Power Flashes:
The Political and Visual Cultures of Electricity in Accra, Ghana

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DECLARATION

I, Pauline Destrée, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Power Flashes:  
The Political and Visual Cultures of Electricity in Accra, Ghana

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the visual manifestations of electricity and their relation to political power in Accra during an energy crisis (colloquially known as Dumsor, Twi for off/on) and an election year in 2016. “Flashing” in Ghanaian parlance is a particular mode of mobile communication, in which one generates a signal to request a call back. It manifests a state of being connected without having access to power, but also of connection without content. This thesis argues that this mode of communication applies fittingly to the infrastructural address of the energy network in Ghana today: a situation of partial and unequal connection, manifesting a state of being connected to a national grid without having access to power, in a country that boasts one of the highest electrification rates in the continent, yet periodically experiences energy shortages.

The thesis describes certain entanglements of infrastructure, political power and the intimacies of everyday life that are foregrounded and unravelled in an energy crisis. It moves through the ordinary and official sites of the city: the national Electricity Company offices, the public sphere of the city, private and shared domestic houses, memories, stories, and material effects, to express the diffuse, pervasive, and intermittent presences of infrastructure and state power in the lives of Accra residents.

This thesis situates contemporary engagements with the politics of infrastructure in the historical legacies of the electricity system in Ghana. National electrification, developed after Independence in 1957 as part of Nkrumah’s decolonisation efforts and emancipation agenda, has fostered a particular relationship to the national grid and expectations of visibility, delivery and belonging – expectations which today are often frustrated by the material shortcomings of their promises. This thesis examines the emergence of “Dumsor” as a popular complex of political expression in response to this history of fractured connections, questioning notions of access as a putative and often unrealizable ideal, and exploring the asymmetries, marginalities and toxicities implied and prefigured in connection itself.
As the continent that stands to be most adversely affected by climate change, designing and understanding infrastructures in African contexts will be crucial to the sustainability of human life and global futures. Energy systems in particular will become crucial to developing sustainable responses and resilience to the effects of climate change. Unsurprisingly, infrastructure in Africa is a privileged site of foreign investment and targeted development projects. As a ‘benchmark’ of growth, infrastructure plays an increasing role in the global imagination of Africa and speculation about its future, often cast in terms of ‘renaissance’ and ‘leapfrogging’ through innovative technologies (e.g. solar and waste-to-energy plants). Understanding how these international circuits of global finance, international policy, and environmental concerns play out in local contexts are ever more urgent. My research on an energy crisis in Accra looks at the contradictory projects (social, political, economic) invested in infrastructures, exploring ethnographically how these tensions reverberate in the everyday lives of people affected by their promising power but often disappointed by their shortcomings. An ethnographic perspective on these issues is fundamental to both private and public interests and policies deployed in energy systems in Africa today. Infrastructures are collective systems that regiment a particular relation between economic flows, political power and citizens; as such, understanding both their technical operations and their social and political effects is increasingly needed. My research participates in interdisciplinary debates about material culture, technological systems, and African politics by showing that infrastructures cannot be reduced to a matter of technical expertise best left to the purview of engineers and urban planners alone. Infrastructures are crucial to people’s everyday lives, from the ways they dress and fashion national identity, to the ways they interact with civil servants, international experts, and one another. As such, my research brings together interdisciplinary literature on energy systems and governance, African politics, postcolonial theory, material culture and urban theory channelled through an ethnographic perspective.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT 3

IMPACT STATEMENT 4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 7

PROLOGUE: DUMSOR LIFE, DISCO NATION 11
INFRASTRUCTURE, POLITICS, POSTCOLONIAL THEORY 13
FLASHING: RETHINKING CONNECTION AND ACCESS 17
FLASHING IMAGES, UNFOLDING EVENTS 22

INTRODUCTION: POWER FLASHES: INFRASTRUCTURAL VISIONS 25
THE DUMSORIZATION OF AFRICA 25
MODERNITY, AFRO-FUTURITY, AND THE ACHIEVABLE PRESENT 29
INFRASTRUCTURAL FORMS, POLITICAL EFFECTS 31
“How to link up?” 36
THE VORACIOUSNESS OF INFRASTRUCTURE 38
AFRICAN VISUAL ECONOMIES AND INFRASTRUCTURES 43
GHANAIAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE “HYPERPOLITICAL” 45
CHAPTERS’ OUTLINE 50
A NOTE ON METHODS & FIELDWORK 54
A NOTE ON LANGUAGE & CURRENCY 58

CHAPTER 1: FLASHING THE STATE 59
ARRIVAL #1. DOCKING IN GHANA 59
SCANDALOUS INFRASTRUCTURE 62
FASHIONING THE DUMSOCRACY 65
“Making Noise” 68
FLASHING THE STATE 74
“Noise is better than cutlass” 77
TRENDING CRISIS 79
TRENDING AND THE ACHIEVABLE PRESENT 81
ABASO, SANKOFA: POSTCOLONIAL TIME 83
THE DEATH OF DUMSOR 85

CHAPTER 2: ECG DE-LIGHTING CUSTOMERS 86
THE STATE AS FAMILY BUSINESS 87
NEGOTIATING BILLS: ECG CUSTOMER SERVICE 92
CRITICAL DE-SYSTEM 95
INCOMPREHENSION AS ACCOUNTABILITY 99
LEGIBILITY AND REVELATION 102
THE ALMIGHTY ROOM 6: A STATE AT WORK 105
NUMBEARABILITY 107
GADGET INTERROGATIONS: CONFESSIONS & REVELATIONS 109
ESTIMATED BILLS, UNCERTAIN NUMBERS 111
CONCLUSION: ECG’S VISION STATEMENT 116

CHAPTER 3: THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTRACT OF ELECTRICITY 118
INDIRECT RULE AND SELECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE 118
INDEPENDENCE AND THE NATIONAL GRID 124
NEW ELECTRIC VISIONS 134
INFRASTRUCTURES OF DIGNITY 137
THE HOLLOWING OF THE CONTRACT 140
“BOOM TIMES”: J.J. RAWLINGS 143
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>THEY MAKE US LOOK COLO</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Privitalising ECG</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prepaid meters as “CNN Broadcasters”</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compound Housing and the Domestic Politics of Infrastructure</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meters and infrastructural governance</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Precarity and marginality: The right to non-infrastructure</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>THOSE SITTING IN AC</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heat of darkness</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political History of AC: “Those sitting in AC”</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racial atmospherics</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The miasmatic imagination</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>King Malaria and God Mosquito</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>IN PRAISE OF BRIGHTNESS</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Boom Light”</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The wonders of brightness</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Obaa Korkor”</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Brighti”</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blue is the colour of love</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>YOUR LIMIT IS YOUR DRESS</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Folds of power</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Appearance is number 1”</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sartorial Prosperity Gospel</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The banal miraculous: Modesty &amp; neatness</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“First Appearance”</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sartorial Dumsotactics</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion: Infrastructures of intimacy</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AFFINITY #1: Jumping Scales, creating the ordinary</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AFFINITY #2: Excess and defects: Creativity and crisis</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AFFINITY #3: Delivery and public goods</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AFFINITY #4: Infrastructures of intimacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Ghana, a ‘PhD’ stands as an acronym for two different kinds of interpretation. One points to the ‘prayer, hard work and determination’ essential to live a successful life. The other refers to the ‘pull him down syndrome’ that is believed to plague and obstruct these efforts. I would say this is a wonderfully apt representation of an (academic) PhD journey, but there are thankfully a multitude of persons whose encouragement, love and guidance have made this an incredibly enjoyable one.

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Figure 1. Map of Ghana.
Figure 2. Map of Accra and main neighbourhoods. From: Fagariba and Song (2016:149).
“Project Ghana” – Wanlov the Kubolor

Be careful how u project Ghana
Don’t photograph the borla (trash)
Don’t say it’s corrupt
We r gettin tinz in order
Don’t speak of the bad road
Just get a Range Rover
Don’t tweet of the shed load
Acquire a generator

(...)
Skin whitening adverts
We are very proud
Of our colors on the flag
Never doubt
It’s a gift not a bribe
To make the police like u
R u a celebrity with moni?
Our President is like u!

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1 A Ga word meaning “truant”, hustler; see Ato Quayson’s analysis (2010) of the term in Ghanaian literary and urban cultures.
2 Available online: https://soundcloud.com/foknbois/11-soulpete-project-ghana-ft-foknbois?in=foknbois/sets/fokn-ode-to-ghana
“Ghana”, musician Wanlov declared to me, “is being run like a Disco”. The “Disco” referred both metaphorically and literally to “Dumsor”, the colloquial Twi term for the energy crisis afflicting Ghana since 2014, evoking the cadence of the light switch going “off” (dum) and “on” (sor) across the urban landscape. Dumsor, as a form of connection and power, has profoundly impacted the political reality of Accra. In 2016, when I did fieldwork, Accra was a city running on electric nerves. Tensions and apprehensions about the deepening electricity crisis that was affecting the city for the past two years and the uncertainty of a worsening economy were expertly woven into politicians’ manifestos and exploded daily in media rhetoric and radio call-in opinion shows. “We heard it’s gonna stop so many times”, continued Wanlov, that “we don’t really see: we don’t see a steady light at the end of the tunnel, we just see a flashing light, you know, a disco light.” “If Ghana is being run like a disco”, I asked Wanlov, “then who’s dancing?” He smiled: “We are all still standing and smiling, so we are all dancing”. And dancing we try would reply Ghanaian rapper superstar Sarkodie, but with caution and difficulty: Dumsor, as he put it in his song of protest against the crisis, is like a “villager in heels” (okrasini ne heels) attempting to achieve the fragile stability of modernity.

Manuel Castells, in *The Rise of the Network Society*, argues that in the global networks of connectivity, communication, and circulation of the twenty-first century, “the switchers are the power-holders” (2010[1996]:502). The infrastructural imagination of Dumsor inscribes a visual economy of desire at the heart of this ‘switching power’: the patterns of Dumsor, it was popularly joked, were enforced by a “control man” at the national Electricity Company, sitting behind his control board, switching on and off the lights to different neighbourhoods according to which girlfriend he would be visiting that night. In other versions, Dumsor was believed to be caused by a class of schoolchildren visiting the Electricity Company, all granted a turn at the switching board (figure 3). Dumsor, as described by upcoming singer Degree, was akin to the deceptive character of the trickster seductress: off and on, off and on, good today, bad tomorrow, enticing you to all sorts of sweetness only to deceive you into the traps of marriage.

Infrastructure has long been used as a rich metaphor to describe economic structures and social organisation. In this thesis, I argue that infrastructure also has an elective affinity with political power. Dumsor, as a metaphor of connection and cut, of light and
darkness, allows us to “think infrastructure’s metaphorical capacities with its material forms, and to think those material forms along with their capacities to generate aspiration and expectation, deferral and abandonment” (Appel, Anand and Gupta 2015, emphasis mine). This thesis attempts to connect these material forms of deficient, dumsorised electrical infrastructure with socio-political formations. Like political power, infrastructure has a tendency to aspire to more, and yet often comes short of meeting its initial terms of delivery; political power and infrastructure both attempt to serve and define particular notions of the public and the public goods; they are both perceived as forms of unbearable but vital connections; they excite popular furies but impel compliance, they arouse suspicion, doubt, fear, and yet provide the basic conditions of economic and social security. They represent the enabling hindrances through and despite which urban living takes place. Through their capacity to straddle scales, to stage the monumental and the magnificent and then reappear in the banal and the everyday, they have a certain magical power to create, form, and severe associations – to shape the flows and networks of effects the city relies on for its own ability to live. In turn, these effects have an ability to reanimate uncharted memories and resonances lodged in volatile elements of history, that weave their own stories of power and resilience.

Figure 3. The Excursion at ECG. Credit: Wobetekpa.
Infrastructure, Politics, Postcolonial Theory

"Power Flashes" looks at particular visual manifestations of electrical power and their relation to political power in Accra. In electrical terms, a power flash is the signal sent out by worn-out power lines during a storm or a tornado. The power flash becomes a warning that things have been led astray, a flashing image of disruption, degradation, and damage. It points to the momentary sparks of discontent lodged against an infrastructural economy of neglect and disrepair, a flashing denunciation of the partial fixes and incomplete solutions that dominate the “urban now” (Baloji and de Boeck 2016) – a moment of suspension that fuses together past remnants of inequality and exploitation, contemporary desires and future im/possibilities.

But “flashing” in Ghanaian parlance describes a particular mode of communication: it is used to express the attempts to connect by generating missed calls, signalling both one’s desire to be called back and one’s inability to pay the cost of sustained connection.¹ Flashing manifests a state of being connected without having access to power, but also of connection without content. As such, it questions notions of access as a putative and often unrealizable ideal, and explores the asymmetries, marginalities (Burrell 2012b) and toxicities implied and prefigured in connection itself. Connections, as “clusters of promise”, create a relation of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011:23), spawning webs of desires and imaginations in spite of their defective premises. This thesis explores the tenacity and fragility of these webs, and the political potency of disturbance and interference to understandings of connectivity, by considering flashing – a particular mode of communication and form of infrastructural connection – as an aesthetics of political address.

"Power Flashes" also evokes the aesthetics of particular types of appearances that only occur in extreme brevity. In photography, the flash emerged as a technology of revelation and denunciation: as a strategy of artificial illumination in darkness, it sought to reveal details hidden in plain sight, to expose the mysteries of surfaces (Flint 2017a). In that sense, flash had a certain democratic purchase, even as it was tinted by the allure of shock and sensationalist witnessing (Flint 2017b). Similarly, the ‘power flashes’ I

¹ The practice became so popular that network providers developed a “Call-me-back service” featuring attractive offers for users of “flashing units” (the minimum airtime required to generate a missed call) (Sey 2011:386-7).
describe here express grassroots strategies of revelation, seeking ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ for the actions of their political leaders even as these produce their own surfaces of occlusion and opacity. Indeed, the aesthetics of the flash also produce a somatic effect of blindness (Flint 2017a: 54; Thompson 2015:14,20), recording under erasure; this thesis looks at the violence of particular practices of illumination and their effects.

During the energy crisis, Ghanaians stressed to me time and time again that electricity had become incontrovertibly “political”. They generally implied by this that the construction, management and delivery of electricity (and infrastructure more generally) had become a decisive influencer in the political process, guiding electoral outcomes, economic policies, strategic public spending, and international relations under efforts for development and projects of economic liberalization. This was seen to have made infrastructure particularly amenable to corruption and clientelism; voters and politicians alike recognised the immense possibilities of electricity and electrification rates as evidential and evaluative measures of growth, development, and democracy (Briggs 2012). As the time of my fieldwork coincided with an election year (for the December 2016 elections), this politicisation was particularly noticeable. It was well-known, for instance, that in Nima and Chorkor, poor neighbourhoods of Accra but swing zones in elections, people living in precarious housing enjoyed air-conditioning, deep-freezers and TVs for free. In my neighbourhood, I was surprised to find an AC box ingeniously installed in the cardboard wall of one of the local big men’s rooms. (Free) electricity was often framed as a national right central to the constitution of citizenship (Rupp 2013; MacLean et al. 2016), and by extension political power, expressed in clear injunctions to politicians that the voting outcome would depend on the provisioning of electricity (figure 4). Yet beyond this instrumentalist view of infrastructure as a political pawn in Ghana (e.g. André and Mesplé-Somps 2011; Briggs 2012; Harding 2015), I contend here that electricity was also ‘political’ in the sense that the visual and material effects that it enabled (or prevented) during the crisis and throughout this election year became primary modes of addressing the deceptive and ambiguous logic of political power, and its processes of distribution. As Brian Larkin argues (2008; 2013), infrastructures are not simply technical systems but aesthetic vectors of political address. Indeed, the politics of the energy crisis in the election year were not simply a tactical way of
acquiring tangible goods, but a mode of *relating* to power – of fashioning relations to and of power – and its infrastructural logics of uncertainty, illusion, and delivery.

Figure 4. Dumsor Demonstration. Credit: Kodjo Silas.
The power flashes I describe throughout this thesis, the relations of, and to power that unfold through electrical infrastructure, express a distrust of infrastructure’s political forms and the defective excess of connection – promising more than it can sustain, and yet somehow sustaining itself from this shortage. It analyses the contemporary terrain of infrastructural relations and their political inflections, as well as charting some of the historical contours and effects that infrastructure reanimates, casting a fresh look at theories of postcolonialism and race, neoliberalism and the global economy. Infrastructures in the Global South are often seen through discourses of modernity or development, as opportunities for economic growth and indicators of ‘bare needs’, of the essential conditions of liveability. Yet to Ghanaians, infrastructures are also at the forefront of historical discourses of race, nationalism, citizenship, and political systems. Infrastructure, as a particularly resilient aspect of colonial and postcolonial projects, today sutures (Baloji and de Boeck 2016) local imaginaries of modernity, power, and political (in)efficacy. The current electricity crisis in Ghana, which has taken importance as a marker of the State of the Nation, brings forth an infrastructural discussion of the postcolonial premises and failures of the Ghanaian state. Infrastructures, as socio-material assemblages, gather multiple temporalities and political projects. Through a focus on the infrastructural event of Dumsor, I attempt to unfold some of these projects, and to elucidate thereby the elective affinity between political power and infrastructure in contemporary Accra. In particular, I look at the ways that electrical infrastructure has invested particular forms of connections (as modes of address) with particular expectations of delivery, that create an interpretive grid and entangling web of intentions and designs.
Flashing: rethinking connection and access

In her work on new media and communication practices in Ghana, Araba Sey (2011:386) describes the shifting uses of “flashing” from a means to request a call-back to a generalized desire to connect without clear functional intent, a mode of sustaining relations and maintaining intimacies. Flashing becomes a way of greeting without words, a small gesture of care. Flashing, as a mode of communication, describes a way of participating in a network of connectivity without full membership (Ferguson 2002), and expresses the desires for connections and the resilience of connectivity even under the erasure, marginalization or impossibilities they inflict. Flashing conveys a situation of “partial connection” (Strathern 1991), of being connected without the ability to communicate a message. At the same time, this new use of flashing as a form of intimacy-in-marginality, of participation-in-exclusion, expresses the resilience and affective excess that emerges from the defects of infrastructure.

This situation of unequal connection under differential access, signalling particular types of demands through the inability to pass on content, provides quite a fitting image for conceptualizing Ghana’s infrastructural situation. Ghana boasts one of the highest electrification rate in sub-Saharan Africa – 83% for the national average and 91% in urban areas (USAID 2018). By comparison, only 35% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa have access to electricity (IEA 2016); Ghana’s neighbours Togo, Burkina Faso and even Côte d’Ivoire only reach 27%, 18% and 62%, respectively. As we will see in chapter 3, high electrification rates and an extensive national grid have played historical roles as the signs of Ghana’s socialist ideals of national connection first pioneered by Kwame Nkrumah at Independence in 1957 through electrification as a form of decolonization and the creation of a new nationalist publics (explored in chapter 3). Today, however, the national grid is interspersed by frequent interruptions, due to an increased dependence on debilitating networks of imports for crude oil, an unreliable hydropower dam suffering from lowering water levels, and the obsolete, degraded nature of its equipment, dating back to the 1960s. During the time when I did fieldwork, people had access to electricity intermittently (twice a week during the worst of the crisis). Afrobarometer’s 2016 survey suggests that of the 87% of households connected to the grid in Ghana, only 42% of those experienced reliable power (Howard, Okuye and Penar 2016:1); across the continent, Ghanaians (along with Nigerians and Guineans)
ranked electricity supply amongst their highest-priority issues (see also IEA 2016:3,19), and in the period between the Round 4 and the Round 6 survey (2008 to 2016) Ghana saw a dramatic 40% drop in government approval rate, expressing the political contours of the crisis.

Since 2008, Ghana has experienced an increasingly unreliable power supply, culminating in a full-blown electricity crisis between 2014 and 2016. The shortages were initially due to decreased rainfalls and low water levels at the Akosombo Dam, one of the main providers of electricity in southern Ghana. Interestingly, the shortages were not due to a lack of capacity, an inability to meet the demands of rising consumption, as it was argued in some international reports (e.g. Fritsch and Poudineh 2015). In fact, Ghana’s installed capacity for electricity generation during the 2014-16 crisis actually exceeded maximum demand (Boateng 2014) – reaching 2087 MW at peak load for a generation capacity of 3759 MW (Kumi 2017:2; Energy Commission 2017:5) (figure 5). “Dumsor” was not caused by a lack of capacity, but by problems of connections in the networks on which electricity generation and distribution relies, including problems with fuel supply and rising fuel prices, the procurement of gas from the Nigeria gas pipeline, lowering water levels at the dam, major technical and commercial losses at the distribution company for Southern Ghana, ECG (Electricity Company of Ghana), and a circle of accumulated debts between the key energy stakeholders (figure 6).

2 In 2014-2016, Ghana’s energy mix was composed of approximately 64% hydropower, 35% from thermal powerplants, and 1% from solar – a proportion that is, however, projected to increase in coming years (Eshun 2016).

3 In 2016, ECG reported technical and commercial losses of 23.6% (Energy Commission 2017:13).
The crisis in Ghana thus exposes the shortcomings of a notion of ‘access’ simply predicated on material capacity. In energy systems today, access does not guarantee supply: power might be unreliable or unaffordable (Sackeyfio 2018:119). This is not simply a point for infrastructural policy: it also demands an ethnographic attention to the premises and im/possibilities of connection itself, and of its lived experience. It requires analysing what, anthropologically, might be made of desires to connect and difficulties of connection, of what modalities of the political these connections make im/possible. As Akhil Gupta has argued (2015), access is a precarious achievement, an infrastructural relation that must be interrogated, not presumed. In India, he argues, the lived experience of electricity as a form of surveillance and control rather than a
liberating power, and of its absence as conducive to a lively social and political sphere, befuddles normative ideas of accessibility, and of the democratic corollaries of ‘delivery’. In Ghana, the presence of an infrastructural system that is there but not working questions a notion of precarity as assumed to result from material scarcity – from a ‘lack’ of connection or access. Rather, infrastructural precarity in Accra today is in fact inherent in the very presence of connection, in the perception that the signs of political power – like the delivery of electricity – always yield both more and less than they promise, demanding responses that seek a path through and across their deficiencies and hold on to the material signs of their promising potential.

