemptive. Instead, it must be read as an ambivalent and ethically fraught condition, shaped by the very infrastructures that attempt to constrain, regulate, and sometimes obliterate the forms of life that persist within them.

While the editorial framing of the collection emphasizes improvisation, ambience, and emergent connectivity, often drawing from aesthetic and affective registers, I engage these themes through a reparative lens that centers ethical accountability and the limits of relational life under capture. Where the collection gestures toward opacity and refusal as tactical or atmospheric disruptions, I approach them as sites of ethical negotiation and epistemic disorientation. My concern is not to displace these framings, but to extend them, asking what becomes possible when we center practices that do not seek to escape injury but to endure and reassemble life beyond its terms.

DWELLING

Infrastructure is often perceived as a neutral material facilitator of both literal and figurative economic and social development and conveyance. However, infrastructures organize and order modern life, producing geographies and built environments that are too often extractive, racialized, and dispossessive. As we see in the foregoing essays, infrastructure has operated as both a mechanism of accumulation and a means of regulating relational life across settler, (post)colonial, and imperial histories. These are active formations that produce the very conditions under which Black and Indigenous communities are rendered productively available for state and private enterprise through capture, containment, banishment, and removal (Roy 2017). Even after the programs and policies that produced them have moved on to reterritorialize other spaces for accumulation, infrastructures' remaining material presence persists in the ongoing and uneven coordination of marginalized life.

Infrastructure is often presented as a solution to seemingly innate societal and geographic problems such as access and disconnection. But property regimes, drainage projects, and logistical networks of concrete, steel, and cable too often only offer solutions by naturalizing possession, erasing forms of life and relation, and concealing the coercive processes through which land and labor are made extractable. N.D.B. Connolly, in analyzing the development of the highway system in Miami, argued that "infrastructure relied on seemingly exceptional shows of white power, such as lynching or forced conscription," and further that "violence helped hold in place the daily racial indignities upon which

American capitalism and its many forms of segregation stood” (2014, 52). The city, as the product of infrastructural development, he shows, functions as an overlapping formation of produced exclusion through environmental harm, disinvestment, and juridical control.

What the papers in this collection demonstrate is that within spaces made by infrastructure, which often first become so by being labeled as abandoned or forgotten, blighted or beyond repair, there persist forms of resourcefulness that do not, or possibly cannot, seek to undo the infrastructural order through confrontation alone but work through its gaps, fissures, and contradictions. Provisional, adaptive practices and situated knowledges emerge as historically and politically grounded strategies of persistence rather than romanticized alternatives. They index a relationship to space premised on survival and collective inhabitation. These counter-practices complicate any easy opposition between domination and liberation. They invite a more nuanced reading of infrastructure not only as a site of harm but also as a terrain of negotiating political possibility under constraint. Rather than relying on a politics of intention, this view centers the structural afterlives of extraction and the ways they shape life chances unevenly across racialized geographies. The challenge is to account for these conditions without reducing them to either victimhood or resistance, but instead attending to the complex relations that sustain life in the midst of imposed order, which is offered across the papers as varied practices and ethics of refusal.

This charting leads to a central query of how to reckon with relational life under racial capitalism, as both a moral and structural condition. The infrastructures that bind lives together are also those that sort, expose, exploit, and discard (Cowen 2014). To theorize relationality in these contexts requires a frank account of how connections are built, whether through solidarity or harm, because we learn that both can occlude and can become complicit. Ethics in this sense are about the arduous labor of accounting for one’s embeddedness in fraught relations. Such a framing acknowledges that even the most well-intentioned forms of solidarity may obscure voice, legitimacy, and risk. The issue calls for an ethics that acknowledges these gradients of implication, insisting that no relation is free from history’s sediment, where structures accumulate, persist, and constrain the possibilities of the present (Koselleck 2018).

A concept of relationality emerges that demands more than recognition of interconnectedness. It requires sustained inquiry into how relations are historically produced, whose lives are sustained or diminished through them, and what responsibilities are generated (Strathern 2020). Drawing on critiques of epistemologies of ignorance and the politics of articulation, relationality in the issue

becomes a diagnostic practice. It is less an endpoint than a method of critical inhabitation, refusing easy alliances and foreclosures and tracing its often-difficult-to-navigate contours instead. Relationality here is a mode of attunement entailing a commitment to making visible what relations can often conceal and resisting the lure of superficial consensus. Such an approach calls for reflexivity as method, capable of discerning how communities can persist through shared space, institutional language, and collective projects.