One day, I was sitting at the Electricity Company, waiting – as we did most days – for “the network” to come back. “The network” referred to the internet system on which the new customer management system of the Company depended for all its operations. In 2016, amid the energy crisis, ECG embarked on a series of reforms aimed at preparing the company for privatisation (discussed in chapter 4). This included a new customer management software which shifted its information to an online database, supposedly making it more efficient; what resulted, unsurprisingly, was a vicious circle of infrastructural dependencies. As we waited, and waited, for The Return of The Network, one ECG staff suddenly joked: “This network! The net is working, but the work is not working!” His witty comment illustrates that the crisis was really not caused by a lack of capacity but by the difficulty of connection itself, of how to make the “work” work when material foundations are already in place. Dumsor as a cut in connection was not simply seen as the result of the arbitrary exercise of connections and disconnections carried out by the state’s employees, but expressed the insufferable pattern of an infrastructure that no longer knew how to ‘go on’, how to ‘link up’, how to ‘on’ the on, how to ‘work’ the work in the presence of its nets. I argue, then, that Dumsor was perceived as a tragedy not because it was a ‘failure’ largely caused by corruption, misgovernance, mismanagement, technical inefficiency, or maintenance, as it was often explained away and represented in the press; but because it was a cut in connection, dramatizing the problematic nature of connectivity itself, of its precarious achievement, of the cruel dependencies it wielded, reminiscent and indeed rekindling historical networks of extraction and exploitation. As Jenna Burrell has argued in relation to internet users and online scammers in Accra, global connectivities have created new marginalities and invisibilities, enforced in the asymmetries of representational and
participatory power (2012:183). Infrastructural histories of the continent, and particularly Ghana, display a situation of participatory exclusion in global networks, of participation without membership (cf. Ferguson 2002), that is seen as defining of the contemporary situation in Africa today (Weiss 2004:8). The West African coast’s history of “extraversion” (Bayart and Ellis 2000) has been characterized by a hyper-implication in global connective networks, having long provided the raw materials of modernity that built the infrastructure and ‘modernity’ of the West – yet rarely materialized similar access to wealth and goods in their places of origin. Histories of exclusion and exploitation are layered, I argue, in the metaphors, ironies, and humour that surrounded the imagination of the energy crisis. As we will see in chapter 3, the history of electricity in Ghana reflects these problematic patterns of connections and disconnections: electricity was first introduced in the early 1900s by the colonial railway administration to connect the gold mines of Obuasi to the coast, inscribing a “selective territorialized investment” of capital concentrated in “extractive enclaving” (Ferguson 2005:378), with very little infrastructural benefit to the surrounding population.

Flashing also describes a particular form of attention, a mode of listening sparked by something that stands out from the background noise. When listening to radio, people would describe as “flashing” a particular quality of sound bytes that results from a constant hook to a faulty and overcharged grid – in which what stands out, what ‘flashes’ from the noise and sparks the mind retains that grainy, distorted, unclear but enticing quality (Larkin 2004). The flashing appearances and images circulating through a degraded, partial and defective infrastructure attest to the difficulty of producing and sustaining infrastructural visions today, but also to their enduring appeal, resilience, and imaginative possibilities. This ethnography, constituted by particular moments, images, and political events of electricity in Accra, attempts to explore these possibilities. By looking at the moments and signs of absence, partial presence, and modes of access to electrical infrastructure, I look at the way that political power is manifested through infrastructure, but also at the unforeseen, sometimes invisible routes and associations that infrastructural connections assemble.
Flashing Images, Unfolding Events

The thesis unfolds through a series of infrastructural visions and events that all ponder the relationship between electricity, political power, and postcolonial legacies: the surreal arrival of a power barge from Turkey supposed to relieve Ghana from the darkness, docking under the tunes of the Titanic soundtrack (chapter 1); the dubious exigency of numbers on electricity bills (chapter 2), and the prepaid meters ‘running faster than Usain Bolt’ and making publicly visible people’s economic deficits and precarious situation, like “CNN Broadcasters” (chapter 4); the pan-African visions of Nkrumah’s torch of freedom carried through the national project of the Akosombo dam as the utopic creation of a postcolonial public and electrical citizenry through the national grid, and the disillusions of post-independence promises and the increased hollowing and facetiousness of the infrastructural ‘contract’ (chapter 3); the atmospheres of power sustained through air-conditioning, and the colonial history of ‘atmospheres’ (chapter 5); the aesthetics of light (chapter 6); and the moral creases of ironed shirts compromised by Dumsor, creating an ambiguous visual and performative terrain of sartorial, moral uncertainty defined by a distrust of flamboyance and a respect for modesty, in sharp contrast to political excess (chapter 5).

These visions attempt to move back and forth on different social scales and historical focus, to reproduce the work of infrastructures, as gatherings and unfoldings of socio-material events. Events, as Marilyn Strathern has powerfully argued (2013), can be seen as images that condense layers of resonances and past encounters that unfold in the appearance of brevity and singular manifestations. As Walter Benjamin famously wrote, “the past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (1999:247). This thesis attempts to draw some of these “flashes” and evoke the ways in which they come to form the “constellations” of the present (Benjamin 1999:255), looking at the way in which a particular event – the energy crisis of 2014-2016 – spread and folded into the “recesses of the ordinary” (Das 2007:1).

The flash also introduces an aesthetics of brevity: it announces the bursts, the brief clashes during which power is made visible and contested. But much of the struggles and concerns I describe in the thesis also surround the question of what comes after the
flash: how to keep it “brighting” for a little longer, how to prolong the flash beyond its moment of crisis, how to make it last despite its infrastructural recalcitrance? This takes me to the second aspect of the flash: the particular visibilities that it creates and demands. Flashing as a technology of exposure and revelation in the history of photography made visible the “detritus of the everyday” (Flint 2017b), the details and dents, the wear and tear, the wrinkles of things. People were particularly frustrated by the crisis because it disrupted some of the technologies that sustained the “economy of appearances” (Tsing 2000) crucial to navigating the uncertain opportunities of the city and its sites of power and influence. The importance of visibilities and the complexity of the visible were brought out particularly acutely during the crisis, as people attempted to make do without bright lights, fans, and irons. “Flashing” denotes an ability to shine in the temporary (Thompson 2015); the concept of “First Appearances” (described in chapter 7) that was emphasized in people’s discussion of success in their everyday conveys the impression people make in the flash of a second, an ability to shine without engaging in shameful and morally questionable displays of flamboyance and wealth, but rather in the ability to balance neatness and sharpness, to stand out while remaining modest. As Kate Flint has argued, to explore the aesthetics of flash “is to interrogate the connections between light and revelation, the fragility of the borderlines between awe and destruction, and the limitations of the technological sublime” (2017a:11).

The narratives and stories around electrical appliances and their unreliability during Dumsor bring out a crisis of the visual itself, and the contested morality and “mysteries” of the seen in Ghana (Wendl 1999:154). In chapter 6, I look at the desires for brightness through lightening and illuminating technologies that challenge, but also intersect with, racialized narratives of light and privilege. In chapter 7, I describe people’s “ironing stories”, as their “crumpled appearance” due to the inability to iron prevented many from attending Church or going to the office. I discuss the kinds of moral debates and judgements that they provoked, and reflect on the links between these banal and everyday aspects of infrastructural interference and wider political narratives, between intimate practices and national discourse. The desire for bright lights and sharp lines resonated in political advocacy and popular obsession with veracity and transparency in political – and infrastructural – matters. In chapters 2 and 4, I look at the introduction of a series of neoliberal reforms at the Electricity Company in preparation for its privatisation. New billing practices at the Electricity Company (chapter 2) and the
implementation of suspicious new ‘private’ (yet visibly hyper-public) meters (chapter 4) became embroiled in discourses and desires for ‘transparency’ that did not however reveal some kind of essential truth or reality, but opened up the gates of storifying political and infrastructural drama, in a way that questions the properties of transparency as a revelation of visibility and legibility.
INTRODUCTION – POWER FLASHES: INFRASTRUCTURAL VISIONS

The Dumsorization of Africa

On the 27th August 2015, Kenyan Professor Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba gave a monumental speech in Ghana entitled “the Tragedy of Africa”. As he eloquently lamented the failure of post-independence governments to “exorcise the ghost of colonialism” and dressed the inventory of neo-colonialist ventures under “kleptocratic” regimes practising “voodoo economics”, he suddenly invoked the revival of the late 1950s African nationalist leaders, and with great effect he asked: “Kwame Nkrumah, when he rises up today, Ahmed Sékou-Touré, when he rises up, Kambarare Nyegere when he rises up; Ahmed Ben Bella when he rises up; Patrice Emery Lumumba when he rises up; Ahmadou Ahidjo when he rises up; Nelson Mandela when he rises up; what will they see? Dumsor Dumsor”. The revelation was met with much laughter, and as he
invoked the nostalgia for pan-African dreams of hydroelectric dams and decolonized power, he forcefully declared: “This dumsorization of African countries must stop!” (Lumumba 2015). Lumumba’s diagnostic of the twenty-first century African tragedy in the energy crises of the continent places infrastructure at the very forefront of popular and political imaginations of Africa. Dum/Sor, as a cynical Manichean image of darkness and light, of metaphorical and literal power in contemporary Ghana, reminds us that infrastructures are much more than technical, financial, or organizational systems: they are aesthetic networks, deeply involved in the circulation and production of images, illusions, desires, and in/visibilities (Larkin 2008; 2013). They are central to claims of “membership” (Ferguson 2002) and revisions of modernity’s “denial of coevality” (Fabian 1983) in the global economy. In Accra, Dumsor was often referred to as a “tragedy”, a “crisis”, or simply as “bullshit”. Dumsor, as an image, seemed to encompass the woes of contemporary Ghana (figure 8), evoking corrupt misgovernance and nepotism, technical inefficiency and lack of maintenance.

Figure 8. Dumsor map of Ghana. Source: unknown.
Dumsor is a contemporary urban Ghanaian form that brings back the issue of the representation of the continent at large and historicises—often by satirising—contemporary infrastructure within colonial and postcolonial legacies of racial politics and visualisations of power. In the electrical map of the world obtained from satellite data on lights at night (a new framework to measure economic growth—Henderson, Storeygard and Weil 2009) (figure 9), Africa remains nothing more than an erasure, a faint outline—a shadowy contour lying below a neon-bright, almost 3D light-filled Europe. It stands as a dark, vast “blank” spot (Miller 1985) awaiting the relief of electric light promised by the arrival of foreign investors, humanitarian workers—a new form of “electric re-colonization” (McDonald 2009:xvi). In the discourse of electrification on the continent, the “darkness” of Africa, which was once invented, imagined, conventionalized as a moral contention, is framed as the sole obstacle to development, in headlines such as “Lighting a Dark Continent—Electricity in Africa” (The Economist, 2014) or “Africa shines: an unexpected bright spot in the global economy”. And yet, as Dayo Olopade writes in The Bright Continent, “a thermal map of Africa, depicting temperature and sunlight, confirms that the continent is literally bright. While the OECD countries appear largely in cool tones of blue and green, Africa glows red and orange” (2014:161).

Figure 9. The world at night: satellite data on lights as indicators of growth. From: Henderson, Storeygard and Weil (2009:44).

As the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo viscerally put it (2000), the tenacity and viscosity of that trope remains a burden whose “ugly odour has clung to Africa, all things African, Africans and people of African descent everywhere, and has not faded yet (…)
What have Africans done to deserve such absolute hexing?” In the words of the President of the African Development Bank, Akinwumi Adesina: “Africa is simply tired of being in the dark. It is time to take decisive action and turn around this narrative: to light up and power Africa”. “Lighting up Africa” becomes a historical reversal, yet at the same time it attests to the tenacity of this image of light and darkness, and to the violence that attends the slippage from metaphor to literality – “where matter and myth connect and disconnect continuously” (Taussig 2004:xviii-xix) –, from imagination to actuality, entrenching Africa as a passive canvas begging to be transformed, acted upon, illuminated, empowered by external action.

And so this thesis begins with a particular kind of “infrastructural violence” (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012), not simply one inscribed in the physical structures that mobilise and entrench marginalisation and disconnection, but one invested in the very terms and modes of codification, measurement, and benchmarking of a world order prescribed upon infrastructural efficacy such as electrification rates (Rupp 2013) that entertain affective imaginations and unequal positionalities in a global world. Infrastructures remain sites of entanglements that inherit patterns of relations of earlier geopolitical moments and must contend with their ongoing ruination (Stoler 2016:350). Infrastructures fuse colonial legacies with postcolonial predicaments: Western

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4 As do, indeed, most current programmes of energy development such as The World Bank’s or Akon’s “Lighting Africa”, the African Development Bank’s “Light up and Power Africa” or Obama’s “Power for Africa!”.
modernity was established by building and exploiting “landscapes of parasitic infrastructures” in the colonies (Christensen 2017:1). Infrastructure in Ghana is today still associated with a parasitic ‘culture of borrowing’ and ‘fake contracts’, operating in a bureaucratized economy of theft that entertains neo-colonial dependencies. But violence also engenders its own modes of coping and resilience. The uncanny echoes of Dumsor with missionary and colonial projects of spiritual enlightenment have not passed unnoticed by satirical commentators, who decried the crisis as a biblical parody, paraphrasing verses: “ECG, Generator, Solar panel… what shall it profit a man to have all the light and die in darkness? Receive Jesus, the only true Light”. “Be a beacon of truth – don’t shut your light off from the rest of the world, for you’re the light of the world (Matt 5:14). Don’t be #Dumsor”. Dumsor became a new presidential greeting: “Me ma wo Dumsor!”, a wordplay on the greeting “Me ma wo akye” (Good morning / I give you greeting), to which one would replay: “Yaa Mahama!”, the name of the President, instead of “Yaanua” (the appropriate acknowledgement of the greeting). This satirisation of darkness, playing on the very terms and themes that are still used today to assess, mark off, and diagnose the ‘ills’ of the continent, expresses the resilience of a vernacular political imagination finely attuned to the potency and tenacity of this lexical field, “partaking in the scorn about its non-modernity” (Enwezor 2010:614) and about the modernist project of infrastructure itself. My focus on Dumsor, as a popular complex of infrastructural politics, intends to capture some of the creativity, resilience, and sense of ironic political consciousness that pervades everyday life in Accra and exceeds the technical, functional aspects of infrastructural matters.

**Modernity & Afro-futurity**

In Ghana, as elsewhere in the Global South, infrastructures have come to be seen as universal indicators of growth and development, as visible manifestations and methods for measurable and standardized variables like electrification rates and access to drinkable water (Strauss et al. 2013). Often taken as the most objective signs of economic and political success, associated with international ideals of development and ‘good governance’, infrastructural projects have become key sites of global attention and investments (AEEP 2016; Baptista 2018; Castellano et al. 2015). In the infrastructural discourse of Africa, electrical power – including electrification, reliability, generation capacity, affordability, and sustainability – is seen as the largest infrastructural challenge on the continent (Foster and Briceño-Garmendia 2010). The
developmental complex of infrastructure emerges from discourses of modernity and its telos. Historians of electricity have traced the emergence of “the new networks of power” (Hughes 1983) foundational to the lifestyles, environments, habits of the very definition of modernity and the political organisation of the modern nation-state (Mann 2008). At least since Leslie White’s seminal article on energy (1943), but already prefigured in E.B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, infrastructures have mapped an evolutionary trajectory of progress based on stages and types of material and energy fuel. In the electroscape of modernity and economic development, Ghana – and Africa at large – have usually been seen as the “Cinderella” (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2003:350) lagging behind in “modernity’s teleology of catching up” (Pratt 2002:30). Energy crises only reinforce the denigration of Africa to the delayed site of what Enwezor has called the “aftermodern” (2010), that which has been relegated to “an epistemology of non-existence” (614), that both contends with and struggles to disengage from the hegemonic construct of modernity as a quintessential project of supremacist European temporality reigning under the tyranny of the “synchronous” (Bhabha 1994:240).

At the same time, Africa is increasingly seen as a place of innovation and emergence (Simone 2004) promising an “energy renaissance” with renewable energy solutions and sustainable development (Africa Progress Panel 2015; Bright and Hruby 2015; Olopade 2014:75), crafting alternative imaginations of technological futures. Narratives of “leapfrogging” (e.g. World Bank 2017) are heralded as a jump to a ‘hyper-modernity’ that contests the linear trajectory of infrastructural development and attempts to bypass the encumbrances of infrastructural dependencies. Yet the category of the “next” or the “emergent” can also seem to be refusing Africa the possibility of an achievable and liveable present – something I take up further in chapter 1. Africa’s impending prosperity is often seen as a mirage, perpetuating a sense of constantly-deferred futurity. Recent African science-fiction writing and films problematize this futurity and re-imagine the infrastructural terms of the contemporary. In Deji Olukotun’s After the Flare (2017) – the sequel to his Nigerians in Space (2014) – a solar flare has produced an infrastructural inversion, destroying the electricity grids and connective tissues of the

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5 See, for instance, the numerous examples of inventive economic technologies that bypass formal banking institutions and retail spaces, such as “M-Pesa”, a mobile-phone based payment system in Kenya; Jumia, a Nigerian e-commerce site that lets buyers pay cash on delivery; and in Ghana, MTN mobile money that allows mobile phone users to transfer money across the country (see Breckenridge 2010).
West, as Africa remains the only place on earth with working electricity and a space station, whilst the West appears as a stranded, ruinous landscape from where all attempt to escape. In the recent film Black Panther, the fictive substance of vibranium reimagines an infrastructure of Afrofuturistic hypermodernity developed from the mineral riches of the continent, protected from predatory extraction from the West. Both reveal that infrastructures do build imaginaries that stage their own forms of chronopolitics, and trace the course of geopolitics and national fortunes. These Afrofuturistic visions present a “crisis of exposure which produces a crisis of possibility” (Williams 1978:109; emphasis mine), in which crisis, creativity, and critique merge. They engage the proleptic as much as the retrospective (Kodwo 2003), and expose a changing world order that proclaims the increasing irrelevance – the “majestic petrifaction” (Enwezor 2010:598) of the West in the redundancy and inefficiency of its infrastructures.

Similarly, the Comaroffs (2012) argue that the Global South provides a retrospective-proleptic glimpse of the contemporary crises of capitalism in Euro-America, enouncing an inverted epistemological order. Africa, the Comaroffs argue, has long lived with the consequences of neoliberal policies and rapacious economies; to the extent that the former colonies served as the laboratories of capitalism, they have anticipated the post-capitalist landscape of ruins and neoliberal moment of crisis that the West is currently “catching up” to (2012:123). But as critics have pointed out, this theoretical gesture of reversal at best “leaves intact the very epistemic posture, orientation, or disposition” at stake (Aravamudan 2012; Ferguson 2012) and at worst, “bespeaks a fetishism of originality and precedence” (Aravamudan 2012). Perhaps a more useful way of gleaning the prospects of infrastructure and global geopolitics is, in my view, not in giving primacy or precedence to one or the other, but in recognizing the folded temporalities and political projects that infrastructures compress and gather, and which unfold during particular events of significance like Dumsor. In the glimmering promise of the “aftermodern” (Enwezor 2010), Dumsor becomes a condensed image through which crossing transects of time, debris (Stoler 2016) and recovered futures unravel and “flash up” (Benjamin 1999:247).

Infrastructural Forms, Political Effects
The so-called “infrastructural turn” (Graham 2009) in anthropology and the social sciences has promised new redefinitions of the political (Venkatesan et al. 2018) that
pay attention to the material politics of infrastructures (such as transportation, energy networks, communication channels, water and sanitation systems) in organising the relationships between society, the state, the environment and the economy (Knox 2017). Infrastructures are seen as a “political terrain” (Von Schnitzler 2013:671), central to claiming particular rights and understandings of citizenship (Anand 2017; Diouf and Fredericks 2014; Redfield and Robins 2016; Wafer 2012), forming – or preventing – particular publics (Collier et al. 2016; Harvey and Knox 2015; Mitchell 2011; Tischler 2013) and notions of the public good (Bear and Mathur 2015; Chalfin 2014).

Infrastructures, as some have argued, operate through particular techno-political devices (von Schnitzler 2013; Coleman 2014; Mitchell 2011) that redefine the relationships between flows of circulation, materials, and modalities of rule. They transform geographies, transcend national boundaries and inscribe increasingly “splintered” and “hopping” forms of financial capital and economic zones across the globe (Cross 2015; Ferguson 2005; Graham and Marvin 2001).

Yet it is often unclear, as Hannah Knox (2017:373) and others (e.g. Harvey, Long in Venkatesan et al. 2018: 4,41) have pointed out, what kinds of political engagement they produce or prevent, or how different this attention to “material politics” (Barry 2013) is from earlier approaches that have long been concerned with stressing the agency of objects and the importance of material praxis and materials over discursive formations (e.g. Drazin and Küchler 2015; Miller 1998, 2005;). In some studies, the ‘political’ becomes pre-emptively black-boxed as an ‘inherent’ feature or affordance of infrastructural systems (e.g. McFarlane and Rutherford 2008; Rupp, Strauss, Love 2013), rather than critically discussed through the very forms, materials, and configurations of infrastructural matters.

The current focus on infrastructural politics follows from a long tradition of recognizing the “politics of artefacts” (Winner 1980) and the “agency” of objects (Gell 1998) in shaping social relations, conditioning particular forms of “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977), bodies, and environments. Material culture studies were orientated around a particular agenda for recognizing the importance of materials and the material world in shaping social processes such as kinship (Miller 1998) and identity (Friedman 1994a). They were inspired by earlier attempts (notably by Simmel, Benjamin, and Kracauer) to reveal the social through its mundane and banal details, to deconstruct the infrastructure of
sociality and expose the illusion of its stability and anthropocentric distinctions as historically-situated projects (Latour 1991). Material culture studies attempted to reclaim the “humility” of things and to resist the “tyranny of the subject” (Miller 2005), blurring the distinction between objects and subjects (Lemonnier 2014), humanity and materiality, and studying the enduring effects of human efforts at enforcing this separation (Latour 1991). In contrast to earlier anthropological approaches that stressed structuralist and linguistic approaches to ethnographic phenomena, material culture studies shared a methodological interest in processual analysis rather than functionalist dogma, stressing the importance of agency over function, process over structure. Yet many material culture studies have tended to reify a dualistic focus on the “thing” and its effects on bodies or “the social”, without problematizing the wider environment and geopolitical formations in which these things acquire their semblance of solidity (what Latour (2005b) calls their “freeze-framing”). Studies that stressed the “social life of things” (Appadurai 1986) or traced commodity chains did help to provide a wider perspective on the transformative process of materials; yet even then, the singularity of the thing remains at the centre of analysis, and the “flows” through which they pass are assumed rather than problematized. By contrast, Latour has argued, following Heidegger, for a view of “things” as “gatherings”, an assembly of particular matters, relations, opinions, and people, that momentarily coalesce into what we call a thing, which Latour suggests we call “matters of concern” (2004) – that is, matters that are less orientated towards factuality or objectivity and instead implicate particular socio-material configurations of care and concern. In that view, the “social” is seen as a particular way of tracing associations, of creating new relations, rather than a pre-existing attribute of particular activities, groups, or spaces (Latour 2005a). Science and technology studies can be seen to have partially anticipated this turn to infrastructure, by looking at more diffuse or distributed processes of agency to hybrid “actants” of human and non-human, that oppose the supposedly-defined entities of the social: institutions, bodies, humans, objects, through the notion of “network” (Latour 2005a) and assemblage. Manuel Castells (2010) described the rise of a “network society” in the “Information Age” organized around the new “social morphology” of the networking logic, in which flows take precedence over the stability of spaces, linking disparate nodes into a global net. Marilyn Strathern has famously critiqued (1996) the “auto-limitlessness” of networks and emphasized the imperative of networks to “cut”, to come to a rest, to condense in particular sites. Building on her critique, recent infrastructure
studies have questioned this notion of “flow” and the seamless movement (and indeed, the very imperative of movement) that it implies, arguing that infrastructures (or networks) are “complicated pleated arrangements”, full of “gaps and interstices” (Harvey et al. 2017:13), that defy any clear functional intent or directionality, and play a crucial role in shaping the social connections that they weave. What to do, indeed, while waiting for the network? What of the “work” that does not work even when the net is there? What kinds of disconnections, promises, and “morphologies” are enunciated there?

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Infrastructures are not simply a “site” or “object” for political contestation (e.g. Diouf and Fredericks 2014), but a constantly-shifting terrain (Star 1999) that moves along and redefines its own possibilities and impossibilities of political address (Larkin 2013). Scholars of “new materialisms” or “vital materialities” have argued for a “political ecology of things” (Bennett 2009) that takes into account the vibrancy and vitality of non-humans in redefining our responses to collective, environmental and political issues. Seeing electricity as an “actant”, and its infrastructure as an “agentic assemblage”, they argue, exposes the limitations of anthropocentric analyses which often fail to engage with the unpredictable, divergent trajectories of electrical movement that never fully comply to the routes imposed on them, but rather subscribe to a “strange logic of turbulence” (Bennett 2009:xi) that doesn’t map onto anthropocentric notions of agency (Coole and Frost 2010). Recognizing these forms of agency offers, they argue, a different ethics to shape policies around issues such as energy crises, sustainability, and climate change. Early on, Thomas Hughes (1983) in his pioneering study of electrification, argued that the engineers and managers that developed energy systems tempered their “drive for order” with the “tolerance of messy vitality” of electrical matter (1983:1). Tim Ingold has similarly long argued against the “block-thinking” tendency in the material culture literature that emphasizes artefacts and surfaces of operation at the expense of a “topology of lines, circulations and currents” that electricity, as a property of life itself, weaves into the “textility” of the world (Ingold and Anusas 2015:551).

As welcome as the recognition of turbulence and vitality may be to studies of infrastructure, they problematically seem to be guided by a question of ontological
condition that must be recovered or discovered (Benett 2009; Bruun Jensen and Morita 2016). The point of infrastructure studies is precisely to point out the complexity of the entanglements of the social and the material, and the political implications of these entanglements. As material culture studies taught us long ago, questions of ontology are better seen as consequences of those entanglements, rather than pre-formed states or pre-existing properties. Material properties and their “affordances” (Knappett 2004) are not fixed, but constantly debated and contested (Barry 2013:12). Rather than seeing infrastructural matters as an “assemblage” (Bennett 2005; Latour 2005a), I find it more useful to see them as forms of “entanglements”. Assemblages, while recognizing the heterogeneity and gathered multiplicity of socio-material relations, still place emphasis on a sense of entity or object (such as the power grid) – looking at “what is assembled” (Latour 2005a:2); they do not actually carve out the problematics of the connections that assemble them. Entanglements, instead, attend to the dissent and forced “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) of socio-material relations, to their contrived gathering, to the contested processes of binding that they create. Infrastructures problematize and expose the messiness of human and non-human entanglements; far from attempting to ‘resolve’ this messiness, infrastructures instead attend to the forms of living, the aspirations, the possibilities for new modes of relating that these entanglements bring forth. They allow us to reconsider, indeed, what ‘connecting’ and ‘relating’ entail, where precarities and dignities may lie, how exploitation and resilience might take shape. As Brian Larkin has argued (2015), “new materialism” theories sometimes elide the forming process of infrastructure, which is crucial to analysing their political work. Infrastructures form (Larkin 2015), they shape patterns of action and imagination for particular constellations of power. In this thesis, I use the notion of “flashing” to describe this particular form of connection that informs both a social positionality in a web of power, and a form of relating to others. As we will see in chapter 3 on the history of the national grid and its forms of gathering and abandonment-in-connection, connections themselves must be problematised, rather than assumed as forms of distribution, delivery, or production. This allows us to understand, for instance, what violences and precarities might be lodged in connections, what forced exclusion might be erased in their apparent inclusivity. Forms are not contained, bounded and coherent, but dynamic processes (Guyer 2015). Far from being structuring or structured, infrastructures are unstable (Larkin 2008), begging us to consider them as ambivalent terrains of contingency, incomprehension, and interference. Materials’ possibilities and
impossibilities are not only shaped by their social uses, which defy and diverge from their initial designs; our interlocutors’ own ways of phrasing those im/possibilities – or what Veena Das (2007:2) would call the relation between eventuality and actuality – are themselves conduits of knowledge and modes of form-giving that intervene in their material trajectories.

“How to link up?”

Mary Douglas once described (1989) her stay at the Hotel Kwilu in former Zaire as a perfect example of the “doubling” (Larkin 2013) of infrastructures in African modernities. The hotel, she described, had the appearance of a modest Sheraton, fitted with AC (a rarity at that time), telephone, and a large bathroom with flush toilet. But as night fell, she realised that the water pipes and electrical appliances in place were not in fact connected to the grid or a water supply. The image Kwilu, she then argued, stood as a “parable” for the increasing disconnection between branches of anthropological – and social sciences – scholarship (864). The Hotel Kwilu wonderfully expresses the anthropological – but also ethical – questions raised by infrastructure: “How to link up”, as Douglas put it (1989:864), through and beyond ties that lie unusable or deactivated, whose social and affective qualities extend beyond – and are no longer amenable to – their properties or ontic predispositions; how to keep the “on” we need “on-ning”, how to make the work “work” if the net remains an ontological convention for the very few who still believe in the power of the hypothetically plausible? And what kinds of projects are invested in the affective, material, political labour required to sustain those connections?

Studies of infrastructure – including this thesis – are often focused on perceived problems or disruptions (Graham 2009), such as leakages (Anand 2015), shortages (Graham, Desai, McFarlane 2013; Trovalla and Trovalla 2015a, 2015b), disconnections and blackouts (Mains 2012; Nye 2010;), disrepair (Chu 2014) and ruins (Tsing 2015). In part, this ‘negativity’ reflects the prominence of breakdown and its heightened visibility (Graham 2009:xi) – a point that has now become a truism in infrastructure studies. Infrastructures in the Global South, it is often argued, are more prominently visible in people’s everyday lives because of their heightened fragility and higher propensity to break down (ibid). Yet it remains rather unclear what this distinction
between the invisible infrastructures of the developed West and the visible (because failing) infrastructures of the Global South purports to distinguish, presumably about specifically ‘African’ or ‘Western’ forms of design or infrastructure. It seems to me more useful to study these moments of ‘breakdown’ as instructive anthropological moments that reveal ways of responding to material fragilities (including their representations), to the unravelling proclivity of infrastructures, and to the temporalities of crisis and uncertainty. Infrastructural ‘failure’ conceptualised as a sudden moment of breakdown or rupture makes three problematic assumptions: first, that things had always worked till then, implying a notion of failure as a direct property of rupture rather than experienced in the longue durée of infrastructural systems; secondly, that the notion of “workability”, or the work of ordinariness performed by infrastructures, and what it entails, can be assumed rather than problematized; and finally, that repairing failing infrastructures back to their previous functionality is the only way to go on.

More productively, I think, infrastructures’ ‘breakdowns’ dramatize fissures always already etched in the apparently sleek and smooth surfaces that have come to define our sense of modernity’s economies of appearances (Tsing 2000). They demand that we question the assumed ‘workability’ of those systems, that we attend to the pressure points, the gaps, and the knot that lie latent, in the very connections that ordinarily seem so seamless. Infrastructures reveal the contested work of achieving the ordinary, but they also show the modes of resilience invested in moments usually seen as ‘ruptures’ or ‘failures’. They demand that we not only attend to the ‘vital materialities’ that animate them, but also to the “infrastructural lives” (Graham and McFarlane 2015) that are lived, endured, suffered and transformed in this production of the ordinary. They demand a particular commitment to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016), to write (from) the “contemporary” (Brightman and Lewis 2018:23) in a way that does justice to the lived realities of the present. In chapter 1, I describe how people during the crisis committed to the tense of the “now-now” that “stretches time thin”, as Thandiwe Loewenson beautifully put it (2018). Infrastructures are systems that constantly shift and reformulate our sense of the real, they are the very systems through which the ordinary and the spectacular are worked through.

The fragility of infrastructure is increasingly being recognised as a fundamental feature of their field of im/possibilities; indeed, one could say that infrastructures are
particularly resilient in their defectiveness. As some anthropologists of infrastructure have recently argued, infrastructures are fragile, precarious, uncertain achievements (Edwards 2010; Graham 2009; Harvey et al. 2017:11), “flaky” assemblages that “seldom cohere” (Anand 2015). David Nye (2010), for instance, has charted the gradual dependency on electricity as a story of increased vulnerability of material systems, as electricity became the leaky, extremely costly, and increasingly unreliable “lifeblood” of modern economies (27-29). Electricity and its breakdown became the “spectres of the new uninhabitable spaces that threaten to rise up more and more, as the latent condition of these systems” (131; emphasis mine). To reiterate a point made long ago by Deleuze and Guattari (1983:151), machines “only work by breaking down”. As such, their breakdown should be less spectacular than their workability, prompting us to focus less on the causality of breakdown and more on “what makes infrastructures function against the odds”? (Harvey et al. 2017:11). Rather than focusing on breakdowns themselves, it is “staying power” – working power – that requires explanation (Harvey et al. 2017; Jackson 2015). Works of repair are crucial to examining this workability of infrastructure and the work of ordinariness that they perform, and allow us to move beyond a focus on breakdown and its corollaries of crisis and failure as the only moment of analysis (Jackson 2014). But “repair”, I would add, entails much more than the technological tweakings of cables and pipes, and includes social projects of care and concern, political and affective labour.

The voraciousness of infrastructure

And yet this work of repair is constantly frustrated and obstructed by the defective nature of infrastructure. Because of its “peculiar ontology” (Larkin 2013:329), infrastructures implicate agents and ‘actants’ on different scales. Infrastructure is at once the most collective and the most individualized form of relation; it lays the conditions of possibility for things to matter, as well as representing itself the manifestation of matter and sociality; it is both network and effect, thing and relation, potentiality and expression. These excessive aspirations of infrastructure are often matched by their own shortcomings; no matter how much infrastructures are made to connect and deliver particular goods, they both always exceed their initial purpose and fall short of meeting it. Electrical infrastructure in Accra fell short of many of its promises of ‘connection’ and ‘delivery’, exemplified by its unannounced cuts, the frequent damaging of the wires, the rotting of the poles, its unaffordable rates, its dubious devices. During Dumsor,
citizens expressed widespread feelings of insecurity, arguing that Dumsor provided incentive and impunity for crime. Reports of theft and armed robbery were abundantly mediatised as a direct consequence of Dumsor. Students at university decried their inability to cope with their academic requirements in the absence of light. Businesses shut down, many laid off staff, young workers were forced to return to their families due to a lack of income and opportunities, and the youth felt entrenched into a state of paralysis and uncertainty. Small businesses like barber salons, hairdressing salons, cold stores, and tailors were particularly affected (Stephen 2015) (figure 11). Dumsor forced on new forms of individualism – what Olivier de Sardan has called the “each-for-oneself-ism” characteristic of African bureaucracies (2013:193): at one point in the crisis, electricity tariffs increased drastically, leading to widespread conflict among people living in compound housing and sharing a meter. Everyday at the Company, staff turned away customers coming to inquire about the possibility of getting individual prepaid meters in order to manage their own consumption, which led to a side business in the selling of stolen and corrupted meters, sold at exorbitant price by unscrupulous landlords and private electricians and ECG staff that saw a ripe opportunity for profit in the crisis.

Figure 11. “Dumsor spoil my fridge klean kuts”. Credit: Joseph Oduro-Frimpong.

The defect of infrastructure thus created new sites and conditions of workability, creating bifurcated opportunities (de Boeck 2012). The electric poles dotting the city support both the cables ensuring the circulation of electrical current, and other types of ‘energising’ practices, serving as advertising structures for political and religious announcements: posters covering those poles from top to bottom announce religious
crusades, political figures, Mallam contacts and solutions for ailments and concerns as varied as marital problems, stomach ulcers, obesity, diarrhoea, exams, visas to abrokyire (abroad) and Dumsor (‘light off’) sex. Ironically, the poles are used to hang off-grid lamps for all the mobile streetfood stalls that use charcoal, oil, rechargeable and solar lamps for their business. The gridlocks of generators and AC boxes are used as social spaces for hanging out, providing support for friends to sit on and engage in long evening chats, for neighbourhood kids to climb on and parody their favourite music idol; they become popular infrastructures where particular atmospheres of coolness, comfort, power are produced, and where hopes, fame, and confidences are bred. Dumsor reorganised the social spatiality of the city, creating or repurposing new community spaces of leisure such as pop-up movie theatres in unused and disaffected spaces of the city, that charged ‘Dumsor prices’ and (re-)created audiences and collective visual spaces of commentary, entertainment, and socialisation – that endured even after Dumsor improved and people were able to return to their individual TV sets (figures 12-13).

Though I never myself saw this, I was told that people carried their TV set all the way to the next active electricity point, plugging it in to watch Kumkum Bhagya – the latest Twi-dubbed Bollywood series. People ‘visited by the Dumsor’ were calling up their friends to find out who had electricity and rushed to one another’s homes to charge phones, laptops, watch TV and use the light. People circled around TV screens in electronic shops showing the football or just enjoying a bit of visual movement; crowds formed around hotspots of power functioning on generator, like the new gleaming petrol stations, to watch the latest news or sit under the AC. During Dumsor, the very landscape of the city was re-configured around new electric oases of coolness, light, visual noise, and animation. As Brenda Chalfin (2014) has argued in her study of toilet infrastructure in Tema, a port city next to Accra, the toilets set for privatisation by the state were re-

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6 Those spaces of infrastructural pooling were not completely new, of course; they complemented earlier spaces that had always functioned as private, parallel infrastructures to the city’s lack thereof, such as the mobile phone charging business – a container shop that provided plugs and chargers for the market sellers’ phones, charging 50 pesewas for ‘light price’ (during ‘on’ moments) and 70 pesewas for ‘dumsor price’ (in ‘off’ times). Many traders and lower-income inhabitants of the city were already reliant on these businesses, owning and relying on phones for their trading activities but lacking fixed access to electricity (figures 14-15). During the Dumsor, these businesses were able to charge the inflated “Dumsor price” alongside their normal fare, depending on the availability of power.

7 For some wonderful projects and evocations of the consequences of Dumsor, see Al-Jazeera’s interactive documentary on Dumsor (Clerici, Taylor and Taylor 2016) and Desiré van der Berg’s photo-essay Dealing with Dumsor (2015). See also the Ashesi Research Committee report on Ghanaians’ modes of coping during Dumsor (ARC 2015) and Sammy Darko’s short summary of the key consequences of Dumsor in Accra (Darko 2015).
appropriated by manifold local commercial ventures – charging fees for usage, raising fowls and cultivating flowers and vegetables on the toilet compound, taking advantage of the availability of water – turning them into a lucrative site that challenges the “inadequacy” narrative of infrastructural matters such as sanitary or electrical infrastructure in urban Africa.

Figure 12. Movie theatre and local TV spot.

Figure 13. Charging phones in Makola.
Dumsor transformed kinship relations and the organisation of the domestic sphere, disrupting everyday routines of cooking, eating, caring for children’s homework, ironing, and family relaxation. Dumsor imposed new temporalities on the city, influencing sleeping patterns and habits. People would stay out late, coming back in well after midnight; many took to sleeping outside. Changing patterns of intimacy were attributed to Dumsor: some couples complained of the heat. Others – men especially – rejoiced at intimacies restored by the lack of electronic disturbance (TV series, phone chats) that would otherwise capture their wives’ and girlfriends’ attention. When Dumsor ended in the early months of 2016, an interlocutor told me that people were now “busy inside”: everywhere you knocked, your friends would not open their doors to you – they were busy “closing the Dumsor gap”, as he put it, and he foresaw what he described as an epidemics of pregnancies following the end of Dumsor – the baby boomers of a post-dumsor generation!

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Infrastructures both exceed and come short of their intentional design. They both aspire to more and default on their terms of existence; they evade a realizable, achievable, totalized “whole” that would somehow account for their fragile and patchy parts (Latour 2010). It is this “voraciousness” (Lazar in Venkatesan et al. 2018:38) that has led some critics to distrust infrastructure, to discard its analytical purchase and political possibilities, arguing that infrastructure is at best nothing new and at worst a bad recycling of much older, and better explored theoretical genealogies. And in a way, they are right: much of what is written today about infrastructure has already been written elsewhere, in their rippling effects, dispersed geopolitical nodes, compressed historical traces. That is not because infrastructure remains an overwhelming, over-determining “infra” base to social action (ubiquitous hence theoretically nullified), but because this appearance of totality, of overwhelming encompassment, of “voraciousness”, is always already one of the political modes through which infrastructures work. Infrastructures – their appearance, their effects, their promises – are untrustworthy; that is precisely what makes them political, not irrelevant. It is this outrageous, extravagant, delusionary and unrealizable scale of infrastructure that I argue lends itself particularly well to both manifestations and critiques of power, and partly explains why scandalous forms of illicit wealth circulation in Ghana (and many other places) figure prominently in the
infrastructural imagination. Infrastructures are promises intended to be broken (Harvey and Knox 2012), yet enduring and generative in their defects, as many ethnographers of West African cities have noted (de Boeck 2012; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Simone 2014). This is a fascinating aspect of infrastructure studies, which I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis: as much as infrastructures break down, their connectivities endure not only despite, but often emerge from their shortages and ruptures. Their productivity emerges from defective sites; they stage booms from their own busts, expressing both incredible testimonies of resilience, and exposing the problematics of connectivities.

African Infrastructures & Visual Economies

This creation of “booms” from the “busts” is the focus of Andrew Apter’s work on the visual economy of oil in Nigeria (2005), a book that has deeply influenced my thinking on the visual and political economies of infrastructures. Apter argues that oil progressively created a visual economy of mirages and deceptions through what he calls its paradox of “deficit production” (201), in which the more oil is produced, the more it is in shortage, and the hopes and imaginations of wealth that it conjures are trumped as illusory riches of false facades and deceptive infrastructures. At first, the discovery of oil in the 1970s in the Delta Rivers fostered an infrastructural imagination of spectacular wealth, in which the magical qualities of oil – its “alchemical transmutations” into manifold commodities – produced a perceptive complex he calls “seeing is believing”, which others have called a “petro-magic-realism” (Wenzel 2006), promising wealth without work (Coronil 1997; Watts 1991). As the country experienced phenomenal transformation, witness to the sprouting sights of petroleum refineries, tarred roads, power plants, Mercedes Benz and nouveau riche palaces, images of infrastructure and development “took on a reality of their own” (2005:42). In this new visual economy, Apter argues, oil “underwrote the veracity of a range of discourses, from the technical and scientific to the national and even racial, as the redeemable and redemptive wealth of the black and African world” (1999:269, emphasis mine). The state, Apter continues, took on legitimacy and exercised a particular form of infrastructural power as the “locus of distribution” (rather than the site of arbitrary power) which created a particular configuration of “truth” based on infrastructural visions (ibid). But during the 1980s, oil prefigured the anxieties surrounding the spectacular rise of opulence and prosperity, anticipating the sad tale of Nigeria’s ‘resource curse’, as oil capital took on increasingly
fetishized forms (Coronil 1997). Because oil was divorced from indigenous production, extracted in Nigeria but processed elsewhere, and sold back as a refined, imported product, oil came to figure ambiguously as both the site of Nigeria’s wealth and the sign of its dependency on foreign extraction and imports; oil became both the raw material to the world’s rising prosperity and a testament to Nigeria’s own downfall. This paradox of “deficit production” (Apter 2005:201), of excess and shortages, of privation amidst immense abundance, generated a “negative dialectic of money” in which former signs of referential value turned into a “mirage of material alibis”, and the visual economy of infrastructure formerly characterised by a semiotics of referential veracity came to take on unclear, suspicious, and illusory tones (218-9).

The realism of the 1970s oil boom, Apter argues, gradually transformed in the 1990s into a “national culture of illusion” (250) following the deceptions of the oil bust, seen in the rise of 419 scams. This visual economy of mirages revealed “a social world not of objects and things but of smoke and mirrors, a business culture of worthless currency, false facades, and empty value forms”, in a postcolonial condition of “semiotic suspensions in which signs (…) are almost literally up for grabs” (Mbembe 2001:283). Achille Mbembe, in his seminal study of the aesthetics of power in African postcolonies (2001), argues that the state has become a sham, a “simulacrum regime” (regime du simulacre), a “hollow pretense”, in which signs have lost any referentiality. In the Mbembeian state, the system of governmentality and its materiality, in the form of contracts, certificates, construction sites, takes on a doubleness, as the material manifestation of infrastructural objects give the illusion of indexical referentiality while in fact revealing themselves to be “empty signs” bearing no relation to their expected outcomes. This doubleness (Larkin 2013:334) creates a particular relationship to the semiotics of infrastructure, in which deception and illusion reflect the “power of the fake” (Mbembe 2002) as a commentary on value (Shipley 2009) and produces a modality of living through multiplicity, uncertainty (Zeiderman et al. 2015), and improvisation (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; McFarlane 2011).
Ghanaian infrastructure and the ‘hyperpolitical’

The time at which I did fieldwork (August 2015 to December 2016) happened to coincide with two episodes that made the politics of visibility and infrastructure all the more prominent: first, an energy crisis which had been developing intermittently since 2014 and peaked in late 2015, culminating in the announced ‘end of Dumsor’ in early 2016 by the President John Dramani Mahama. Secondly, an electoral campaign took place throughout the majority of my fieldwork (the year 2016), which was seen as a moment of “unreality”, during which nothing could be trusted and anything was possible. As such, the energy crisis during 2016 oscillated between signs of resolution calling for celebration (fuelled by such emergency solutions as the power barges and power plant agreements described in chapter 1) and widespread suspicion of political deception and “artificiality”. It is in this context that people described that electricity had become incontrovertibly “political”, that is, identifiable with a particular political party and voting strategy. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I campaigned with the two main political parties around Accra; one day, an NDC (the party in power) strategist told me that the opposition party (the NPP) had “created” Dumsor as a social imaginary of light and darkness, to blame the NDC for the woes of the nation: “NPP has put dust in Ghanaians’ eyes to make them believe it’s Dumsor”, erasing, she said, the complexities involved in supplying power.

This politicisation of electricity decried by my interlocutors did not enounce an instrumental view of the relations between politics and infrastructure: politicization was potentially harmful, identifying and tying people to partisan affinities that could adversely affect their employment status or prospects (as the identification of the political links to its own networks of patronage). During the crisis, the slightest event was immediately subject to suspicions of political partisanship. This overhauling of everyday life by political talk created a daily polarization of the Ghanaian public between the main two parties, which many saw as a distraction from real issues: “when you play it ‘up-down up-down’, the actual issue is lost: it’s just tussle”, a VRA (Volta River Authority, the power generation company) representative told me.
Thus ‘the political’ described here did not simply delimit a negotiating ground for tactical local strategies of development and self-help growth, but a field of visual opacity and paralysis, a stifling force that limited spaces of dissensus or commentary for fear of being identified and categorised as being “politically motivated” or, worst, politically sponsored. As a friend put it: “In Ghana, you cannot be in-between; we don’t know how to be neutral”. This definition of the political recalls the distinction between “politics” and “the political”, or the tendency of “politics” (defined as “a set of technical practices, forms of knowledge and institutions”) to stifle the “political” (as “an index of the space of disagreement” (Barry 2002:270), restricting spaces of “dissensus” (Mouffe 2005:9).