Importantly, the collection challenges the presumption that the limits of relationality are to be lamented. Limits should be seen as ethical opportunities, thresholds that mark when a relation must be withdrawn, reconfigured, or held accountable. These are not abstract moral lines but are drawn concretely through the histories of extraction, environmental violence, and racial surveillance the issue so carefully details. The articles demonstrate that to sustain the promise of relationality, one must also affirm the necessity of rupture and withdrawal. Not all relations should be maintained. There are ties that must be broken to preserve the possibility of something better, if not always more. The courage to sever, disengage, and pause a relation to examine its terms represents acts that are just as vital to ethical life as connection. This recognition opens a space for new questions. These questions refuse easy resolution but underscore the gravity of thinking relationally under conditions where attachment can be both vital and corrosive.

The collection's contributors join my own scholarly encouragement to move beyond the reactive grammar of resistance and toward a more anticipatory and speculative mode of engagement with space and sociality. While the political grammar of resistance continues to be vital, the essays demonstrate that an overreliance on dialectical oppositions such as capture versus escape or oppression versus liberation risks reifying the conditions it seeks to unsettle. Instead, there is an elsewhere, a sometimes-speculative site for dwelling, that emerges as a spatial mode of political being and belonging that is proactive, imaginative, and attuned to the generative possibilities embedded within structurally constrained worlds.

This reorientation is crucial. Dwelling, in the contexts explored here, is not only an improvisational response to the failures of infrastructure or governance. It is an affirmative claim on space and time. In dwelling, relation-building practices cannot wait for repair to be granted or for injuries to be acknowledged. They emerge as investments in different ways of living and relating that do not rely on harm for their meaning. This mirrors my own assertion that Black place-making and kinship must be understood as practices of satisfaction, not

lack. They are anchored not in redress alone but in the everyday labor of composing lives that are adequate to desire. Speculative dwelling as a form of repair to requires ethical anchoring in the effort to remain in place, in relation, and to orient toward the not-yet without depending on a politics of grievance to justify that movement.

These chapters offer ethnographic evidence of such practices and theories for understanding how speculation operates as a method. These are not merely tactics of endurance or refusal. They are world-building initiatives that creatively and carefully reconfigure relational life. To dwell is to repair to a horizon not determined by violence. The examples offered in this volume show us that spatial acts, however provisional or fragile, can constitute forms of political life that are not legible through injury or resistance alone. These acts are not departures from struggle but refusals to let struggle dictate the entirety of existence. In this way, dwelling affirms the ethical and political necessity of living otherwise. What emerges is not a fantasy of escape but a grounded, situated practice of composition that arises from the specificity of lived experience, particularly in urban landscapes marked by dispossession and racialized neglect. In this framework, dwelling becomes a site of world-making, of improvisation entangled with the material and affective constraints of daily survival (Simone 2018).

Across the volume, examples drawn from Dakar, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa reveal how dwelling is reconfigured through practices of spatial appropriation, informal infrastructure, and collective experimentation. These are not merely tactics of coping but strategies of prefiguration that assemble livable futures in the present. Central to this mode of engagement are acts that are committed to something more than survival, to be centered in practices of anticipation that make relations possible. Anticipation, to be clear, is not teleological prediction, not an elsewhere that is an afterlife, but a disposition toward cultivating what can and should be, even and especially in the absence of guarantees. Anticipation is a refusal to let constraint be the exclusive terrain on which Black life is theorized, fostering practices that insist on the legitimacy of dreaming otherwise, even when the material conditions of life appear to foreclose such possibilities.

REFUSAL

Against the established functioning of infrastructure, the contributors defy linear temporality and normative understandings of development. The work of Danielle Beaujon in colonial Algiers, for instance, reveals how architectures of control also yield unforeseen openings for radical spatial refusal. This resonates with Simpson (2014), who demonstrates how sovereignty and nationhood are

expressed in ways that diverge from the narrow expectations of the settler state and its legal frameworks. Sabine Mohamed's account of urban life in Ethiopia underscores how development projects become sites for counter-logics, where state surveillance and dispossession are met with affective economies and alternative spatial rhythms. Their practices instantiate a politics that recognizes refuge as always contingent. Yet this contingency is not a weakness. As the essays show, it offers a condition under which ethical and political imaginations exceed the repressive indifference of neoliberal governance, its demands of marginalized subjects, and its infrastructures designed to regulate, constrain, or erase. Instead, the slow, iterative labor of making life possible under duress in scenes of careful inhabitation, of dwelling otherwise, quietly and insistently lays the groundwork for the full possibility of fashioning new forms of relationality.