Here, infrastructural development emerges as a “hyper-political machine” (cf. Ferguson 1994), pre-marking everything as always already, and potentially, under the influence of political affinities. “The political” as it is used in Ghana is that which cancels any form of open contestation of power because it pre- and over-determines, it marks out and cancels out before any meaningful encounter or critique can take place (the inverse case of Ferguson’s “antipolitics”), a kind of advance warning and precautionary measure that can always underwrite the social forms that take place through it; as such, it also denounces the violent effects of democracy as a ‘zero-sum game’ that obtains in the reduction of issues to matters of partisanship, of polarisation and binary opposition (Ferme 1998; Moran 2006; Rose 1991). This description of the “hyper-political” in Ghana echoes what Marshall Sahlins has called the “hyper-inflation” of power’s significance and ubiquity in his critique of neo-Foucauldian studies. Power, Sahlins argues (2002), has become “the intellectual black hole into which all kinds of cultural contents get sucked” (20); one could today replace “power” by “the political”, as Mattei Candea (2011) has argued. Yet there is an uncanny ethnographic effect when this theoretical critique is enounced by one’s interlocutors: this “black hole” of power mirrors perfectly the way that Ghanaians describe the political’s tendency to transform “the apparently trivial into the fatefully political” (Sahlins 2002:22). For Sahlins, this has the effect of cutting off critique, of trivialising the practices and relations theorists

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8 James Ferguson (1994) famously described the political projects invested in areas of “depoliticization”, arguing that development in Lesotho constitutes an “anti-politics machine” which seemingly depoliticizes everything while “performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power” (xiv).

9 Mattei Candea (2011) has argued that the expansion of ethnographic studies of the political – the “politics of x” types of studies (of gender, of time, of knowledge, etc) as he calls them, have rendered the political undefined and naturalized as the “ground” from which social life (x) unfolds (310-311).
attempt to critically appraise. Yet what he calls the “poly-amorphous perverse” (2002:40) of power is not simply a ground for analytical critique, it is also, and often, an ethnographic and lived grievance that one must work with rather than (or as well as) oppose on theoretical grounds. One important question that emerges from this “hyperpolitical” reality, then, is not so much “what constitutes the political” (Candea 2011) – a useful ethnographic starting point but, I would argue, a limited anthropological project)¹⁰ but how do people live within this “black hole” of mixed-up and sucked-up contents, how do they manage to live in this viscosity of power (Sartre 1943)?

This is where infrastructure and its aesthetic modality of political address comes in. As systems that intrude and connect the intimate and the civil, the ordinary and the sublime, infrastructures with their “dendrite-like tentacles” reach deep into the “recesses” of social life, creating the “constellations” by which the ‘state’ and its effects can be analysed more vividly than simply as matters of pragmatist and rational instrumentalism (Das 2015:S4, S7). An ethnography of the “hyperpolitical” reflects on the tendency of the political to swallow whole, and to screen reality in a cloak of indecipherability and polarizing effects. In the opening chapter, “Fashioning the Dumsocracy”, I describe what Ghanaians call “noise-making” in the public sphere of political critique, which plays on and bursts out democracy’s tendency to polarise, by surrounding and flooding those distinctions with irreverent noise, blurring and distorting the grounds of political identification and creating zones of interference that effectively drown the political (that is, its paralyzing, polarising effects) into a sea of diversion, ironic subterfuges, and laughter. The visual culture of infrastructure studied in this thesis unfolds against a background of constant suspicion, uncertainty, and open-endedness.

Inspired by the work of anthropologists of urban Africa that have emphasised the invisible (de Boeck and Plissart 2004; Ferme 2001; Meyer 2003), spectral (Simone ¹⁰ Useful because, following Rancière, those practices of “repartitioning” form the ground of the political and produce particular effects of power (Candea 2011:321). While extending Ferguson’s argument (1994) to recognize the political potency of the supposedly “non-political”, Candea argues that Ferguson grants “political reality” a primacy (a pre-eminence) from which everything (including the non-political) unfolds, and argues that one should rather resist this impulse to treat practices (both depoliticizing and politicizing) as ultimately political, and instead take seriously this distinction (2011:313). Yet, as Michael Herzfeld has rightly objected to Candea, while one can (and should) pay attention to one’s informants’ views and own “emic” concepts (here, of “the political” as the annihilating, zero-sum technique of political paralysis), that should not prevent us from arguing with them or, indeed, subjecting them to critical analysis (Herzfeld in Candea 2011:323).
2004; De Boeck 2011), informal (Simone 2004), imagined (de Boeck 2015; Meyer 2015a), contradictory and impossible (Burrell 2012; Hoffman 2017) infrastructures of the city, I use the “political” to evoke these unfinished formations, and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1970:32) that accompany them and create an ambivalent ground of action in Accra’s political and visual culture. As Charles Piot (2010) has argued in relation to Togolese post-Cold War political culture, analyses of power in West Africa today demand a move away from the “politics of the belly” (Bayart 2009[1989]) characteristic of post-independence neo-patrimonial African states, to the ways in which power eschews coherence, clarity, and manifests itself in more ambiguous forms, playing upon the registers of the visible and the invisible, facts and fiction. As I show throughout this thesis, Ghanaians’ fascination and obsession with the veracity of political discourse and the evidential traces of infrastructure reflects a heavily contested visual domain, in which the mysteries of the seen and the making of reality, of what I call “an achievable present”, become subject to debate, political instability, and arduous labour. Making things and people visible is hard labour, both in terms of infrastructurally producing these visibilities but also as exercises of social and cultural exegesis. Achieving a sense of “reality” is a difficult, contested collective enterprise (Das 2007; 2014), a daily contest between competing flows of movement and attraction each attempting to “come on top” of the others, as discussed in chapter 1 through the transformation of the crisis into a “trend”, a notion of competition for reality.

The political I am concerned with here is thus not meant to indicate only a focus on the institutions, legislations, organisation of the national state, but with the intimate, contradictory, uncertain relations to forms of infrastructural relations seen as directly involved in delivering, securing, or withholding the constitutive elements and currents of power such as electricity. Although the national Electricity Company and its officials figure prominently in this thesis, their political practice does not simply reside in their administrative roles as civil servants, but also in the uncertain outcomes, variable relations, and unstable visions of power that they authorise or prevent. Further, I see the political beyond its antagonistic modalities (Barry 2002; Mouffe 2005): in the relations of conviviality (Mbembe 2001) and laughter (Chapter 1) that nonetheless harbour their own toxicities and violences, in situations, spaces and projects traversed, undergirded and haunted by relations of power (Berlant 2011; Stoler 2016). The political emerges in desires for particular projects of connections that are the very moving force and “spectral
vibrancies” of networks (Pinney 2002) and infrastructural dependencies – rather than only in the conditions of contestation, conflict, and disagreement (Barry 2002; Mouffe 2005). How, otherwise, are we to understand the persistency of hopes, dreams, and desires for infrastructures despite their tendency to disappoint, or their clear toxic effects to one’s future? (de Boeck 2011; Harvey and Knox 2012; Hoffman 2017). In Ghana, the political is also associated with “sweetness” and the rot it harbours (MacKenzie 1995; Stoler 2013). Power, as is well-known in Ghana, is “sweet”: power is addictive and irresistible, and it works through sustaining forms of desire and aspirations that foster their own decay. As Jennifer Hasty has forcefully demonstrated in her ethnography of the press and political culture in Ghana (2005a), the state for Ghanaians does not simply represent a Weberian institution for the exercise of rationalised and bureaucratic power, but also works as a site of sociality and intimacy (159). Further, she has argued (2005b) that civil modes of engaging the state (in her case, through the press) often attempt to “re-enchant and re-personalise” those intimate relations between the state and society “against the alienating effects of liberalisation” (366). Her argument about the sympathetic magic and contagion that inhere in the “conviviality” (Mbembe 2001) of corruption practices and enable their durability and proliferation (342) could equally be applied to the relationship between the “infrastructural citizenry” (for want of a better term) and the state deemed responsible for the delivery of public utilities.

This contagiousness of the political finds particular affinity with the entangling nature of infrastructures. Infrastructures do not so much work as “systems” (which implies a sense of central control and design) but as “relational worlds” (Harvey et al. 2017:2), “complex ecologies”, fragile webs or broken networks (Edwards 2017:340). Infrastructures inevitably implicate: they entangle even as they exclude, they bring into relation even as they disconnect. Writing about colonial relations as an “imperial web” of power, Ballantyne and Burton (2005:3) bring attention to the fragility of their threads, to the connections and ruptures that are contained by this “broken and disjointed enterprise”. Similarly, infrastructures enmesh and entangle into “webs” that are not totalizing but partial connections, that build as they crumble, connect as they abandon, tracing precarious patterns of liveability.
Chapters’ Outline

Like infrastructure, this story is eclectic and fragmentary, weaved through partial connections between things, people, words, sounds and imaginaries. It is more concerned with tracing wider arcs of connections and evoking the dispersion, multiplicity and complexity of socio-political life under defective infrastructures than with giving a pointed account of a specific issue. Studies of infrastructure, I would argue, are most intriguing and exciting when they manage to jump between these scales and to write from within the folds of the metaphorical and the actual, the material and the discursive, the imaginary and the impossible. Ethnographies of infrastructures allow us to move between scales without assuming this process of scalability as unproblematic and standardised, as critiqued by Anna Tsing (2012), but attendant to the “architecture of non-nesting” (522) and distortions that scalability produces. The real ethnographic asset afforded by infrastructure is precisely this ability to “link up” domains of socio-cultural enquiry that are usually guarded apart, of drawing connections and unforeseen entanglements in the micro-effects of political power. During Dumsor, not being able to iron one’s shirt and show those ‘pleats of care’ to God at Church; not being able to discuss the latest marital drama of Maria, the telenovela en vogue; not being able to sleep in the heat, to do one’s homework, to charge one’s phone, were all daily frustrations that were deeply associated with the effects of political power, seen as the deterioration of the national, intimate fabric of an “ordinary realism” (Das 2018) and the erosion of postcolonial civil entitlements. Infrastructure allows us to trace how and why these are related, and how people map and explain these connections. In this thesis, I focus on electrical infrastructure to bring the political and the aesthetic, the administrative and the sartorial, in interesting conversations. I attempt to bridge what are often studied as two separate sites of infrastructural engagement – the state-governed administration of infrastructural provision, and the domestic and aesthetic technologies that infrastructures provide for – into a shared political and infrastructural episteme. As such, the following chapters follow a path traced by the Ghanaian Adinkra philosophical concept “Nkyimkyim”, literally meaning “twisting”, which recognizes the “zigzag” quality of life, made up of twists and turns, taking unexpected detours through which connections, as contingencies of movement, present bifurcations and surprises rather
than following a comprehensive linear logic. Each chapter can be seen as a particular “flash” of political and social interaction in the intermittent time of Dumsor, offering a facet of the lived experience of electricity, of what it makes possible, of what its breakdown halts but also generates.

In Chapter 1, Flashing the state, I describe the creation of a “Dumsocracy”, a public sphere of critique and a site of political imagination, through which people attempted to make sense of the situation of Dumsor through the circulation of stories, songs, protests, cartoons, and jokes. I describe the relation of this popular complex to political power as a mode of “flashing address”. As Araba Sey has noted in her study of communication in Ghana, flashing leaves “a trail of the caller’s identification” (Sey 2008:386), it is a mode of address whose “message” is only secondary to the imprints left by the chain of relations invoked in this connection. In this first chapter, I explore the potency of these imprints. In particular, I describe the ways in which the youth transformed this moment of crisis – a situation of enforced shutdown and paralysis – into a “trend” (abaso), an opportunity for standing out, for “flashing” in the midst of the darkness. The trend of Dumsor hypes the heightened presentism of crisis, transforming its potential rupture into an achievable, and fashionable present.

In Chapter 2, ECG De-Lighting Customers, I introduce the Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG), where I conducted most of my fieldwork. I describe the everyday interactions taking place at the Customer Service frontdesk, and the idioms of ‘incomprehension’ deployed by customers as a mode of accountability, used to

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11 “Obra kwan ye nkyinkyim”, that is: the road of life is twisted / wandering.
challenge the numbers on their bills and plead civil servants for a renegotiation. I describe interactions at the Company as an example of a “state at work” (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014a), looking at the conditions of workability of infrastructure through billing processes. I look at a process of ‘numbearability’ imparted in those exchanges: that is, of making oneself amenable to bear the brunt of numbers’ decisiveness despite their indecision.

This process of “accountability” can be seen as part of a historical, postcolonial contract of electricity, which I explore in Chapter 3. As Hannah Knox and Penny Harvey have argued, infrastructures enable us to trace the co-emergence of political and material histories, and to describe unacknowledged dynamics of state formation (2012:524). I describe the development of an infrastructural contract predicated on a connection to the national grid in post-independence Ghana as Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister and president of Ghana, and Pan-African leader for the Independence movements of the 1950s, made electricity (in the form of a hydroelectric dam) the key project of decolonization and economic empowerment for the African continent at large. The national grid was developed in stark contrast to the colonial model of selective infrastructural development focused solely on mining and extractive sites, as was characteristic of indirect rule. I explore how desires for electric things expressed in post-independence fiction writing can be seen as a way of restoring, and reclaiming the micro-dignities of life in infrastructural forms. The history of public infrastructure in Ghana, and especially electricity, is situated in a tension between nationalistic ideals of self-sufficiency developed by Nkrumah, and a history of private concessions and foreign investment. The challenge of forging a vision of Ghanaian-ness that was inherently opposed yet dependent upon foreign participation has made the notion of the public good – and especially electricity – a key site of national affirmation and unification but also of contradictory visions of the state as a site of fraught distribution.

Chapter 4, “They make us look colo”, looks more critically at the contradictions of the state’s policy of social security and poverty alleviation through electrification and the ideal of the national grid in the context of ECG’s ongoing privatisation. It looks at the introduction of a series of neoliberal reforms aimed at revenue recuperation, assessing in particular the impact of new prepaid meters installed in particular neighbourhoods and the debates that they provoked around issues of dignity, precarity, and publicness.
Chapter 5, “Those Sitting in AC”, explores the importance of air-conditioning in producing atmospheres of influence and power and its anachronistic status as a “legacy of the colonial overlords” in contemporary Accra. Despite its absence during colonial rule, AC and the atmospheres of coolness it produces are deeply associated with colonial power or “the bosses”, conveying unspeakable wealth. I connect contemporary understandings of AC in Ghana as a way of “feeling like a state” with earlier colonial atmospherics in 19th century descriptions of the West African coast, in which climatological features of air defined a racialised atmosphere.

In Chapter 6, “In Praise of Brightness”, I look at the importance of bright lights and the valuation of brightness through the practice known as “Brighting”, a technology of transformation through which people hope to attract attention, ‘make it’, and transform their socio-economic conditions. “Brighting”, and its associated practices such as skin bleaching, intersects with but also departs from a racialised understanding of whiteness. I argue that the commitment of Ghanaians to the enforced presentism of crisis (chapter 1) also applies to their navigation of the visual world of Accra, in which the ‘wonders of brightness’ and the mysteries of the seen constitute an economy and political terrain. I end with a reflection on the black aesthetics of blue light in creating electrical atmospheres of romance.

Chapter 7, “Your Limit is Your Dress”, explores the world of appearances produced by electrical appliances like the electric iron, and their importance in “dressing one for success”. One of the major outcries during Dumsor was that ironing became difficult, and this created a national moral crisis about the status of one’s appearance, related to professional, religious and personal ethics. Here I argue that the importance of self-appearance, as a surface that grants or deflects favours, indeed as one’s very first instrument to success, is revealed through close attention to the details of ‘creases and folds’ that emerged during Dumsor. Appearances constitute a kind of prosperity gospel that summon the banal miraculous in the everyday urban sites of Accra. Dumsor, as it compromised the signs of success crucial to navigating the main institutions of power in Accra – the Church, the workplace and state institutions – created a moral sphere of deliberation on the power of appearances, and exposed the work of infrastructure in sustaining the landscape and praxis of the ordinary.
A note on Fieldwork and Methods

“Accra is a spectacularly ugly city and I say this with loving conviction. There is beauty here, great beauty, but it lies in the detail, not the overall. Flashes of colour, foliage, the spectacular density of urban life; street signs, slogans, humour... all the usual clichés abound.” – Lesley Naa Norle Lokko (2010:260)

This PhD took a rather unexpected turn. I initially intended to study wedding photography and the transnational circulation of wedding photographs, especially through the case of weddings-in-absentia. The photographers I followed at the time, interestingly, were earning more and more of their profits from the construction industry, advertising and documenting the rise of new luxury apartments and shopping malls. I was interested in this visual promise of luxury at a time when oil wealth was expected to flow in – Ghana having discovered major sites of oil extraction in 2007. When all I heard on a daily basis was “Dumsor”, and an election year was profiling itself, it presented the perfect opportunity to study the changing visual and political economy of Accra.

When I changed my project to Dumsor in January 2016, I was able to tap into the networks I had been developing in my first three months. I was lucky to have a former connection, a wedding photographer, with connections to the Public Relations Department. I formally applied for a research position at the Company, and this was graciously granted. I did most of my placement at the Customer Services district office near Makola market. I interacted with customers, followed their complaints and issues, and observed the inner workings of the Company’s day-to-day operations. I also went in the field with ECG technicians, observing meter readings, disconnections, repairs on the grid, and interactions with customers. At the main ECG centre, I followed the privatisation of ECG from within its walls. I also followed all the latest developments around infrastructural and political issues at the time, collecting testimonies, opinions, stories, and attempted to capture the buzzing atmosphere that surrounded them in public spaces. To complement this, I had numerous interviews with key energy sector stakeholders – ministry officials, think tanks, civil society groups, regulators, companies. I also did more targeted interviews, with the help of two neighbours, to tackle particular issues in greater depth, such as compound living arrangements, calculation techniques of shared consumption, and the effects of Dumsor on market traders.
As a young white woman on my own, certain age and gender groups were easier to access than others. I formed strong bonds with a number of “Aunties”, as I refer to them in the thesis – women in their mid-40s and 50s, who helped me understand the intricacies of life in Accra, the complexities of family histories, and of relationships – and with households in my neighbourhood, where I researched the domestic politics of electricity consumption, particularly in compound housing. I also complemented by work at ECG with interviews and visits to artists’ studios, who had produced works and songs in relation to Dumsor. In order to protect their anonymity, all names have been changed into pseudonyms or anonymised through initials.

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12 Auntie is a marker of respect for women older than oneself.
Aside from my research position at the Electricity Company, I lived and spent much of my time in a lower- to middle-class, peri-urban neighbourhood of north-western Accra, next to a lively and bustling high street. Like many neighbourhoods of Accra, it reflects its “socio-cultural pigmentation” (Wellington 2002): residents include Twi-speakers from the Western Region, some established Ga households, and Northerners and Hausa-speakers, many of whom were former residents of Old Fadama in Accra, who were resettled during one of the draining operations of the Korle Lagoon in 1999 – an area that has a long history of evictions and conflicts, and sits across the world’s biggest e-waste recycling site, Agbobloshie (Afenah 2012). The neighbourhood is a residential area, far from the private gated developments and corporate enclaves of East Legon, Osu, Cantonments and Dzorwulu (see figures 2, 17); its narrow lanes host a mix of compound housing, large detached family houses, and a mix of Pentecostalist, Methodist and Catholic Churches, and mosques; the wider roads to which they lead all bustle with a prolific ‘kiosk economy’, bordered with countless kiosk shops selling provisions, phone credits, electronics, pharmacies, schoolbooks, domestic appliances; internet cafés and betting houses; noisy ‘spots’ (bars) playing the latest Afrobeats; street food stalls selling a range of local staples (groundnut and palm nut soups, palava sauce, jollof rice), waakye (a rice and beans dish), roasted plantains, peanuts, corn kobs, yams, and kelewele (fried spicy gingery plantain). The neighbourhood had a bad reputation in the city: it was often associated with the activities of Sakawa Boys and 419 scammers. This negative perception was, as we will see in the next chapters, actively dispelled by its residents – such as in interactions with ECG and state officials. In many ways, the neighbourhood was a place that, like other “ordinary cities” (Robinson 2006), struggled to achieve a sense of liveability and yet always managed to create newness from its ordinariness.
A note on language & currency

I use the term ‘Accra parlance’ to refer to the multi-layered linguistic fabric of the city, made up principally of Twi (the predominant Akan language, spoken throughout southern Ghana), Fante (another Akan language, similar to Twi, spoken on the coast), Ga (the language of Accra’s indigenous population), pidgin (influenced by Nigerian pidgin), Hausa (spoken in the north but also in the many zongos or ‘stranger quarters’ of the city) and, of course, Ghanaian English or ‘Twiglish’. At the Company, most customers spoke either English or Twi. In my neighbourhood, people spoke a mix of Twi, English, Ga and Hausa; when I did more pointed interviews, I enlisted the help of neighbours and friends, who also translated numerous Twi songs for me. The Ghanaian currency is the Ghana cedi (GHC); for ease, one can assume that during the time covered by this thesis (2015-2016), amounts in cedis can be divided by 5 to obtain the £ equivalent. Thus GHC 100 = £20. All pictures are taken by author, unless specified in the caption, where credits are given.
CHAPTER 1. FLASHING THE STATE

Arrival #1. Docking in Ghana

On the 26th of November 2015, as the city of Accra was besieged by the rhythms of the light switch going on and off, a power barge called Ayşegül Sultan docked at the Tema harbour.1 Ayşegül Sultan is a floating power plant, a massive electricity generating set on sea (Figure 18), claimed by its Turkish holding company Karadeniz Holding A.S. to open a new chapter for electricity generation for countries facing urgent power deficiencies.2 The arrival of Ayşegül Sultan had been a long-awaited event: the ship had taken months to arrive at Tema, and for many Ghanaians, the delays were blatant proofs of the incompetence of the current government and the delusory tricks of infrastructural promises. The “phantom ship” was caricatured and framed as one of the numerous scandals in the national saga of Dumsor.3 Nevertheless, on a bright Sunday morning in November 2015, traditional leaders, ministers and officials from various energy stakeholders convened at the Tema harbour to welcome the barge (figure 22). In cartoonist Akosua’s caricature of the event (figure 20), the ceremony is reinvented as a religious consecration, an official ceremony for a newborn ceremony or “outdooring” of Dumsor featuring Opening prayers by Action Prez(ident) Light, followed by a welcome address by Dumsor Terminator the Minister of Power Kwabena Donkor,4 swinging to a Christian Praise song and culminating with the plugging-up of the Dumsor ship to the Ghanaian shore. The commissioning ceremony was broadcast live on TV to the dramatic soundtrack of Titanic: a cynical evocation of impending shipwreck in a partially-submerged economy struggling to stay afloat, but also the promising sight of docking into a bright, secure future (de Boeck 2011:275-6).5

1 Accra’s industrial twin-city, one of the main harbours on the Ghanaian coast.
2 Karpower currently holds projects in Lebanon, Indonesia, Iraq, and recently Zambia via Mozambique. Ghana was their first project on the African continent. More information can be found here: http://www.karpowership.com/en/about/news/karpower-starts-producing-power
3 The Daily Graphic reported: “While Ghanaians await the fate of the barges, one would prefer to call the carrier a phantom ship. Is this delay tactical? (…) One makes no insinuation, but in an impending election year not every transaction makes financial sense” (Frazier 2015).
4 A month later exactly, the same Minister would officially resign following weeks of protests and demands for his resignation given his failure to resolve Dumsor and his embroilment in a series of recent scandals pertaining to the power sector.
5 Titanic is a recurrent figure: Filip de Boeck (2011:275-6) describes a project development for luxury apartments named the “Modern Titanic” in Kinshasa, evoking both a dystopic future of doomed shipwreck but also the seductive image of sailing to a bright new future. In Danny Hoffmann’s book Monrovia Modern (2017), the Ministry of Health – now lying in ruins – is referred to by its squatting residents as “Titanic”, by reason of its prow-like tower and analogy of fate: “it was sinking and so were we” (35).
Figure 18. Ayşegül Sultan docking at Tema. Credit: Karadeniz Holding A.S.

Figure 19. The long-awaited arrival of the barge. Credit: Makaveli.
Figure 20. Arrival ceremony for the barge. Credit: Akosua.

Figure 21. Dumsor shop in G-major. Credit: Akosua.
In this chapter, I am concerned with teasing out some of the political relations and modes of critique invested in infrastructural moments like the salutary arrival of a power barge or, as I describe below, the scandalous contracts for thermal plants. I describe a particular aesthetics of infrastructural politics shaped by a taste for the scandalous and “sensational forms” (Meyer 2009:2) of intrigue (Hasty 2017) through the manifold stories of greed, incompetence, corruption and disappointment that saturated the electricity crisis. By aesthetics, I mean a particular mode of action (Gell 2008; Morphy 2009) and address (Larkin 2013), shaping a mode of connection and mediation of political power. I first describe the fashioning of what we could call a ‘Dumsocracy’ – a popular public sphere of critique and imagination that ‘flashes’ the state through the interfering capacity of what was called “noise-making”. I briefly discuss the historical value of noise as a counterpart to an imagined (re-)turn to violence. I then discuss the way in which the energy crisis and its temporality of rupture was transformed by artists, cartoonists, musicians and journalists into a popular “trend” (abaso) that attempted to refashion what I call an ‘achievable present’.

**Scandalous Infrastructure**

The Karpower barge is one of the many Independent Power Producers (IPPs) contracted by the then-president John Dramani Mahama as an emergency measure to respond to the energy crisis in late 2015, part of a 10-year-long agreement with Karadeniz Holding A.S. to add 450MW of power to the generating mix. The contract had been much criticised by energy think tanks, civil society advocates, the political opposition, and energy analysts, who expressed concerns over the terms of the agreement. Their analysis of the contract revealed that it did not include the risk of non-performance and could, in the case of fuel shortages, create liabilities to the amount of $135,000/day; rumours also suggested HFO had to be used for 5 years, half of the 10-year contract, making the barge financially unviable.

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6 Ayşegül Sultan provided an initial 220MW capacity, with a second barge expected in 2016 to provide the remaining 230MW. The power barges are powered with HFO (heavy fuel oil), but have the possibility to switch to natural gas, an attractive option following a $700 million World Bank loan a few months earlier to explore Ghana’s Sankofa Gas Project – an offshore gas field in Western Ghana that is expected to fuel up to 1000 MW of clean power, and alleviate Ghana’s public spending on costly and unsustainable emergency power solutions.

7 Dr. Mohammed Amin from ACEP (Africa Center for Economic Policy) questioned the performance track-record of the company, pointing out that the company’s power barge in
The day after the commissioning ceremony took place, Africa Center for Energy Policy (ACEP)’s advisor Ishmael Ackah condemned the celebration as unnecessary “fanfare” that was “painful to watch” and “insulting” to Ghanaians plunged in deep Dumsor (Energy Ghana 2015). This echoed the popular view that these commissioning events were merely staged spectacles to elicit praise from the President’s cronies, a form of make-believe in the ritualised visual economy of infrastructural veracity (Apter 2005:225). “The President is working!” was heard mockingly or admiringly on the streets, demonstrating the state’s capacity to act (Piot 2010:9). By the end of his term in office, these infrastructural legacies had earned Mahama his nicknames “Dumsor Prez” and “Commissioner General” – as the last months of his mandate were marked by numerous spectacular inaugurations of roads, stadium, power plants, factories, and schools.

The barge crystallised a number of issues pertaining to the state’s handling of the energy situation. The motto of Karpower, “The power of friendship”, written in big letters on the flank of Ayşegül Sultan, ironically voiced out widespread skepticism of those Lebanon had recently failed to work and cost Lebanon $270,000 a day (ACEP 2015; Boadi 2016).
‘friendships of power’ that proliferated during the crisis under the government’s “myopic and politically expedient policy” (Boahen 2015) to resort to short-term, hasty, unscrutinised solutions. A few days later, my friend Patricia commented: “We are always waiting for the white man to come and teach us what to do, to pull us up”. The state’s reliance on the import of foreign IPPs and the allocation of heavily criticised contracts for the building of thermal plants exposed a general distrust of the Ghanaian public with the tendency of infrastructural projects to provide opportunities for fraud under the cover of foreign assistance for development or neoliberal policies for economic recovery. Yet the barge and its public portrayal also illustrates the making of an infrastructural imagination that creates and circulates popular political narratives and visualises its own interpretations of power and global relations.

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In mid-October 2015, Verdens Gang, a popular Norwegian tabloid, published an article that purported to have unmasked what subsequent Ghanaian critics have called “Ghana’s worst contract of all times” (Taylor 2015). A few weeks earlier, journalists from Verdens Gang irrupted in the office of Dr. Kwabena Donkor (the Minister of Power largely blamed for the crisis), confronting him with two enlarged pictures of a Pakistani-Norwegian man we would later learn was wanted by the Norwegian and Swiss police for multiple counts of fraud, and whom, Mr. Donkor confirmed, had just provided Ghana with a suspicious $510 million hire-purchase agreement for a power plant. The contract, providing 10 gas turbines amounting to 250MW of emergency power generation, was signed by Dr. Donkor and a Dubai-based company called AMERI (Africa & Middle East Resources Investment Group), represented by the Prince of Dubai Shaikh Ahmed Bin Dalmook Al Maktoum, and the wanted man in question Umar Farooq Zahoor (Foss, Widerøe and Henden 2015).

The scandal erupted when it appeared that the average price of those turbines usually sold at $22 million each only, bringing the total value of the deal to a mere $220 million, and leaving a gaping $350 million unaccounted for. The Ministry of Power justified the exorbitant expense for engineering, planning, and running costs, but their figures did not convince the public, and over the following months details of the deal were obtained, broken down, debated, re-calculated, in attempts to unravel an elusive, incomplete truth.
As my friend explained: “We will never know the truth, so that’s why everyone, you have to choose your own interpretation”. The scandal led to a 17-member investigation committee by the new elected government in February 2017 (after I had left fieldwork), and to demands for its abrogation. The scandal was hailed as the tipping point of an energy crisis which had allowed politicians to dig “gold mining opportunities” for personal gain and “milk [the] poor nation dry”, “spraying cash around as if the country [was] swimming in rivers of gold” while the rest of the nation “suffered in darkness”, as a journalist evocatively expressed it (Gadugah 2015), using paradigmatic tropes and metaphors of corruption and exploitation (mining, milking, spraying, swimming) and indigenous natural wealth (gold). Accusations of corruption and embezzlement were portrayed as witch-hunting attempts by the two main political parties for political point-scoring, in the context of an election year.

**Fashioning the Dumsocracy**

As Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan have argued, everyday affairs in Ghana “carry a special flavour of excitement and movement” (1986:5), as political matters are constantly subject to “scrutiny, evaluation, and critique”. News discussions and debates blast from every corner of the city, “compelling popular fascination” through a combination of official statements and “unofficial leaks, scholarly analysis, popular commentary, rumours and jokes” (Hasty 2005:1-3). Throughout the Dumsor saga, details and specifics of Ghana’s electricity grid and its deficiencies were assessed and scrutinized, consolidating a kind of vernacular expertise in the shape of stories, jokes, nicknames, and the affective tone of sensational and scandalous outrage – what satirical painter Bright Ackwerh called “violent knowledge”, that is, a contagious and endangering form of knowledge for political power. Rumours (Burrell 2012), sensational stories (Hasty 2005a:18), and banter about daily events (Shipley 2010:95) are all fundamental modes of political inflection in Accra, operating through the cultural imperatives of indirect speech (Shipley 2010:105) and the perlocutionary force and

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8 See, for example: Ghanaweb 2015a, 2015b.
9 The committee was also subject to scandal, as some accused it of being funded by AMERI itself – the subject of investigation! The saga continues up to today: at the time of writing, negotiations for an amended deal are still ongoing, following almost two years of controversial debates.
injunctive power of spoken words (Austin 1962): almost quoting Austin, interlocutors
said that “Words really do things”, “they can make things happen”. During Dumsor, in
a context of perceived lack of clarity around infrastructural encounters and contracts, in
part produced by the technical complexity and messiness of infrastructural systems,
rumours ran as “pervasive undercurrents and reservoirs of political commentary”
(Spitulnik 2002:179) and sources of vernacular expertise in defiance of the international
veneer of technical objectivity that often adorns infrastructural matters. But they also
made a certain “claim to the real” (Das 2007:121): rumours, as Veena Das has argued
(2007), become infectious and contagious vectors of the political, presencing memories
and narrating incoherent events into forms of experience and storytelling that come to
“mould the present in new and unexpected ways” (134). Rumours have long been seen
as paramount to challenging systems of authority and power in Africa (Max-Wirth 2015;
Mbembe 2001; Nyamnjoh 2005) by denoting a particular “social truth” (White 2000:42)
that generates credibility and circulation. As Charles Piot argues in relation to Togolese
post-Cold war political culture, in a way that also applies to southern Ghana, storytelling
(of which scandal-making is part) is a powerful mode of local political theory, creating
a site of excess that encourages epistemic vibrancy: “more stories, more ambiguity, more
versions” (Piot 2010:18). During Dumsor, the circulation and contestation of stories
about power re-enchanted the political with fashionable and attractive tales, despite the
disappointments and bitter resentments they aroused. Corruption or mismanagement
scandals revived the dullness of infrastructural miseries into juicy tales and endlessly-
unravelling revelations. Scandals made the everyday in constant need of investigation,
through which ordinary Ghanaians, as “concerned citizens”, proclaims themselves
not simply as watchdogs – or “wild dogs” (Amoakohene 2010:33) – of the state but as
story-tellers, investigators and skilled players in national dramas.11 Birgit Meyer (2015a)

10 This is how most of the musicians, artists, civil society activists and other commentators of
the crisis described themselves, and where I continue to use this term in the thesis it refers to
their usage.
11 This kind of grassroots justice through the unveiling of scandals is best epitomised by the
celebrity figure of Anas Aremeyaw Anas, a renowned Ghanaian investigative journalist who
made a series of documentaries uncovering corruption in various Ghanaian institutions –
including ECG (Electricity Company of Ghana), mental health asylums, orphanages, and most
famously the judiciary, in his film “Enemies of the Nation”. Anas stages those scandals with a
taste for the spectacular, presenting himself as an enigmatic, mysterious saviour of the masses,
always wearing a long fringe of waistbeads to cover his face, and often appearing with two other
men dressed like him to confuse his identity. See his 2013 TED talk “How I named, shamed and
jailed” – his trademark slogan, known all over Accra: http://www.ted.com/talks/anas_aremeyawanas_how_inamed_shamed_and_jailed. See also
Cameron Duodu’s article on Anas and the power of investigative journalism in Africa (2016).
has discussed the “sensational” in relation to Ghanaian popular video movies as a sensorial, seductive and dazzling experience that gathers and forms people into a popular atmosphere, organized by a particular “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2009, in Meyer 2015a:1), as well as a way of “making sense”, morally and intellectually, of turmoil (Meyer 2015a:1). Importantly, Meyer argues that the video films act as “seismographic devices” in the everyday lived experience of the city, creating “vibes and moods”, registering and staging new trends in urban popular imaginaries (3; emphasis mine). It is this particular aesthetic and temporality of “trends” in the public sphere that I am concerned with throughout this chapter, as an alternative modality of living the temporality of crisis and re-imagining an ‘achievable present’. Like the trotro slogans, fragments of writings and soundbites of satiric talk that pervade the contemporary urban in Accra and create a “labile zodiac of sentiments and desires” (Quayson 2007:253) through which people orient themselves, the making of Dumsor into a trend provided arcs of meaning and associational practices that redefined the political experience of crisis and the infrastructural present.

This making of the infrastructural imagination as a realm of the scandalous denotes a particular affective (Knox 2017) and aesthetic engagement (Larkin 2013) with infrastructure. Dumsor mobilised a public consciousness that can aptly be considered a ‘Dumsocracy’, a space of critique that commented on and subverted the association of infrastructure with good governance and democratic rule. This Dumsocracy was a form of public cognizance and critique of what many declared was a “politicisation” of infrastructure (and especially electricity) in the last two Presidential administrations, and demanded a renewed ‘contract’ of infrastructural provisioning as a national good – a demand that built on historical forms of state delivery framed as a marker of citizenship in post-independence Ghana, as we will see in chapter 3. I was initially struck by the popularity of Dumsor in comparison with other infrastructural shortages like the water or fuel crises that were equally prevalent during my time in Ghana, yet never reached such magnitude. In response, I was told that it was Dumsor’s much largest reach – affecting all of Accra – that had made it so popular. Interestingly, the patterns of load-shedding deployed by the Electricity Company reflected a rather democratic distribution: it was very common to hear of shortages in East Legon and Osu, for instance – areas most associated with expatriate and upper-class residents. While there were some areas marked off as “priority” (hospitals, embassies, Parliament), they did
not amount to a pattern of load-shedding as overwhelmingly determined by wealth and political prominence, as many imagined it; here the “Dumsocracy” was also democratic in the patterns of connection and disconnections that it traced on the urban fabric, creating an unlikely urban collectivity that promised to cut across political affiliations and economic strata in favour of this new “matter of concern” (Latour 2004). I would add that it was also Dumsor’s immensely fertile visual imagination (prompted, in part, by the visions it prevented from being) that made it so popular and amenable to political commentary and exposure of the state’s illusions and deceptions in sensationalist, scandalous forms of critique. Finally, Ghana’s peculiar history of electricity, entangled with promises of Pan-African economic emancipation and hypermodernist dreams of global visibility, has created a mode of collective unification through the national grid and defined the delivery of electricity as a social good provided by the state, as we will see in chapter 3.

This active public sphere shows a constant pulling of the state’s official narrative and activities into the daily fabric of urban life. Scandals and stories made highly technical economic and infrastructural operations relevant and intimate to people’s daily lives. In the vernacular “infrastructural lives” (Graham and McFarlane 2015) of Accra, Karpower, AMERI, or other corruption scandals become well-known characters, key figures in Ghana’s popular political history. Their personae and actions are made into complex stories of greed and deception, painting an intimate moral economy of infrastructure through the allegory of the “contract” (discussed in more detail in chapter 3). Through people’s everyday discussions of these scandals in the transport, energy and water sectors, infrastructure turns from an object of governance often assumed to lie as a substrate of our city’s inner workings into a moral compass.

“Making noise”

As the Karpower and Ameri stories show, the energy sector in Ghana is seen and constructed as a heavily politicised field that is daily mediatised and satirised, reflecting what has been described as an “obsession” with politics (Amoakohene 2010) characterised shaped by an aesthetics of the scandalous (Hasty 2005a:18). This taste for 12 Of course, this did not make it less or a-political; as I mentioned in the Introduction, the political here must move beyond simply an antagonistic, exclusionary, or coercive dimension.
the scandalous is often disapprovingly remarked on by media scholars and educated Ghanaians alike as a diversion, a futile distraction from more serious issues, a “dumbing down of politics” with “sensationalism and trivia” (Amoakohene 2010:33-4). In his *Logoligi musings: blessed with a media in love with the mundane* (2013), Ghanaian writer Nana Awere Damoah laments: “How come our media is so adept at sifting only the sensational and mundane out of the news? (…) We make mountains out of mole hills and treat the actual mountains as if they were less than mole hills” (113:193). In Ghana, the old journalistic adage that “what bleeds leaks” takes on particular resonance, as corruption is often expressed through idioms of vital corporeal flows and consumption (Bayart 1993; Frimpong-Ansah 1991; Hasty 2005; Mbenbe 1996), expressed in metaphors of “chopping”, “hemorrhaging”, “bloodsucking” and “bloating”. I was often told that “bad news sell!”, and the popular expression “Observers are worried” (Wendl 1999:155) expresses the compelling nature of dramas and scandals: “It’s something that is bad, nasty, disgusting, but still you can’t stop looking”, as a cartoon artist described it to me. As Jennifer Hasty has convincingly argued (2005a), analyses of corruption that don’t take into account the *pleasure* invested in this political public sphere overlook the inherently social nature of money, seeing corrupt perpetrators as selfish and immoral rather than as “extroverted sociophiles” (Hasty 2005b:284). They also miss, I would add, the compelling qualities of a scandalous imagination that gives these stories their “infectious ambivalence” (Bhabha 1994:289) and makes them worth telling – and circulating. In this context, sensationalist storytelling, jokes, and humour take on central importance, not simply as a critique of power, but also as an ethics of achievable living in the potentially destructive, conflict-prone consequences of high corruption. My interlocutors often expressed the predicament of joking in the face of tragedy, invoking the common refrain of play and humour as the constrained counterpart of failed governance. This mode of coping was described as “making noise”, “talking talking”, and seen as an alternative to (violent) action. A member of the civil society group Citizen Ghana expressed this “talking talking” as a fatalistic cycle of life: “We just talk, talk; we go to sleep and watch ourselves talk, talk; our kids will also come and talk, talk”.

13 *Logoligi* means a form of evincing, of beating around the bush, not being straight to the point.  
14 See Hasty (2005) for an account of the emergence of a particular aesthetics of “guerrilla journalism” (113) in the private press, who, as a result of their exclusion from state rituals and access to official sources after the liberalisation of the press in 1995, developed “alternative tactics” to find their data, including rumours, document theft, impersonation (136).  
15 See Pat Thomas’s song *Sika y3 mogya* (Money is blood): “Money makes marriages work, money makes families united. Money gives happiness, money gives love, money gives everything. Money truly is human, money is blood” (quoted in Hasty 2005b:276).
Flashing the state

Laughter and the making of excessive noise is a form of political engagement, even if it does not consider itself political or capable of bringing about change. Indeed, as I want to argue here, “making noise” does not simply operate as a “dumbing down of politics” (Amoakohene 2010:34); rather, it must be taken seriously as a particular mode of doing politics. Here, I look at noise-making in two ways: 1) as a form of expenditure, an economy of political address; 2) as a historical counterpart to violence and the imagined (re)turn to violence. Seeing noise-making as a form of expenditure recognises the incredible investments that concerned Ghanaians make to stay awake, to keep the words flowing, to burst out the airwaves if they can. The proliferation of noise during Dumsor inflated the particularity of an event, as I discuss shortly in the making of Dumsor into a trend, selectively curating the grounds of political reality. The inflation of daily news in Ghana makes hypervisible and omnipresent an engaged critical community of watchers, readers, commentators and critics, whose discussions, spurting from every corner of the city, seem to be constantly engaged in forms of state poking or flashing, reminding the powers above of their entangled and defective connections. As Araba Sey has argued (2008:280), flashing in mobile communication is used as a teasing disturbance that both establishes intimacy and leaves a trace that remains, a demand for attention, an insistence. This insistence led one man to declare that Ghana had become a “nation of flashers” (Sey 2008:309), intent on poking and flashing their connections at all costs.

The logic of the Dumsocracy did not attempt to transmit clear messages of advocacy or accountability, but emitted a sea of “distorted” sounds (Larkin 2008) that brought attention to the corrupted nature of political infrastructure itself. In his analysis of the introduction of radio in Northern Nigeria, Brian Larkin (2008: 48-53) has argued that media do not simply communicate through intelligible content, but in their very unintelligibility as well; the “noise” emitted by radio – in the unintelligibility of the English language and the distorted quality of its sounds – carried a particular promise of colonial rule’s education policy, and aurally distinguished a “hierarchy of ignorance” between an educated elite able to understand the “signals” emitted by radio and those for whom this “noise” remained impenetrable (53). Noise also stands as an
infrastructural aesthetics, a sensorial mark of a particular mode of media production and content transmission: the pirated videos of Nigerian films bear a certain noise and blurred quality that is informed by their economy of production and circulation (Larkin 2004). Infrastructure, that is, works socially, culturally and politically both through moments of seamless connections and through forms of interference, intermittent signal, and failure (Larkin 2004:291).

Similarly, in Ghana, “flashing” is both a particular technique of relationality – a form of connection to a collective network that manifests economic status and problematises the promising nature of connectivity – and a particular quality of certain types of information that “stand out” from a congested background. “Flashing” in that sense works as a mode of listening (“my mind is flashing-flashing”) that expresses the inability to grasp clear content, as well as indexing a fatigue with the background noise of urban life, to which only one hooks on temporarily, sparked on by the “flashing” of a sensational form. In the economy of noise-making, flashing, as a mode of address, indexes a relation to information in which both recipients and emitters contend with distorted sound bites snapped in partial transmission. This mode of addressing power does not operate in the register of change or resistance – a futile and utopic project, seen as the pretense of electoral mandates, or as an oxymoronic construct of life itself, because “things are always changing”. Citizens are keenly aware that their “voices cannot reach”, that they are not “in the centre” (of political power). Rather, people are linked to the state by this “flashing” relationship, one enounced through particular moments of interference, creating sparks of disturbance through defaulting infrastructures. In these networks of partial transmission and differential connection, noise, as a disturbance, a potential form of sonic violence (Goodman 2012), becomes a particularly efficient form of political address: it reaches where voices and signs do not, it surrounds, seeps and floods spaces.

This is, then, a very different kind of “public sphere” from the Habermasian model of an elitist, bourgeois public engaged in “rational communication” that mediates between the civil society and the state (Willems 2012). As I have described – and indeed as many have argued in relation to the public sphere in urban Africa – Dumsor as a complex of popular imagination was not intent on establishing “rational” debates in order to influence state policy, but created popular forms of expertise that contested the
“rationality” of official discourse and enfolded the state in multi-layered narratives (Ellis 1989; Gupta 1995:385-7). In turn, the type of content that informs this public sphere itself expressed the problematic nature of information, taking on the infrastructural qualities of the networks that sustain it: a “flashing” type of information that sparks from the background noise – a “scandalous” and “sensational” form that is snapped in partial transmission – and attempts to “flash” those in power – emitting unclear signals of connection, creating disturbances in the flows of official information. Rather than simply “opposing” power or providing an alternative discourse, this public sphere can be seen as a local political economy that involves the calculation of limited capital and desires for connection (no matter how partial or less than ideal) fashioned through the particular state and limitations of infrastructure.