The collection offers treatments on capture and refusal against both the discrete moral categories and overlapping, co-constitutive practices embedded in racial capitalism's structural and affective arrangements (Robinson 2000). Rather than reinforcing a moral taxonomy that separates complicity from refusal, or harm from repair, the articles foreground the entangled nature of these modes of relational life. The geographies explored here, from Somali coastlines riddled with toxic dumping to the infrastructural densities of Nairobi's "Shackle City," unsettle any presumption that relational ethics develop along clear lines of opposition. Instead, they demand a conceptual vocabulary that holds together coercion and creativity, constraint and improvisation, harm and shelter.

In Wangui Kimari's framing, capture is an external imposition and a socially produced environment, or what she calls the condition of "enshacklement." This term names both the material constriction of movement and the affective saturation of everyday life by infrastructural violence. Yet what is notable in her analysis is the persistence of capture and the ways it gives rise to unexpected forms of relationality. Within zones marked by surveillance, hyper-policing, and deprivation, residents cultivate informal networks, resource-sharing circuits, and counterpublics, defying their immobility. Here, capture is not passively endured. It becomes a relational condition through which new social configurations emerge, that are tenuous, fraught, but vital.

Similarly, Dua, Ben-Yehoyada, and Carnì attend to maritime geographies where toxic waste disposal routes trace the uneven topographies of environmental harm. In this context, refusal is not performed through overt confrontation but through deliberate ambiguity and withdrawal. Actors navigate global circuits of extraction without becoming fully legible to them, through silence and strategic non-disclosure functioning as technologies of resistance, enabling, or in other words, opacity.

Building on Édouard Glissant's (1997) notion of opacity as a necessary refusal of colonial transparency, the issue extends that insight to interrogate opacity's ethical instability. Opacity protects against the kinds of extractive visibility represented through the politics and technologies of surveillance (Browne 2015), while simultaneously masking complicities and rendering accountability elusive. As illustrated in the analysis of maritime waste routes, opacity becomes a vehicle for deferral, obfuscation, and the reproduction of racialized violence. The contributors offer opacity as a critical tool which they refuse to treat as inherently subversive. Instead, opacity emerges as a site of ethical negotiation, a terrain where the politics of visibility and concealment are deeply entangled. By charting these entanglements, the issue cautions against celebratory readings of opacity that would evacuate it of its moral ambivalence. In this light, opacity becomes a tactic whose effects depend on positionality, access, and power.

Refusal, then, is not always spectacular. It often takes the form of ambiguity, delay, or the redirection of attention, in turn frustrating the expectations of global governance and humanitarian oversight.

Refusal in this collection is deeply contextual and often layered with ambivalence. Rather than offering clean breaks from systems of harm, refusal negotiates compromised landscapes to manage exposure and exercise autonomy, however fleetingly. Speaking, withholding, and redirection then become critical acts of ethical navigation, a calculus of relational risk undertaken by communities subject to structural harm. Refusal thus recalibrates the terms of engagement under conditions where no position is wholly outside the reach of violence.

This layered interplay between capture and refusal has compelled me to return to my own ethnographic work in *Scammer's Yard* (Lewis 2020), and more recently, in the related article "Ambivalent Refusals" (Lewis 2025) where I confronted the limits of access, recognition, and analytical authority when researching Jamaican lottery scammers. As I explored in the latter, their refusal to grant me proximity, framed around the impossibility of my knowing their experience of "sufferation," was not just a rebuke of my social position or class privilege. It was a refusal of my capacity to know them through the epistemological apparatus I brought into the field. What I experienced was not only an interpersonal impasse but an epistemic critique enacted through everyday practice. Their refusal was not resistance in the conventional sense; it was an insistence on the right to remain opaque, unintelligible, and unincorporated within the terms I might offer as analysis. In this sense, opacity became not merely a relational position but an ethical modality, a political and intimate border, a refusal to allow their interior lives to be rendered legible by the grammar of ethnographic inquiry.

In the paper (Lewis 2025), I offered a reading of this dynamic not as a failure of ethnography, or anthropology per se, but as a productive rupture that disorients the assumed trajectory of knowledge. What if refusal is not simply the negation of participation but a form of world-making that exceeds the epistemic reach of disciplinary norms? This becomes especially clear when considering the capture infrastructures operating in material and conceptual terms. Just as Nairobi's "Shackle City" delineates conditions of spatial immobilization and resource scarcity, fieldwork's epistemic space can become a site of ensnarement, where subjects are expected to perform recognizability for scholarly legibility. In this sense, refusal is the practice of remaining opaque within a system that demands clarity and of living against the flattening impulses of representation and the imperial demands of comprehension.