As Jennifer Hasty has argued (2005a:159), the state for Ghanaians remains a “cultural apparatus of legitimate accumulation and distribution” and a “site of sociality and intimacy”, rather than simply a coercive and bureaucratic institution for the exercise of power. Infrastructure, one could add, sustain connections that orient this relationship in various ways, providing networks and relations which, even if less than ideal, remain important vectors of address. Despite widespread disillusionment with the artificiality of political discourse, and real anger at politicians’ empty promises and misconduct, my analysis of the Dumsocracy does not so much bespeak the “unviability” of the Ghanaian state (Shipley 2010:97) as it recognises the immense expenditures incurred by concerned citizens in reconciling with the defective connections (but connections nonetheless) that it provides, continuing to invest and dwell in its entangled networks of partial, defective connections that rekindle hopes that it would work “one day”. I was often told that Ghanaians were waiting for a good leader to come and redeem them out of misery and disappointment, evoking messianic images of Nkrumah and J.J. Rawlings (one of Ghana’s longest leaders, a military flight lieutenant who ruled Ghana for 19 years and is still known as “Junior Jesus”) as nostalgia of a better future. This image of retrospective salvation recurs like a flicker of hope throughout Ghanaian history, oscillating between anti-imperialist stances and the disciplinary shades of populist redemption (explored in greater detail in chapter 3).16 As Svetlana Boym has argued

16 On the similarities between Nkrumah and Rawlings, see Nugent (2009). See also Schramm (2010), who argued that Rawlings “rehabilitated” and “recycled” the image of Nkrumah (72).
(2001:xiii), nostalgia is not only a feeling of loss but also incurs a certain romance with one’s fantasy, the entertainment of hope that makes one live and endure the present.

Like the phone users connected to a network but unwilling or unable to pass on clear messages and sustain the cost of its connection, Accra residents affected by Dumsor only managed to “flash” the state and create particular moments of disturbance and interference through these scandals and what was referred to as “noise-making”, but these are, too, moments worth noticing and appreciating as forms of political address. Making noise, storifying the state’s wrongdoings in scandalous epics, and transforming the time of crisis into a fashionable present (described below) are ways of bringing the state back in, reclaiming hopes, and invigorating historical legacies; but they also re-evaluate the illusory, imagined, and often implausible nature of the state itself (Abrams 1988; Foucault 1991:103). In the protests that took place during the crisis, Dumsor was framed as a matter of national concern, as seen in the placard seen in figure 4, reading, engrossed in the colours of the national flag: “Anybody against Dumsor-Dumsor is wise and a true Ghanaian”, surrounded by pairs of watchful eyes. In turn, civil society groups that spoke out about the crisis were denounced by the government as “enemies of the nation” and “enemies of progress”. This insistence on state duty and the revival of an ‘infrastructural contract’ described further in this thesis asks us to rethink the current state of the relationship between infrastructural citizens and the processes of ‘fraught delivery’ imparted by the state as one of attraction and entanglement, paying attention to what Michael Herzfeld has called the “embodied messiness of muddling through” rather than against the state (2005:370). They ask us to consider the ways in which the state can operate as both a site of disappointment and desire (Hasty 2005:159; Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017:16), of hope “for and against the state” (Jansen 2014), and to consider the immense investments people – and infrastructures – make to sustain these forms of engagement. It also allows us to think of the state beyond an instrumental mechanism of control and subjection, and to engage with people’s contradictory desires to credit or repair the state. As James Ferguson has recently argued (2015:141-164), seeking dependency from more powerful others (such as politicians or civil servants) should not be seen as a desperate form of survival or an outdated response to power, but as a contemporary mode of coping with economic precarity which in Ghana, I would argue, rekindles political and infrastructural pasts into a liveable present.
The gradual disuse of generators during Dumsor is a case-in-point. The protests that took place during Dumsor made clear that Ghanaians would not take matters of power generation in their own hands, and strongly refused to become a generator economy like Nigeria (cf. Adichie 2015) where “electrical autonomy” shapes the experience of infrastructure in the everyday, manifesting a particular relationship, and history to political order (Larkin 2008:242-4) – one that reproduces historical patterns of uneven infrastructure access (Olukoju 2004), but also promises new opportunities for leapfrogging the deficiencies of the national grid (Osayimwese 2015). In the early days of Dumsor, around 2014, there was a peak in the sales of generators; businesses immediately invested in their own generation, including small shops and market stalls strongly reliant on electrical power such as barbershops and cold stores. But as the crisis continued, private households gradually stopped buying fuel or left their faulty generators in disrepair, taking a stand against the state, forcing it to take up its responsibilities as a utility provider. Ghana, people were adamant, would not allow a “generator mafia” to take hold of the energy system, as Nigeria had (Trovalla and Trovalla 2015a:50). According to Selorm Branttie, vice-president of think tank IMANI, which was very vocal during Dumsor, “all hell broke loose” when the price of fuel suddenly increased in 2014 at a time when people had started investing in generators, causing a national outcry.\footnote{17 Interview with Selorm Branttie, 21/10/2016.} As a friend explained: “When they plunge you in the darkness, and then they raise the price of petrol on which you are depending for your generator, ah! It’s like you are left all alone. So it came to a point when people got fed up. And yes, they stopped using the generator”. As I will show in chapter 3 on the history of electricity in Ghana, this sense of entitlement to state-provided electricity has historical precedents, as electricity in the post-independence era took on revolutionary inflections as an anti-imperialist stance against racial privilege and a national reclaiming of dignity and self-sufficiency.

“Noise is better than cutlass”

I was often reminded that the excessive proliferation of noise around political issues was a way of maintaining “peace” by avoiding anger. Grace, a recent law graduate, explained this practice of “talk talk” as an alternative to violence and anger:
“It’s not that we don’t get angry, we just value our peace more. Because of our history – we have a history of military coups, we’ve been through all that, so I think as a people we are not at our worst yet. Under current constitution, no matter how bad it gets, it’s not as bad as it used to be. So we’d rather insult you on the radio than pick you up and drop you into the bin so… I think it’s our history, too.”

After all, J.J. Rawlings himself decried the “irresponsible sensationalism” of the private press in the 1990s, after Ghana’s return to democratic rule in 1992 and the consequent privatisation of the press in early 1995, ending years of political repression and suppression of press freedom (Hasty 2005:94). Excessive noise-making can therefore be seen as a reaction to this history (Cappelaere 2007:62), a shift from a “culture of silence” to a “culture of contest” (Hasty 2001). But it can also be seen as a critique of the violence inherent in the divisive premises of democracy itself as a zero-sum game, through the encouragement of dissensus and the polarisation of political affiliations (Ferme 1998; Moran 2006). The Dumsocracy was partially a response to, and critique of, this violence, a saturation of democracy itself, as a self-justified ground for alternative truths, for endless contestation, for the proliferation of interpretations, but also for intense competition, fashioning forms of attraction and attention. Indeed, the Dumsocracy did not so much represent an extended moment in time but was characterised by the particular “hypes” of those scandals and trends, coming in bursts, creating a mode of political engagement made of “power flashes”, of periodic convulsions, explosions and excess.

Noise-making and laughter were seen as an alternative to violent armed conflict that Ghana, in contrast to most of its West African counterparts, has been able to avoid. Ghana’s peaceful political climate is a source of immense national pride, framed as a sense of “Ghanaian exceptionalism” (which, as Charles Piot argues (2010:47), extends to the “island of stability” of the “Ghana-Togo-Benin coastal corridor”) in a region marked by conflicts and devastating civil wars (Cappelaere 2007:7). This perceived imminence of violence in Ghana resonates with Mike McGovern’s work (2017) on the

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19 Holbrook’s article on British propaganda for mobilisation in the war efforts suggests possible historical antecedents for this: he describes feelings of a “war hysteria” in the Gold Coast, arguing that it reveals the spread of a “consciousness of the imminence of war in Europe” (1985:347)
pervasive talk about the inevitability of war in Guinea despite the absence of conflict, and with Jon Schubert’s description of a “culture of fear” and an ever-looming threat of latent violence in Angola (2010:665-66), which he argues restrains Angolans from overly political engagement. By contrast, political engagement in Ghana was pushed to an extreme through these practices of “noise-making” and laughter, framed as a strategy for preserving peace, or as a friend put it, as “Conflict Prevention 101”.

This proliferation of noise prevented a strained public from “boiling up and exploding”, avoiding anger at all costs through the practice of “bottling”, which was described by my friend Kwame, a newspaper cartoonist and teacher, as a form of “emotional intelligence”, a skilled management of energies, ensuring stability and control in view of the unpredictability and hardship of life. This capacity to “bottle” was linked to the insistence on the necessity of “forgetting” and the moral valuation of patience, self-control and moderation, which in his view had prevented the advent of a civil war in Ghana.

Noise provided a buffer to the threat of an imminent turn to (or imagined return to) violence. The critique of politicians was often directed as a critique of democracy itself, and of its Western premises – a project with a long history in Ghana, which has seen multiple short-lived democracies replaced by military coups; as we will see in chapter 3, Rawlings in particular attempted to craft a notion of “Ghanaian democracy” as a form of populism and social justice (Chazan 1989:338) starkly opposed to the “sham democracy” of representative democracy (Nugent 1995:46-7). Dumsor reignited longstanding tensions between statist and neoliberal policies of infrastructural development, prompting a reluctant longing for more authoritarian types of rule, invoking the infrastructures of Botswana and Rwanda as evidence of a negative correlation between democratic rule and the provisioning of public goods (cf. Mann

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20 The imperative placed on forgetting as a moral, ethical and nationalist practice resonates with the Pentecostal ethos of rupture with kin networks and the privileging of the nuclear family and the independent money-earner (Meyer 1998b; Van Dijk 1998). Space limitations here prevent me from engaging in deserving manner with this aspect of the temporality of the crisis, but I broach this aspect in the conclusion to this chapter, as I mention the sudden ‘death’ of Dumsor and the political possibilities activated in this capacity to forget.

21 As Kwame said: “Ghanaians, they don’t like to remember. Always throw it away, forget, forget, so that your stress will not kill you. When this happens, I like to be a Ghanaiian. I am so proud of being a Ghanaiian, because always we forget, forget, we bottle.”
2008; Min 2015). My friend and cartoonist M. expressed the tension between freedom and development in these terms:

“Some people here are saying, we need a dictator because democracy is not working for us. Because you know in Ghana we like to make noise. We make noise, but it’s still better than going around with cutlass.”

Thus noise as a pacifier reveals a tolerance and respect for peace not simply born out of, and sustaining democracy, but lived through the ghostly hauntings of past military regimes and the spectres of possible future violence. Jacques Attali (1985[1977]) has argued that noise, far from being an absence of or obstruction to meaningless content, is prophetic: it *anticipates* the rhythms of melodies, makes “mutations audible”, running as a forming undercurrent to established practices, famously declaring that “change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society” (4-5). One could add that noise is also a retrospective lens into the pulses that beat through the political atmospheres of the contemporary, informed by the ruptures and repressions of the past.

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**Trending Crisis**

For all its alleged distracting playfulness, Dumsor as a popular complex was therefore not an avoidance or ‘dumbing down’ of more pressing issues, but a major way of addressing power. It was also a mode of ‘fashioning’ power, in the sense of making power – or its deficiencies – ‘popular’, literally, attractive to critique and civic engagement. Many of my interlocutors fell powerless against the energy crisis and the economic hardship that they faced on a daily basis, often emphasising that all they could do was “laugh”, “make fun out of serious situations” and “make trends”. It is to the latter that I now turn. Making trends, my friends explained, was the only way to respond to crisis in a situation where they knew that their power of action was limited. One young man, David, a recent graduate who had created a satirical Twitter account parodying the Electricity Company, declared: “It’s not like you can go and take arms and storm over the ECG office, so you just talk and make trends. We just talk that’s all. We are always making trends, trending trending – we are bored people! And we love to criticise.” As often happens with popular movements, nobody can really trace the moment when load shedding became known as “Dumsor”; it started, many recall, around 2013, with the inscription of a repeated everyday gesture and expression – *dum* and *sor*, *dum dum dum*, “Dumsor”! During 2014-2016, Dumsor flourished into a public sphere
of creativity and political commentary, providing inspiration for about 15 songs specifically about Dumsor (most of which can be found in artist Wanlov’s 2015 curated “Corruption – Dumsor mixtape”, included in the USB),

cartoons and paintings of various Dumsor elements, satirical Twitter accounts, memes, protests attended by top celebrities of Ghana’s popular culture scene, and a national repertoire of jokes, roaming the radio’s airwaves, passed on at work and among one’s friend circles.

Degree, an up-and-coming musician, estate agent in his spare time, and taxi operator, explained his attempt at participating in this new trend of Dumsor, with his creation of a song of the same name that compared the vacillating and unexpected character of the light to the experience of marriage and declining love, and to women’s deceptive characters: she is “on” today, “off” tomorrow, seducing men into the disappointments of married life. He saw the gradual trending of Dumsor as an opportunity for him to reinvigorate old dreams of success and fast-track his music career, put on hold in the midst of economic difficulties. “When there is a system in the country”, he explained, “we also take it and use the concept for our music. Where the system is heading towards, everybody will want to listen to you.” Dumsor, people explained, had abaso, literally meaning “it has come on top”, it has become the latest, hottest thing in town. W’abaso, “you think you’ve come on top?” is a teasing form of banter jocularly thrown at people’s attempts to outdo each other in subtle ways, to craft their way to success, provoke recognition and envy.

Here, the Dumocracy appropriates the underpinnings of democracy as a capacity to elect power, repurposing it as a practice of selecting the grounds of reality on which power must act. Trends become the “survivors of a filtering process” – the flashing sparks from a congested present –, the events of significance that most “resonate with the fears and imagination of a population” (Burrell 2012:327) and become popularly ‘elected’ to represent the real. As Veena Das has beautifully argued (2007; 2018), the real involves intense labour and ethical practice, it is produced through time-tricking techniques of “forgetting”, competing for what has come, and anticipating the near future.

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22 Also available here: https://soundcloud.com/wanlov/sets/coraption-mixtape
23 While the “trend” may seem to resonate with neo-liberal discourses of entrepreneurship, self-promotion, branding, and digital affordances of attractions and viral success, which are all highly popular on the urban scene in Accra (Shipley 2015b), what I suggest is that those practices of trending happen to intersect with those discourses, rather than being unilaterally influenced by them. This form of “virality” has a longer history in the ‘proverbial’ forms of historiographies in Ghana, combining to create this sense of “trending” of contemporaneity, produced through time-tricking techniques of “forgetting”, competing for what has come, and anticipating the near future.
multiple modalities of the possible, the potential and the imaginable. *Abaso* insists on contemporaneity as a social production, a democratic or dumsocratic selection of time. Transforming the crisis into the trend of Dumsor reminded politicians of the craftiness of time, and of the possibility to transform material structures and their deficiencies into viable avenues of success and competition, and even of national pride, as Ghana celebrated the adoption of ‘Dumsor’ into Wikipedia, which marked the height of Dumsor’s popularity and came to validate its national specificity, illustrating Ghanaian creativity.

**Trending and the Achievable Present**

Crisis is typically perceived as a rupture, a fracture, a sensation of loss or damage; yet here, crisis was reconfigured as yielding new modes of becoming, carving a space of attraction for oneself, in a landscape of depleted opportunities and a perceived condition of global exclusion. Discussing new fashions and clothing styles with my friend B., a casual worker in a cultural agency who had long felt the precarity of unemployment and the depressing conditions of Dumsor, during which countless people lost their livelihoods, she explained that nowadays young women increasingly bought second-hand rather than tailored clothes, explaining: “Times are hard. The system is hard. But still, we are finding alternatives to keep an attractive appearance, to keep looking our best and still compete” (I will go back to this in chapter 7). I became fascinated with this capacity to turn an infrastructural moment of crisis and failure into a domain of desire and possibility towards a deeply uncertain and unpopular present. For the unemployed youth, trending reoriented one’s life prospects, shifting the motile possibilities of the social environment (Vigh 2010) to reimagine one’s “subjunctive self” (Whyte 2002) through creative motion in order to stay afloat in a submerged everyday (remember the imagined fate of the Karpower barge drowning like a shipwrecked Titanic).

But “trending” was also a deep commitment to the hyper-presentist tense of crisis, an exposure and retention of the contemporary for revision. During Dumsor, I was fascinated by the fact that the everyday seemed to be completely consumed by this particular infrastructural event. I was struck by Accra residents’ unflinching commitment to the “enforced presentism” (Guyer 2007:410) of the crisis, which stood out in stark contrast to the acts of “dreaming” or “speculation” through infrastructure
written about in urban Africa (de Boeck 2015; Trovalla and Trovalla 2015a, 2015b; Walsh 2004). Infrastructures in Kinshasa, de Boeck has argued, become sites of “divination”, “complex aetiological grids” (de Boeck 2015:4) from which people attempt to read and anticipate the signs of power. In their ethnography of basic infrastructure provisioning (water, electricity, fuel) in the Nigerian city of Jos, Trovalla and Trovalla (2015a) have argued that in the context of unpredictability and unavailability of energy flows, infrastructure becomes a “conundrum” to be figured out as well as a “divination tool used to pierce through a politics of mirages” (2015a:52). They propose a spectre of visibilities and invisibilities of infrastructure that are mobilised in temporal figurations of speculation, anticipation and divination which create their own market cycles and influence the delivery and distribution of public goods themselves. In a somewhat different vein, Sneath (2009) has argued that electricity in Mongolia follows a similar logic to scapulimancy, as its metonymic association with modernity in Soviet electrification projects presents a “metonymic field” of interpretation through everyday divination.24

By contrast, Dumsor in Ghana did not figure temporalities of action geared towards anticipation or divination of the future. Indeed, I often found my questions about the future of the electrical landscape in Accra frustrated by clear refusals to engage in any temporal manipulation of the future, emphasising instead the need to summon, to pray, in the here and now, for desirable outcomes. My questions appeared to suggest a nonsensical frame of temporal action that made inappropriate inferences about my interlocutors’ political affiliations. Asking a customer if they thought Dumsor would come back after the elections would elicit alarmed looks, and the vigorous affirmation that “No, we are not praying for that!” or “Nobody is praying for that”, be they NPP or NDC (the two major political parties). The future of the electricity crisis was not to be predicted, speculated or even suggested, but prayed for, wished for, summoned in the here-and-now. Dumsor insisted on retaining the present, waxing and waning in its folds, confronting the stiflingly real – that moment when pipes stop flowing, grids stop delivering, and the material containers and transmitters of both literal and metaphorical power stand as empty props. It revealed a particular commitment to “stay with the trouble”, to use Donna Haraway’s felicitous phrase (2016), rather than embarking on the

24 Electricity has been a leitmotif in Soviet science fiction, as a field of political possibilities torn between promises of collective access and menaces of authoritarianism. For analysis of this see Laursen (2012).
speculative realms of better tomorrows, and as such trending could be seen as a mode of resilience in a context of infrastructural fragility, that allows us to think crisis and uncertainty differently than as the rupture of a presumed order (Guyer 2015:1). Trending, as a particular attitude towards crisis, does not insist on fixing what was broken, on returning to a previous state of the ordinary, but offers new possibilities for an achievable present.

Through the making of “trends”, Accra residents redefined the chronotopic fabric of the city, composing new realities, imagining an alternative poetics of urban living, a re-enchantment of political boredom. As Fabian has argued (1998:18-21), popular culture in urban Africa creates forms of freedom understood not as a liberation from domination or rule, but as moments of potential affective transformations that can be shared and communicated. Similarly, the trend of Dumsor can be seen as coming in bursts, hyping a sense of heightened presentism, creating a mode of political engagement as made of periodic convulsions. And here I want to introduce Dumsor to you the way most Ghanaians have come to associate it with a certain beat, in the hit song by Ghanaian superstar and rapper Sarkodie (song 2 on USB), who released the song Dumsor in the midst of the crisis, inspiring many musicians like Degree to produce their own: Dum. Sor. Dum. Sor. Sarkodie says: “It touches all, from poor to rich, from old to young, the hardship of Dumsor has become like shea butter that we all smear on our skin” – a reference to the Harmattan season when the Saharan winds dry the skin and dust invades bodies and surfaces.

*Abaso, Sankofa: Postcolonial time*

But this making of the trend was also a way of building the present in order to create a cumulative image of a historical reality, similarly to the ways that Francis Nyamnjoh has described the “gradual, cumulative, long-term effects” of popular media forms like cartoons (2009:1) that gradually create a record of social history, working as popular mnemonics (Schneider 2004:79) and deploy their political effects in the unfolding and accumulation of these images (something that is deployed in the very graphic techniques of the cartoon, as it creates effects through minimizing and maximizing salient features). Events, Marilyn Strathern has convincingly argued (2013), could be seen as a condensed artefact or performance, unfolding conflated temporal frames of the past, the present and
the future. Events could be seen as a Pandora’s box of temporal effects, a succession of displaced forms, such that time emerges not as a linear progression between events, but through the capacity of an image, as a containment of effects, to evoke and unfold historical performances of the past and the future simultaneously. What kinds of political possibilities lie in these evocations, and by which cultural mechanisms are they invoked, legitimated or refuted? What kind of technique is the time of the trend (Bear 2016), and what kinds of actions does it favour or preclude? Thinking the political temporality of the trend as the reconceptualization of failure into a fashionable present questions what Homi Bhabha has called the “temporality of the synchronous” in Western discourses of history and modernity (1994:240). Bhabha argues that modernity’s temporality has been normalised as a condition of synchronicity with its subjects, marginalising other forms of temporal becomings, through which certain subjects and forms of modernity appear as “lagged”. The “postcolonial belatedness” that Bhabha describes is sustained by what Fabian (1983) has famously exposed as a “denial of coevality” that has been central to the workings of colonial and postcolonial institutions of racial exclusions and exploitation, and to the very project of anthropological writing. “Making trends” can then be seen as a “vernacular modernism” (Pinney 2003), that is, a perpendicular rhetoric (Gates 1988) created out of the shadows of hegemonic political time and space, in an attempt to remake the grounds of “reality” as a question of fashionable contemporaneity – a re-fashioning, literally, of history and its epistemological claims (Roitman 2011).

The trend blurs the teleological implications of crisis or failure, pointing to a different “chronopolitics” (Bear 2016:488) of crisis, one not so much deployed through the rupture of linear time but condensed in the popular form of the trend, that retains and stretches the present but also attempts to make sense of the irruptions of the past (Pinney 2005). Indeed, the presentist tense of the trend occurred in tension with another kind of temporal narrative known as Sankofa. Sankofa is an Adinkra philosophical symbol that means “go back to your past and retrieve it”; it points to the contested nature of the past in Ghana and forms of attending to its sudden manifestations in the present. Sankofa and debates about the past made an appearance during the crisis in the form of the domestic technology of the iron. During Dumsor, as many couldn’t iron their clothes – which is an imperative to one’s appearance, especially in sites of power such as Churches, the office, and state institutions, as will be discussed in chapter 7 – many people resorted to using the “box iron”, a metallic hollow iron filled with hot charcoal. During the crisis,
the box iron was renamed Sankofa, an ironic inflection to the original meaning of Sankofa that is usually used to denote anxieties and conflicted attitudes towards the past, and to advocate an attitude of pride and dignity towards ‘tradition’ and the lessons of the past. On a second level of irony, some doubt remained as to whether Sankofa alluded to this attitude to the past, or whether it referred to the chicken that serves as a weight to close the box’s lid, and looks strikingly similar to an Akan gold weight in the shape of the Sankofa symbol. Trending the contemporary, then, also operated in tension with narratives of the past like Sankofa, which revealed the historical layers of the “urban now” (Robinson 2013) – a “space-time constellation” through which elements of the past are “blasted out” and connections reaching back and across are “realigned” to inform the present and future (666). It created an achievable present, one that manages to hold while containing the irruptions of the past and remaining volatile enough to be transformed into the shape of the next.

The Death of a Trend

In January 2016, just after the arrival of Ayşegül Sultan, as Dumsor had gradually worsened over the past few months, it suddenly stopped. Overnight, it was as if Accra had been struck by collective amnesia (Van Dijk 1998), and fieldwork suddenly felt like delving into archaeological matter (Scott 1998:7-8), as my informants wondered with perplexity why I still lingered in Ghana when my research had, in their view, concluded with the happy ending of Dumsor. A friend offered his interpretation of the “end of Dumsor” in my neighbourhood (figure 25): “Ah! You don’t have Dumsor anymore because they know you live there! And if there is Dumsor Dumsor you will continue your research and they want you to stop, so that is why, you don’t have dumsor dumsor. They know that there is obroni25 doing this research there. I’m telling you! It’s true”.

Over the next twelve months, Dumsor made resurgent re-appearances, prompting widespread suspicions and discussions of the political nature of its manifestation.

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25 *Obroni* is the common appellation for white people. There is controversy over the term’s origin; etymologically *obroni* comes from *abrokyire* (over the horizon), “the one coming from far”. However, there is also the possibility for *obroni* to derive from *abro ni*, meaning “the wicked one”. As such, *obroni* is typical of all the different images and associations of race and colonial history, which, in Ghana, express themselves in imperceptible nuances and equivocacy.
In everyday talk, across a wide range of religious, governmental, and informal institutions, practices of “forgetting” were actively pursued and encouraged. At the Electricity Company, for instance, both staff and customers would be quick to remind me that Dumsor was ‘over’, that my questions were unwarranted and that they were now focusing their energies on more pressing issues (such as the privatisation of the Company and the new reforms it stipulated). Forgetting was widely observed in everyday life as a fundamental attitude to coping with the uncertainty of urban living, as an affective disposition to wellbeing, and as an orientation to success and prosperity, corresponding to the emphasis on rupture and effecting a “complete break with the past” in Pentecostalist temporality (Engelke 2010; Meyer 1998b). “Forgetting, try to make that one marriage your heart!” is how a friend poetically put it. But forgetting in the case of Dumsor was also a highly reflexive discourse on nationalist character: “The
Ghanaian”, I heard time and time again, “forgets easily”. “Ghanaians, we forgive easily”. The temporary fixing of the energy crisis was readily discussed as the President’s exploitation of what they referred to as Ghanaians’ “short-term memory”: “Ghanaians we are too forgiving and too forgetful, and politicians exploit our forgiving and forgetful nature. They capitalise on it.” Forgetting, when it came to Dumsor, also made clear that this apparent readiness to forget revealed a potentially political capacity or disposition to do so. TV programmes and radio shows discussed the ‘cultural amnesia’ of Dumsor, in effect reminding people of their capacity to forget. It was this capacity and disposition to forget, which became one of the axes of action in the election planning and voting patterns throughout the year and the rest of my fieldwork. Forgetting Dumsor was not so much a question of memory, framed by a political elite as the politics of knowledge and mnemonic (in)capacities of the electorate, but a concern with the possibilities of (re)defining the civil contract of infrastructure. That Ghanaians could remember Dumsor, its chronology and its consequences in great detail, was beyond doubt, as I was to find out in interviews and conversations; but that they chose to selectively forget it, and constantly claimed that they could and already had, and that they knew the President was using this imputed “short-term memory” to bend their voting patterns, points to forgetting as a political practice, in the collective re-articulation of time, predictions and action. Despite all the collective “amnesia” that had hit Accra residents in the post-Dumsor phase of the election year, as soon as the election results came in and the opposition leader, Nana Dankwa Akuffo-Addo, was proclaimed President-elect, Auntie Z., whom I was visiting that day, chuckled and said: “You see? Now he sees we are not stupid – we have not been fooled. If he [former President John Dramani Mahama] had won, it would have shown that we are fools!” Another interlocutor described this as “making ourselves fools” – “pretending we are stupid to pass through the system and get what we want”. Her comment is worth bearing in mind as we turn to the next chapter.

26 This self-awareness of forgetting, and the quoting mechanisms through which they are enounced (e.g. in discussing the importance of forgetting, many of my interlocutors would replicate Bible passages, sermons, or self-help books), are also ventriloquising other discourses as a mnemonic practice. I am grateful to Steph Newell for identifying and illuminating this point.
ECG, the Electricity Company of Ghana, aka the “Electronic Crime Group”, “Electricity Comes and Goes”, or “Either Candle or Generator”,\(^1\) are a controversial figure in Ghanaian consciousness, often seen as “nothing other than a gang of daylight robbers” (Bawah 2011), a trickster figure, whose enticing promises of connection and stable power are constantly thwarted by the cuts, shortages, and misconduct experienced by the Ghanaian public. The blue pick-up trucks of the Company, with their reclined ladder and technicians sitting on the ledge, are a common sight on the streets of Accra. On one truck could be seen the motto: “ECG: Delighting the Customer is our ultimate goal” written in bright yellow letters (Figure 26). To Ghanaian poet, writer and self-declared “unrepentant cynic” Efo Dela, “De-Lighting Customers” encapsulated perfectly the ironic image of ECG, a form of delivery already prefixed by its impending cut. “Delighting by de-lighting” (Boateng 2014) played on the affective experiences of an access to light achieved under the constant threat of disconnection and interruptions.

\(^{1}\) Compare with the acronymic creativity of NEPA (National Electric Power Authority) in Nigeria, satirically known as “Never Expect Power Always” (Osayimwese 2015). When NEPA was renamed PHCN (Power Holding Company of Nigeria) in 2005, it was quickly reformulated as “Problem Has Come to Nigeria”, “Problem Has Changed Name”, and “Please Hold Candle Now” (Trovalla and Trovalla 2015a:53).
The state as family business

ECG incarnates the ambivalent figure of the undesirable friend turned feared enemy, an insufferable yet inevitable alliance. As a columnist stated in a rallying article entitled “Stand up if you hate ECG”, the power of ECG, as a monopoly for distribution, outweighs that of the President himself: “ECG can do things to us that the President and the National Security are barred from doing because I can change the government if I am not happy with the party in power, but we are all stuck with ECG if we don’t want to read by moonlight or want to drink our pure water a little colder. ECG is aware of the power of such monopoly and this has willy-nilly defined its attitude towards its customers. Take it or leave, is the message. ECG – No one likes us but we don’t care!” (Gyan-Apenteng 2011).

In the song ‘Dumsor’ (song number 3 on USB) featuring various Ghanaian artists under the collective “Concerned Citizens”, ECG is derided and accused as “thieves”, telling “toli” (lies / stories) and taking the light at the most inconvenient moments. ECG makes
an appearance in the song in a rude interaction with a customer; an ECG worker is heard saying: “Don’t tell me what to do bloody fool, Don’t tell me what to do bloody fool / Bloody fool / Bloody fool / Who are you? / Bloody fool”. “Oh, please, please, don’t insult me I’m a hardworking citizen”, responds the customer.  

Yet within the Company, ECG is often referred to as a “family”, caring for its workers, fostering teamwork and mutual care. This familial duty of the Company extends much further into the national fabric, shaping contradictory ties to the state: as the only distribution option, and one of the biggest national companies, ECG forces everyone to partake in its system, and most Ghanaians have formed ties with their local ECG staff. Over decades, residents in Accra have built relationships with workers at the Company, and many know and depend upon someone in the Company to fix their electricity issues – either a relative or a ‘helpful’ middleman. This intimate relationship of ECG to Accra’s social networks was brought out most prominently during the privatisation talks in May 2016, which as I discuss in chapter 4, provoked both feelings of triumph and hopes of effective reform prompted by decades of frustration with bureaucratic encumbrance and unreliable power supply, and apprehension over a friend or a relative’s future at ECG once let to the concessionaire (as well as fears over the rising price of utilities).

ECG thus represents a controversial figure, impressing both corporate professionalism and familial intimacy, binding customers and citizens into deeply affective positionalities and shifting identifications. In their daily interactions, both customers and civil servants regularly switched between these positions and discourses, alternatively invoking consumer rights or the leniency afforded by personable relationships. In the Customer hall of the central Accra district, round cut-outs with quotes of corporate success and customer service excellence hang from the ceiling and adorn the walls:

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2 The song tells the story of a man about to make love to “his girl Margaret”, when ECG switches off the light as his area has that night become “the target”; having come “prepared”, he puts on a candle, “put on the table, I don’t know what happened: my whole place dey burn up!”. This semi-comical, semi-tragic story was a common narrative style during Dumsor – materializing the fears, anxieties, and disturbances experienced during Dumsor in both highly relatable and deeply entertaining ways.

3 ECG has over 1.8 million customers (it distributes in southern Ghana), 5600 staff members, and annual sales of about $800 million (Boateng 2014).

4 Gracia Clark (1994) argues that the uptake of the word “customer” in Ghana dates to precolonial time, when it was adopted from British traders on the coast who regularly bought slaves and local goods from African magnates (228); the Kumasi traders she worked with associated it with the “passbook system” linking import firms with their regular customers, which flourished in Kumasi from the 1910s through the 1960s (229).
“ECG, Our customers… Our lives”. “ECG, My business… My Life.” On the outside corridors, painted images remind staff and customers of their duties and aspirations: “QUALITY STARTS WITH U!” “CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: MAKE IT OUR PRIORITY” (figures 25-27). In all the rooms, posters of ECG’s “corporate vision statement” spread their message of efficacy and trustworthiness under the acronym “POWER”: Professionalism, Openness, Wellbeing, Excellence, Reliability (figure 28). The Customer Service subdivision of the company was opened in 1992, as part of the 1990s reforms to ECG to tackle the deep financial and operational crisis of the Company at the time. During Dumsor, people took to calling the ECG helpline as a new national pastime. My friend B. recounted this provided a new form of social entertainment when hanging-out with friends: they would sit in a circle and call ECG one at a time, building up the pressure on the line, to inflate the statistics of received complains and focus the attention of ECG officers on their neighbourhood. During my fieldwork, I was based at the main Customer Service Centre of the Accra East District; the customers spanned a wide range of occupations and socio-economic classes, including traders from nearby Makola (Accra’s biggest market), residents of Osu, La, and businesses from the Financial Center.

When I left Ghana, ECG had just started implementing a new online customer service system (as part of the restructuring of ECG in preparation for concession) manned by a Digital Media Team, featuring #meetECG interviews with staff responding to common FAQs by customers, centralized information on meters, bills, electricity usage and consumption, and infrastructural projects. Recently, on a short visit to Ghana (April 2018), general consensus was that ECG had now become one of the best customer services in the country! Yet at the time at which I did fieldwork, which had seen two years of prolonged Dumsor, tariff increases, and a series of reforms as part of the upcoming privatisation (lending concession) of the Company, the image of the company was at its worst.

5 The ECG Call-centre is located in Osu, where calls are received and then re-directed to the relevant departments. Most of the calls are forwarded to the Faults’ Centre, situated a hundred meters away from Accra East’s District Office. At the Faults’ Centre, engineers will then take note of the reported issues and “anomalies” in a complaints book, in which they log in every repair made and call received, and deploy teams of engineers and technical support officers to the sites.
Figure 25. “Quality starts with U!”

Figure 26. Customer Satisfaction

Figure 27. It’s your business: stop the leakages!
Figure 28. ECG’s Corporate Vision.
Negotiating Bills: ECG’s Customer Service

In this chapter, I attempt to retrace the style, grain and “minute texture” (Gupta 1995:375) of everyday exchanges at the Company to bring attention to the simultaneous intimacy and aloofness of the state and its representatives. ECG’s central office in Accra (figure 30), formerly known as the Electricity House, is an imposing brown and ash pink building dominating a busy corner of the intersection that leads to Makola (Accra’s biggest market, figure 31), Tema and Tudu Station (two of Accra’s main transport hubs), and Kwame Nkrumah’s Memorial Park & Mausoleum. Walking through the smoked glass doors of the Electricity Company Customer Service’s main entrance, one feels the cold air from two big coolers blowing refreshingly onto the large sleek cream tiles gleaming from the neon lights above. The front room of the Company is organized like a large crescent. On the right, the cashiers’ side, people wait for their ticket to be called to the appropriate booth to pay their bills or top up credit. There are booths for pre-paid and post-paid (credit) meter users, and a booth for other payments – reconnection fees or initial payments. On the left, customers with queries about their bills, meters, customer account or registration are attended by two front-desk customer service assistants, Auntie Amy and Auntie Emma. In-between the customer service frontdesk and the cashiers is a counter for faults and disconnections, where faulty meters are brought in for observation and disconnection cases are dealt with. A small stand which features a bright lightbulb permanently lit on display provides information on energy-efficient lights and sells various bulbs. The counters all lead to backrooms, whose numbers have become household names among customers, to which they are sent according to the type of issue their case presents – bills, accounts, meters and disconnections/reconnections. Hanging above the faults’ desk, a TV transmits ECG documentaries and short educational and entertaining films about illegal connections, bill payments, and the dangers of electrocution. In between the short films, ECG’s logo comes to the screen, its tripartite lightning sign bouncing up and flashing: ECG!
Figure 30. ECG Accra East District office – formerly known as the Electricity House.

Figure 31. Makola Market.
Day after day, customers walked in and sat on the metallic benches, inquiring about their bills – the ones that never came, the ones that were months late, and above all the ones they didn’t “understand” or “believe”. They brought in their meters – the faulty ones, the ones “running faster than Usain Bolt”, the ones that made them look “colo” – that is, colonial or backward (described in chapter 4). They registered new connections, came to pay reconnection fees, or pick up their confiscated fuse for reconnection. On the Customer Front Desk, they brought out their bills, smoothing them out on the large dark wooden table, and announced their issue to an attentive Auntie Amy. Their words complained of painful numbers, hundreds and thousands of cedis that left them astounded and discouraged. The unbelievable numbers adorning their bills brought to the surface feelings of betrayal and suspicions of perfidy from the machinations of an unreachable and tricksterish state. They were numbers that tested the limit of their capacity to endure and “bottle”, as they put it, their daily hardships in self-control and coolness.

“422. 4-2-2!?” Numbers written on the bills were repeated incredulously. Shouted with the full force of indignation and the rightfulness of one that has been robbed and lies waiting for a verdict to correct to an invisible jury this violence of abstraction (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Ferme 1998): “422! Madame”, cried out on the back of unrepressed laughter, “Madame, I used to pay GHC 22 per month. 422?! It is unbelievable!”. Auntie Amy would make an empathetic frown, advise them to “pay something small” and check their earthing, their wires, or their meters. “I don’t understand! It’s too much. The Dumsor is not over – I’m telling you. Even if it’s over, now it has created even more problems. Because now we cannot pay our bills. I need someone to tell me something!

6 Many customers complained that their bills were never delivered or meter readers taken for months, sometimes years. This seems to have been a recurring issue in the history of electricity distribution in Accra; in The Daily Graphic of September 6th 1963, Eddie’s weekly column describes the services of the Electricity Department (as it was then known) in these terms: “The electricity department is unusually very quick at cutting off the power supply of customers who fail to settle their bills promptly. On the other hand, the department often beats the record of the snail when it comes to sending out bills to its customers. Very often the bills don’t arrive at all. Or at other times after elapse of three or four months a bill arrives showing a huge amount of arrears one has to pay. Invariably this is followed up with a warning, or more appropriately, a threat that the bill should be settled within a specified period or face disconnection. In many cases due to lack of proper coordination between the revenue branch and its technical men lights are sometimes disconnected even before the bills or the warning notes arrive. The individual citizens must also remember that any attempt to refuse or delay payment in respect of any services rendered by the state means a stab in the back or a step backwards in our onward march towards economic independence” (Daily Graphic 1963).
They just tell you, oh it’s a fault!” When Dumsor improved, in January 2016, “faults” became the new currency of electricity shortfalls – “now everything is fault, fault!” People would look at me as a last resort: “So I hope you write a good story about this at home!”.

In this chapter, I look at customers’ demands for visibility, transparency, and understanding through the politics of numbers (Ferme 1998) put forth by the Company’s billing system and navigated daily by street-level civil servants and disgruntled customers. I look at the ways in which numbers establish a ground of “incomprehension” that becomes a zone of manoeuvrability in interactions with civil servants, in ways that contradictorily use the productive “confusion” of numbers and their ontic indeterminacy for staking claims and reparations, even as they seek clarity and transparency from what are perceived as obscured, deceiving calculations of electrical flow, value and consumption. I look at the stories bills tell, following Jane Guyer in “listening for another voice in the data” (2004:132) of mundane economic documents by “thinking other” about numbers (175).

**Critical De-System**

Allegations of corruption and mismanagement at ECG were rife. The majority of customers who physically visited the Customer Service were disgruntled with the Company, and complained profusely about the perceived corrupted nature of officials and the incompetent state of operations. It was well-known in Accra that many ECG workers (many of them in fact sub-contracted and underpaid workers) connived with customers in facilitating meter bypasses, delaying meter readings or generating inaccurate ones (or in acquiring meters illegally put for sale at a time when tenants, especially in shared compound housing, were ready to do anything to get their hands on an individual meter – as discussed in chapter 4). Customers often complained of the threats of disconnection they received from ECG staff, ordering them to pay “something small” to avoid disconnection in the case of large owing amounts susceptible to forthcoming disconnection. In the caricature below, the “disconnection man” figures
anxieties of cuts and abandonment to the darkness – “pay something small, else we will come and cut your light and you will be in darkness!” (figure 31).

One customer even told me that he was once ordered by one of the staff to pick “dropping” and pay for it, otherwise the team would not come to rehabilitate his light. There were also suspicions about the patterns of light distribution; Kofi, a worker at Tema harbour who lived in Kanda, noticed that the state’s housing estates always had light: “I’ll be calling ECG and asking why: are we not all paying our bills, are we not all Ghanaians? Or,” he smiled, “is there some kind of discrimination going on?” After this, he declared that he wanted to “change line”, that is, to change the “zone” his flat was located in and enter the grid demarcation of his neighbours, because “these people they always have light, because that is where all the electricity people live. That is where they all live. And the Mexicans and Americans.” And yet, as I briefly alluded to in the previous chapter, the patterns of load shedding were actually rather democratic – expatriates and foreigners were probably using generators.

Customers at the Front Desk

Once, when I went on a disconnection trip to Makola Market with some ECG staff, three hairdressers came to ask me ‘not to cut their light’, saying that their “Madame” was bringing the money. In fact, the ECG staff had been telling them (in Ga, which I don’t speak) that I was the one who ordered the disconnection!

Taxi fare (as opposed to shared taxi or trotro).

Of course, this does not mean that the patterns of presence of electricity during a blackout were not discriminate, but that this differential access was not in fact effected by the state.
often confronted ECG staff, accusing them of theft, manipulation, and deception, probing their reactions and sometimes taking me as a witness: “Please, I hope you won’t deceive me again”, they would ask mischievously. “I’m not deceiving you”, ECG staff would reply, “it’s the meter, not me” or: “It’s The System, not me”.

The “System”, as it was constantly invoked, hovered over the Company as a vague, malevolent but crippled and disjointed force, whose defective applications caused havoc and resentment in the Ghanaian political and social fabric. “The System” was invoked by both civil servants and the Ghanaian public as an all-encompassing self-evidential explanation, accused and blamed for mistakes in bill generation and computation, the inadequate supply of power, the rising electricity tariffs, the corruption within ECG. In his ethnography of “The System” and politics in Angola, Jon Schubert describes The System as a kind of shared imagining, and understanding, of social realities that “resonates in the background” (2017:2), but also imply a set of mechanisms that make the system work (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014a). In Ghana, “The System” created a zone of relationality that cut across the state, implicating both bureaucrats and the Ghanaian public as unlikely partners (Olivier de Sardan 2013), both unwillingly subject to the imagined authority of unreachable technocrats, failing computers and corrupt politicians that constitutes The System. As many ECG staff would often say to their customers, “It is affecting everyone, me too my bill has gone up, me too I can’t pay”. This unlikely partnership partakes in a common nationalistic aspiration and dedication to the country as a site of dignity, pride, peace, and sacrificial service. This split figure of the state in ECG, between The System and the nation, allows civil servants and customers to both affiliate themselves to an imperative commitment to national service and “the state”, as an idea uncoupled from particular political affiliations (Lentz 2014), and at the same time detach themselves from “The System”, the politico-economic institutions and vague and protean figures of control, corruption, and incompetence. This split is often what makes ECG work.

In the acclaimed song “State of the Nation” (song 4 on USB stick), Ghanaian artist E.L. describes the “hard times of elevated prices / Energy crisis”, and contemplates “how corruption is tearing apart the very fabric of society, the damage is done / The policeman
at the checkpoint collecting his one, stretching his hands through my window, other hand on the gun / To get that 2 Cedi fix”.

The situation in Ghana, he sings, is

A critical de-system for what it is and should’ve been
It should’ve been a Paradise for the world to envy
But it’s hard when all your capital reserves are empty;
The rich get rich chase girls in Bentleys,
The poor die cross-sign-preacher-man-screaming,
Amen! Give it to God, mama, Give it to God!

Here, E.L.’s “critical de-system” (de-lighting customers) exposes the failure of The System as a potential site of paradisiac riches, lamenting the ruins of “what it should’ve been”. During Dumsor, the then-President John Dramani Mahama earned the new nickname “Dead Goat”, following a comment he made in response to threats of strikes and protests: “I have seen more demonstrations and strikes in my first two years”, he declared, that “I don’t think it can get worse. I have a dead goat syndrome: it is said that when you kill a goat and you frighten it with a knife, it doesn’t fear the knife because it is dead already”. The System, then, appears as a kind of fatalistic and fearless force, scavenging the impending remains of “the state” on which it preys (Frimpong-Ansah 1991). My friends used to say that “we are killing our own selves”. As an elderly customer at the Company once told me: “We are holding our own throat! Today, everybody is a big man, nobody is responsible.”