Thus, the entanglement of capture and refusal must not only be read as a descriptive dyad but as a methodological challenge to the ethical pretenses of scholarly inquiry. The scammers' refusal of my recognition was a refusal of capture, but it was also a call for me to operate differently, to recognize for myself my inability to seek understanding where none was granted or desired. This is perhaps the most necessary and challenging lesson for those who study the afterlives of colonial domination: that understanding, when conditioned by refusal, must begin with relinquishing our entitlement to know and for the desire to be not known among those dwelling in the sites of our inquiries.

What I have come to accept is that there is no shortage of intimacy in refusal. Rather, refusal engenders intimacy in the honoring of boundaries, the dignifying of distance, and the acceptance that some aspects of Black life remain beyond our grasp. Refusal, thus, is not an uncomplicated remedy to the damages of capture. Instead, it is as an ethical practice that emerges from and is shaped by conditions of vulnerability, precarity, and often complicity, entangled with the very infrastructures it seeks to reorient.

In the Somali context, community responses to the environmental afterlives of toxic waste are forms of refusal that are both protective and incomplete. They involve collective labor to manage exposure and strategies of endurance that register the limits of what can be done. These forms do not restore equilibrium, but hold together lives that are otherwise threatened by abandonment. Ultimately, the entwinement of capture and refusal reframes the ethics of relationality as more than a matter of coherence or consistency but of responsiveness to the complexity of the lived contradictions that shape our attempts to live and relate otherwise.

REPAIR

The sense of dwelling articulated throughout the volume, particularly in the introductory contribution, aligns with and extends my rethinking of repair beyond injury and instead as an active movement toward cultivating new forms of Black life. I have proposed a shift from understanding repair as a response to harm toward a conception of repair that turns toward the possibilities that lie beyond reparation. That move, which I call “repair to,” signals this forward-oriented movement grounded in care, intentionality, and the assembling of conditions not structured by injury. The speculative and reflective engagements described in these articles echo this sensibility. The terms of suffering do not confine them. Instead, they reflect commitments to building presence, coherence, and relation in ways that exceed the metrics of damage and the protocols of recognition. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, geographic constraints are not absolute barriers. Instead, they are conditions that influence how people make use of available resources to create their own space in the world (Gilmore 2008, 36).

While the collection does not explicitly engage the frameworks of reparations or repair, it nonetheless contributes to the broader conceptual landscape in which such discourses might be rethought. Rather than grounding its analysis in frameworks of injury and redress, the volume tracks how relational forms emerge, persist, and sometimes fracture under infrastructural, ecological, and racial duress. Its focus is not on compensatory justice or the politics of restoration, but on how life is inhabited and assembled amid regimes of abandonment and capture. In this sense, it orients us toward the atmospheric conditions under which reparative imaginaries, as world-making that exists outside of state-sanctioned structures (Stanley 2021), might arise, even if the language of repair remains absent.

This absence is instructive, as it stands as an invitation to reconsider what constitutes repair and where it might be located. Across the volume, we encounter practices that do not announce themselves as reparative but that nonetheless suggest a commitment to sustaining life amidst degradation. These are infrastructural improvisations, speculative dwellings, and forms of collective inhabitation that refuse the terms of their enclosure without necessarily promising escape. They are neither aimed at restoration, nor do they seek to reverse harm. Instead, they register ways of relating that endure and ways of building presence that do not await recognition.

Opacity, once again, becomes central to this conceptualization. It enables a form of repair that does not require full transparency or total recognition.

Rather than demanding confession, clarity, or narrative closure, opacity permits the maintenance of relations marked by uncertainty, contradiction, and asymmetry. Doing so opens a space for ethical engagements that are not premised on agreement or resolution but on shared inhabitation of difficulty. In this reading, opacity is not a refusal to relate but a modality through which relation is sustained under conditions of fragility. This conceptual shift is exemplified in the speculative and anticipatory practices documented throughout the volume.

In this regard, the collection converges with my own argument that repair should not be understood as a return to a prelapsarian state of wholeness. Instead, I have argued for a reparative orientation that begins from the recognition that harm cannot always be undone, and that relational life persists in the wake of this recognition. What I call “repair to” names this anticipatory movement, not a reaction to injury, but a commitment to otherwise building Black place-making and kinship practices that refuse to be tethered to antiblack violence as their primary referent.

The collection’s attention to speculative and grounded practices of dwelling resonates with this orientation. In its refusal to treat damage as the sole terrain of analysis, it opens space for thinking repair beyond restitution, as an everyday and often fugitive engagement with the possible.

I argue in “Black Life Beyond Injury” (Lewis 2024) that Black relationality must be apprehended not through its ruptures alone, but through the affirmative forms of belonging and presence it continually generates. Repair thus marks a shift from the grammar of aftermath to a politics of tending to life, relation, and space as grounds from which new terms for existence emerge. What I argue for, and what continues to motivate my thinking, is that repair must not be tethered to a liberal teleology of restoration. Instead, it must be grounded in the generative capacities of Black life itself, capacities that do not require antiblackness as their animating force.

The risk in using injury as the structuring logic of reparative analysis is that it licenses a grammar of accounting that cannot imagine a world other than the one already constituted by violence. What I attempt to do with relational repair is interrupt that narrative inheritance to create discursive and political space for Black life to be recognized in its own terms. That intervention has been difficult, particularly because even the most radical formulations of abolition and Black ecological thought often return to resistance as their organizing principle.

While politically necessary, I remain cautious of how such frameworks risk maintaining a recursive relationship to injury that is ultimately exhausting. As I argued in the article, precisely this exhaustion impairs our ability to locate and

support the nascent infrastructures of repair already present within Black life. Whether in the cooperative labor of community gardening collectives, the intimate ethics of elder care networks, or the spatial acts of staying and inhabiting otherwise, I have found fragments of a reparative imagination that do not simply rebound from harm but chart a future unburdened by it. The problem is that our analytic habits often make these fragments illegible or, at best, secondary to the spectacle of racial violence. This is why I have emphasized narrative suspension in both my ethnographic and theoretical work, deliberately holding open moments that gesture toward repair without requiring them to resolve or redeem the conditions from which they emerged.

Therefore, these gestures as they appear in the collection do not cohere into a theory of repair, nor do they attempt to, but they mark the sites where such a theory might be grounded. They show that repair, if it is to mean anything beyond harm-driven redress, must be in the provisional, the relational, the spatial, and the collective. It must be understood not as a program or an endpoint, but as a practice of composing life amid what remains unresolved. In the absence of theorizing repair directly, the volume makes room for a more situated, less romantic account. It is an account attuned to the ambivalent, often contradictory efforts to live otherwise within the infrastructures that constrain and enable relation.

What emerges is a situated ethics of persistence. The collection, perhaps inadvertently, gestures toward this by showing how social life is not merely what survives the wreckage, but what remakes the terms of inhabitation within it. It is precisely in this remaking, in the ongoing negotiation of proximity, responsibility, and refusal, that we might locate the groundwork for a reparative politics not structured by recognition but by relation. This is repair, not as return, but as reaching. It is a reaching toward each other, toward otherwise, toward the unfinished labor of composing livable worlds.

This extended vision of repair does not displace demands for restitution, but it insists that such demands are insufficient on their own. Equally important is the cultivation of ethical orientations and social forms that are not exhausted by the histories of grievance or constrained by the idioms of harm. Repair, in this sense, is a practice of world-building amid brokenness, not a cure for it, because as the issue makes clear, we have no guarantees against the repetition of harm. So, the contributions' quiet refusal to supply final answers might be read, then, not as a theoretical omission, but as a gesture toward a more open, more exacting reparative horizon in which life is not restored but reassembled anew.

Such a horizon does not offer comfort, but it does offer possibility. It asks that we engage relationality not for the sake of redemption, but in acknowledgment of our shared implication in structures that harm even as they connect. It also invites us to sit with the incompleteness of our own analytic frameworks. In this sense, repair must remain conceptually unstable, a term under continual revision, because its ethical charge resides in its refusal to settle. The volume's power lies, then, not in advancing a singular theory of repair, but in refusing to foreclose the conditions under which reparative thinking might emerge.

To dwell, which is to remain open to the minor, the improvised, and the unfinished, is to take seriously the claim that life is already generating the terms of its own repair, even if we lack the language to fully name it. The task, then, is not to provide that language in advance, but to create the conceptual and political space where it might be heard. That is the work of repair, not to master damage, but to sustain the fragile conditions under which something otherwise might still be lived.

CONCLUSION

If this collection offers no clear resolution, it is because resolution would betray the conditions under which its insights emerge: conditions marked by ambivalence, constraint, and the fragile improvisations of life under duress. The critical force of the essays lies not in offering a theory of repair or a map of resistance, but in holding open the space where relational life continues despite, and often through, its capture. To remain with this persistence requires a politics that does not presume coherence, a method that does not demand transparency, and an ethics that accepts refusal as a practice of becoming. What we encounter across these contributions are not answers but orientations toward inhabitation regardless of if our futures remain structurally unguaranteed. It is in this refusal to resolve that the work of repair becomes most exacting and most necessary; as a demand to build with and from what persists rather than an expectation of wholeness.

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