Yet this rapacious System was a violence perpetrated by an imperative morale of hypersociality (Hasty 2005; Olivier de Sardan 1999): the failures of “The System” were described by senior officials at ECG as rooted in the culture of appreciation associated with service provision. Senior officials complained of their efforts at fending off customers’ offerings of money or food for prompt service and privileged treatment (skipping long waiting lists and queues, for instance). One of the senior officials at the Customer Service declared that “In Ghana, systems don’t work” because “everybody wants to collect”, and worse, because “people will even require (to collect) before they do anything for you!”. Here, she described the ways in which “The System” mentioned above generated inefficient, unworkable “systems” – that is, modes of interaction and

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10 A 2-cedi note, the equivalent of £0.30, bribe to policemen.
forms of transaction – which operated along a reversed logic of exchange than that prevailing in Euro-American capitalist consumerism: “It’s like you always have to thank people for doing their job, here they always think that if you do something for them, they have to give you something. Even though you are paid to do it.” In line with the dual image of the Company as a kind of national “family business” described above, the logic of “thanking” for small favours was used in parallel, and sometimes in conflict with, the promoted identifications of the public as consumers and customers. In the everyday minutiae of ECG, bribes and favours were also part of office banter, as a kind of “gainful margin” (Guyer 2004:26), running alongside the office’s interactions. Jokes and teasings of favours provided opportunities for establishing familiarity and intimacies, rather than perpetrating the secrecy and illegality assumed in Western anti-corruption discourse. As Michael Herzfeld has argued (2005:372), these acts of “connivance” create “tangled skeins of complicity” that are crucial to the very exercise of control, undermining the impulse to resist; indeed, those forms of connivance were often highly desired and appreciated ways of speed-smoothing complicated processes by eliminating bureaucratic obstacles, tailored to preferences and agenda of particular customers. For instance, once, we dispatched a meter reader to a customer’s premise, but he insisted that it had to be at a time when he would himself be present to make sure that “when he [the meter reader] comes to take the reading, I give him something small to make sure that he does it right”! The aesthetics of ‘corruption’ were described by the senior official mentioned above, as a distinction between the tackiness of a bribe, and the unexpected granting of a favour, seen as a welcome “surprise”, defying expectations, creating a kind of pleasurable “shock” to the rigidity of The System.

Incomprehension as Accountability

When customers came in to contest their bill, they would often profess an open incomprehension of the requested figures and numbers. They expressed scepticism and mistrust of the state’s calculations through the idioms of doubt, disbelief and non-understanding, and attempted to solve these by arguing “their case”, coming in ready with “all their arsenals” and impelling ECG staff to “educate them” into understanding. To my surprise, when customers explained their case in terms of “non-understanding” (“I don’t understand this thing at all”), civil servants at the Company changed attitude, immediately taking on an educational role and empathetic stance. Auntie Amy, who
works at Customer Front Desk, described her role as that of an “educator”. After a particularly frustrated customer left her station, she turned to me and explained: “Everybody complains. Everybody has a problem. But it’s not their fault: most of them, they don’t have a problem, but they don’t know. 70% they don’t have a problem”. That is why, she concluded, “we are not just solving customers’ problems, we are also educating”. This didactic function was stressed by customers themselves as a duty to cast blame and accuse ECG staff of a lack of oversight, competence, or worse, a subtle accusation of malfeasance. The accusations and expectations of understanding, educating, and adapting are mixed in the following exchange into a back-and-forth debate over responsibility and duties:

Auntie Amy, frown on her face: You have to understand.
Customer: You have to educate!
A.A: I’m explaining it to you – but you have to adjust.
C: You need to educate us over this!
A.A: Look. We did a survey [about our billing system]. Many people wanted the CMS [commercial management system, to which they switched recently– described in chapter 4]. So, if you’re not adapting, it means you are still dwelling in the past.

Here, this apparently “backward” customer (who, ironically, was an electrician and thus knew very well how these things worked) is invoking the duty of ECG staff to “educate” customers, while Auntie Amy bounces back and forth on his accusations, casting him as a “backward” and uncooperative customer unable to adapt to the exigencies of modern technologies and preferences of the general public. Later, as I spoke to the customer, he declared that he would have to “go back to his books” to try and understand the new billing process, but stressed that it was ECG’s duty to educate everyone on this.

The powers of incomprehension and the notion of “understanding” as an absolute prerogative was made clear to me on one occasion, which involved a customer who had gone to complain to the Press and the PURC11 about his bill, alleging that he had been ordered to pay various amounts consecutively, and had not been issued a statement to certify the owing amount and the details of the calculations. As the man entered the billing negotiation room, Room 6 (described later), he was given royalty treatment, passing before anyone else. As he sat comfortably to face Auntie Lizzy, the head of billing, he started making his case by declaring a fortiori: “Please. We just all want to

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11 ECG’s regulatory body – the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission.
understand.” Auntie Lizzy readily agreed, nodding vigorously – “Yes, yes! We just all want to understand.” Given the sensitive image of the Company in the press at a time of billing scandals and tariff price hikes (see chapter 4), the Public Relations Officer, Auntie Naomi, saw the matter with utmost importance. The problem with the case, she told me, all came down to the fact that “they didn’t educate him on it, so he didn’t understand what to pay”. She explained the importance of “understanding”: “You have to understand the money you pay, because money is hard to come by these days! You can’t just pay whatever to someone – then the man can lose his job, too!”. Indeed, here Auntie Naomi reveals the dangers lurking in accusations of incomprehension and the importance of “educating”: that these expectations and accusations act as subdued insinuations of corruption, under the cover of confusion and incomprehension. Thus this repeated injunction on the part of customers for staff to educate them should not be seen as a professed ignorance exploited by civil servants and customers themselves, but as an implicit criticism and accusation of corruption. My friend B., a journalist and media entrepreneur, once declared: “Not understanding, I would even say it has become an institution in this country! They will tell you that you elected them so that they hire people to do the understanding for you.” This, then, gives a whole new meaning to notions of illiteracy, ignorance, and comprehension, not as epistemic stances or abilities, but as inquisitive modes of accountability, responsibility, and vigilance.

Let us go back to the exchange between Auntie Amy and the customer-electrician, as he reiterates for the third time:

C: Please. Can you educate me on this [the new billing system].
Auntie Amy then declared, putting an end to the conversation, which ends in mutual laughter:
A.A: No, but you won’t understand. Even me I don’t understand… it’s for engineers! Those kilowatts and things… you will just confuse yourself; trust me.

Here, Auntie Amy brings the exchange to a close by acknowledging the unknowability of the billing process, professing a general state of incomprehension in which internal staff themselves have been plunged – a situation that comports, indeed, a certain sense of humour. In the daily exchanges between civil servants and customers, therefore, a ground of incomprehension – which included civil servants and, indeed, the billing system itself – shrouded the everyday negotiations of bills as indecisive outcomes and uncertain documents, whose logic was predicated upon this very ground of incomprehension as a condition of enunciability for transactions to take place at all. This
receptivity to incomprehension on the part of civil servants is, to my mind, not due to a sentiment of “superiority” that these confessions of feigned or genuine non-understanding allows them to gloat over (although this certainly did happen). Rather, I would argue that it confirms a general suspicion and recognition of the illusory nature of numbers’ pretension to commensurability, aggravated by the unreliability of the electricity.

Legibility and Revelation

What are the politics of incomprehensibility in billing negotiations if “understanding” has less to do with comprehension and more to do with particular modes of accountability – in the investigation and social validation of acceptable numbers, through idioms of state responsibility and liability? How does this cultural appreciation of the virtues and implied vices of incomprehension and education recast our understanding (as a moral commitment, a suspicion of illegality) of governmentality? Studies of documents, writing, numbers and their “ways of seeing”, ordering, classifying, and enumerating incidents, people and things have been central to neo-Foucaultian analyses of governmentality, biopolitics, and the political economy (e.g. Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991; Elden 2007; MacKinnon 2000; Mitchell 2002; Rose 1991; Scott 1998). These studies have usually been concerned with analysing the techniques of modern state rule through a historical charting of the conditions of their existence and the social processes, practices and methods through which they come to appear as self-evident – deploying what Timothy Mitchell has called a “state effect” (2006[1999]), giving the state the injunctive and institutional force of reality and the appearance of an enduring structure. Mitchell’s account of the production of the appearance of the state as a coherent entity imbued with a metaphysical reality of its own through the banal routines of bureaucratic practices reveals bureaucracy and documents to be a creative, generative, formative process of giving shape to imaginations of the state and giving the categories it creates the force of the law (Scott 1998:3). As Talal Asad (1994) reminds us, the “statistical universe” is not only a matter

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12 The professed “incomprehension” of customers was sometimes seen by the ECG staff as a feigned ignorance to avoid the repercussions of an illegal connection, and attempt to extricate oneself from criminal accusations.
of representation but a political intervention, creating a common visual and material field of possibilities for the exercise, manifestation and legitimation of power.

Yet problematic in this scholarship is an implicit sense that coherence and order, through a political optics of legibility and simplification, are ultimately the rational modes of modern state rule towards which the “arts of government” are geared (Scott 1998). Despite recognising that the state is anything but coherent, and that this appearance of structure is but an effect of the techniques that bring it into being (Mitchell 2006), the real issue with this reasoning is the assumption of legibility, classification, ordering, and simplifications as the ultimate rationales of power that even a recognition of their “illusory effects” does not sufficiently challenge. This is most evident in James Scott’s infamous description of state practices of legibility, simplification, and standardization in Seeing like a state (1998), whose analysis of various projects of political design and control (in the planning of modernist cities, regulation of forests, compulsory villagisation) yields its own “Foucault effect”: an attempt at “making visible the different ways an activity or art called government has been thinkable and practicable” (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991:ix). The “legibility” bias present in many of those studies of governmentality is not so much problematic for its visualist bias (Fabian 1983:106), but for the assumptions it makes about the relationship between legibility, visibility, and control. Clarity, legibility, and simplification, in Scott’s arguments, are given the evidential logic of power. Scott’s account suggests that “intelligibility” and “legibility” are the only mode of governmental workability, that simplification and legibility are the “goal toward which all modern states aspire to” (1998: 36), and that clarity is a natural attribute of rule and control. By contrast, I show how those modes of probing and tweaking visibilities through demands for transparency and accountability do everything but make things more “intelligible” and “controllable”, challenging the ready-made links between increased legibility and transparency as processes of revelation and control (Sanders and West 2003).

The examples I present challenge the self-evident correspondences that are presupposed and deployed between legibility, transparency, and regulation. These studies establish a triangular system of causality, in which simplifying complex social matters makes them more amenable to visual literacy, whose assumed heightened legibility necessarily leads to greater manipulability and control. I want to disrupt the easiness by which those
correspondences are assumed and drawn; as I discussed above, one cannot underestimate the complexity of nuances and the layers of accusations, suppositions, assumptions, inquisitions invested in apparently simple projects of “understanding”, “ignorance” and “education” voiced in the daily exchanges of an electricity company. These layers of intentions and remediation challenge us to rethink the very possibility of “coherence” as an effect (Mitchell 1999), of “legibility” as the ultimate rationale of control and domination, and of “clarity” as a revelatory and simplificatory mechanism.

In short, I take issue with the restrictive notion of intelligibility taking place through rational modes of revelatory legibility, which implies that making things legible makes them meaningful or, at least, revelatory of data that can be used efficiently to rule. As critical studies of documents and colonial writing regimes have shown, writing and their material forms always carry the possibility for mimetic repetition and displacement, for subversion and the revelation of the theatrics of colonial authority, in the forging of illegible (Das 2004) or dubious fabrication (Raman 2012), and in demanding alternative modes of handling that do not operate along concerns with “readability” (Gitelman 2014). Raman describes the import of the “signature” as a seal of authentication and a repetitive, banal, routinized gesture in colonial Madras, India (in transactions of the British East India Company) as an outrageous affront to the restricted use of the signature as the exclusive purview of the sovereign, subject to highly restricted circulation and ceremonial use. The attempts of the colonial government to establish the signature as a routine act of certification thus enabled new forms of subversion and reconsiderations of the signs and performances of power and writing’s newfound vulnerabilities to the violence of routinised fabrication.

Here the emphasis on “understanding” appears as a metacritique of the very notion of epistemology and its teleological premises rooted in ethnography’s “contextual charity” (Gellner 1970:43), that is, its assumption of credibility and coherence in the field. This brings us back to the 1980s critique of interpretive anthropology ceaselessly “in search of meaning”, biased towards coherence and consistency at the expense of the conflicts, contradictions and subversions of a presumed social order (Karp 1988:36; Keesing 2012). An “anthropology of incomprehension” not only looks at non-understanding as an important mode of social relationality (Keesing 2012), but also, and to my mind more interestingly, questions its relation to clarity, transparency and accountability and the
types of revelatory gestures they assume. As Brian Larkin has argued, and as discussed in the previous chapter, we should recognize the work done by noise and interference, in which incoherence becomes not simply an attempt to expose moments of “non-meaning”, but acts as a mode of inquiry, attentive to other types of agencies, for creating different epistemological and pedagogical projects. I will look at this through the particular case of billing numbers.

The Almighty Room 6: a “State at Work”

Enoch is sitting on one of the metallic customer benches, where we talk about his most recent bill, which states a GHC199 owing amount (about £40). “The electricity here is ridiculous”, he starts. “Before, I used to have AC and I paid GHC 40 a month, but now, because of the Dumsor and this increment,13 I’ve turned off my AC, I don’t use it anymore”. And yet, his bills kept increasing steadily since December. On his first visit to the Customer Service, he asked if this was due to the tariff increase; but he was told that the tariff increments hadn’t taken hold yet, and was advised instead to “check his earthing”. He called a friend familiar with electrical installations to check this for him, but all seemed to work fine. Then in January, he received a bill bearing the shocking amount of GHC 199, despite having stopped using his AC: “I’m asking why the bill go boom like that? They say the units, the increase is small; but it’s because of the taxes. The charges. So I went to Customer Service and they asked for my receipt of what I’d paid, but I had misplaced it so that’s how they got me. So this time, I told myself, this time, I won’t mess up. I brought the receipt and all.”

Following months of frustration and despair at the rising amounts of his electricity bills, Enoch had come ready with all his evidence to “confront” the ECG staff and make his claim heard, defend his case and achieve a re-calculation of his bill. Like many other customers, he was told to check various technical specificities of the electrical system: the wiring, the earthing, the numbers written on their meters. When this failed, or when their inquiries couldn’t be resolved at the front desk, they were then redirected to a mysterious and auspicious “Room 6”.

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13 He refers to the tariff increase implemented in early 2016, described in chapter 4.
Room 6 is a place where the latest intrigues are played out, where customers “in the know” press to queue, patiently lining to get a seat in the office of legendary Auntie Lizzy, “household name” of ECG, head of billing process. Room 6 is the place where bill corrections, bill negotiations and bill generation take place. Customers who come to the front-desk Customer Service bearing bills they don’t understand, believe or agree with are most often sent to Room 6, where they will be able to receive detailed explanation and, where necessary, to lay out their case and hope to achieve correction or “reconciliation” (in the case of disconnections, incorrect billing or overbilling). Workers in Room 6 comprise Auntie Lizzy, head of billing, and meter readers and assistants (often third-party workers), who go out in the field to take readings and distribute bills, and return to Room 6 to input the data and generate the next bills. Room 6 often works closely with Room 5, where the district’s technical officer takes care of faults and meter issues, and resolves challenges around prepaid meters. Room 6 also takes care of commercial services – dealing with high-end industrial consumers, and are also in charge of resolving “disconnection dockets” – checking the stories behind disconnections, and adjusting customers’ accounts in case of reconciliations. Room 6 is always hot and busy: ECG staff pace along the room all day, carrying endless stacks of bills, accompanying customers in and out. Workers’ names shouted across working booths give a frenetic rhythm to the succession of customer cases. On the walls, managerial quotes on professionalism, team-work, and knowledge-sharing have been printed out and stapled to the wooden panels: “Knowledge is not like a loaf of bread; it does not diminish when shared”.

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In this chapter, I use Room 6 as a microcosm of a “state at work” (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014a), a place in which negotiability, resilience, and the “improbable achievements” (Guyer 2004:6) or “magical qualities” (as they are known in Ghana) of making-do in situations of apparent and perceived impossibilities are obtained through the working interactions between civil servants and citizens, rather than in response to their assumed, expected, pre-defined opposition and conflict. In the interactions I describe between Auntie Lizzy, the workers in Room 6 and customers, I attempt to rehabilitate different ways of seeing, feeling, and relating to the state beyond a generalized sense of coercion, mistrust or patronage (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014b: 8; Thelen, Vetters and von Benda-Beckmann 2018:4).
While some of the interactions I observed did involve such sentiments and situations of petty corruption, as described earlier, they did not subscribe to a ready link of causality to state failure or immorality, as these are often equated (or presumed) in the literature. They demanded a different conception of power to the neo-Foucaultian sense of institutional, totalizing control through disciplinary and regulatory techniques, stressing instead a vision of the state as a site of *fraught delivery* (which Olivier de Sardan (2013) argues is the chief definition of governance, as opposed to the coercive functions of the state) and inextricable dependency. African states have been characterized by a “dizzying array of terms” ranging from “empty” (Piot 2010:11), “shadow” (Reno 1995; Ferguson 2006), “criminal” (Bayart et al. 1999), “neopatrimonial” (Chabal 1999), among others. The states “at work” described by Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2014a) work against those imageries of failure and emphasize the productivity of African bureaucracies, and the conditions of their workability (2014b:5-6), beyond an instrumentalization of political disorder (Chabal and Daloz 1999), which implies grand schematics of manipulation and intentional failure. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan use “at work” as a metaphor to evoke the always-incomplete nature of state formation (Das and Poole 2004) through the imagery of the construction site prevalent in urban African landscapes: the private house in perpetual construction that expresses, to the beholder, the sights of both accomplishment and disrepair, a “perpetual building site where construction, repair, abandonment, and re-purposing proceed simultaneously”, in which the state appears as a “construction site of overlapping projects” (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014b: 5-6). The figure of the half-built/half-torn house provides a productive starting point to think the partial visibilities of numbers, in which signs of construction and symptoms of abandonment uncannily converge. In what follows, I describe a bureaucratic poetics of numerical resilience as it played out in Room 6.

**Numbearability**

“Ah! The challenges that a man must face, for a man of God trying to establish a Church…”, laments a customer-pastor, sitting in one of the two chairs facing Auntie Lizzy’s desk. Auntie Lizzy, impervious to his pleas, is fanning herself with a bill, the charts of red and blue rectangles kissing her cheek, busy looking over a customer’s bill. “I am not one of those pastors, I am a teacher, and I teach the word of God. I believe in Justice. But the challenges a man must face, ah!”. Upon Auntie Lizzie’s lack of responsiveness, he turned to me: “Hello my sister. The light will kill us. The light will
kill us. They are killing us!” I asked him what his challenge was. He showed me his bill of GHC 2000, explaining that consumption had tripled: “It’s a big problem. No one really understands it, they will not tell us.” The phone rang and Auntie Lizzy, talking with her employees about this bill, gestured for me to pick it up. A second customer, laughing, complained of the long wait, wiping his forehead. Auntie Lizzy turned to him and apologized: “Daddy please, it’s the new software! This new software de3, 3y3 kakaaka!” The man laughed and nodded back. “Paulina who was calling me like that?” “HR Makola”, I replied. Auntie Lizzy winced, annoyed: “Ah, me I’m hot, she’s disturbing me!” “Paulina, everyday, pressure paaa, pressure!

Customers lined day after day, hoping to reach a revision of their bills or to arrange a visit by one of the meter readers to reach a more favourable outcome (sometimes, through the arrangement of a tailor-made deal with the meter reader). In these processes of billing negotiations, it struck me that it was not commensurability that was sought, but rather a kind of consensual approximation. As Jane Guyer has argued (2004), economic transactions in West Africa exhibit an “asymmetry in exchange”, they do not result in precise or definitive transactions (Berry 1995). West African theories of value, Guyer argues (2004:16), do not endorse the “irreducible purity of number” prevalent in European and North American banking systems; rather, numbers serve as “scalar qualifiers”, gradating quality and producing “scalar judgments”, inviting its claimants and users to modify these existing scales (Guyer 2004:19). Thus, negotiability and incommensurability are key: value is “contingent, hermeneutic, negotiable, and non-natural” (Mirowski in Guyer 2004:14). Yet in the state institution of the national electricity company, this incommensurability and scalar qualifying of numbers comes into conflict with the needs of the company to assert numbers of translatable value and international currency, situated as it is in a global chain of dependence on the global prices in dollars for refined oil production (through VRA, the generating company).

This, I argue, necessitates a process whereby people must, in a way, attempt to reach a degree of acceptance of numbers’ whimsical truths. Numbers were considered as extractive projects: “they have bloated everything”, said a customer whose bill had gone from 72 to 180 GHC. The bills, another said, will “squeeze us. They are squeezing all the water that is left in us.” Accepting the whimsical truths of numbers’ unbelievability was not an issue of numeracy but an issue of “numbearability”: a process of making
oneself amenable to bear the brunt of numbers’ gravity – their pressure, and the seriousness of the critical outcomes they announce. This “numbearability” does not, however, account to a gradual “trust in numbers” (Giddens 1990; Porter 1995), in which numbers come to be accepted as a necessary premise for the elaboration of social complexity; rather, it enounces that people must learn to endure their inconvenient, partial, and unimaginable truths, they must make themselves bearable to their indecision and decisiveness. Indeed, the general perception that numbers “endure”, as stable referents of goods, value, or in this case energy, are an artifice of political stabilization to make people forget that they are made to “endure” them (Ferme 1998).

But numbers, as Jane Guyer argues, are “more inventive than theories of modernity or scientific progress can readily account for” (Guyer et al. 2010:38), and this inventiveness derives from this uncanny combination of undecidedness and decisiveness – amendable but always trenchantly fateful. Numbers are violent because they appear as both intransigent in their fixed hardness and decisiveness, and yet impossibly elastic and capricious, creating amenity for discussion, expansion, reduction and compression. It is this combination of undecided decisiveness that makes numbers so politically potent (Ferme 1998; Hacking 1983) and affective (Nelson 2010). In the following, I describe one mode of probing this uncertain quality of numbers in informal ‘gadget interrogations’ that took place in Room 6, as attempts to reveal, explain, and educate customers on electricity consumption through reconstructions of electrical appliances from extracted testimonies, stories, and confessions.

**Gadget interrogations: confessions & revelations**

One woman, Ma S., was sitting in the chair, probing Auntie Lizzy for her bill’s figures. “My story is that, I don’t understand my bill – it’s too much”. Auntie Lizzy scrutinized her carefully: “What do you do there?” “I have a clothes shop”, she answered. “What do you use in there?” asked Auntie Lizzy. The woman looked up, thinking, and counted: “Fan, 1; bulbs;” “What else”, continued Auntie Lizzy. “Fridge…” “What else”. Auntie Lizzy looked up from her bills, inquisitive: “WHAT ELSE?” until the woman finally muttered “AC…”, and Auntie Lizzy jumped up from her seat, exclaiming: “Oh, ευε correct!! Ha, ευε correct! The AC!!”\(^{14}\) She cast me a triumphant look, and then, looking

\(^{14}\) “It’s correct, it’s correct!”
back at Ma S., explained: “You see, before, we had the Dumsor, so you didn’t have full
power, but now we do, plus there is the 70% increment, so as for the AC, it’s correct.”
Upon seeing Ma S.’s deflated face, Auntie Lizzy added: “If you are still not convinced,
I can give you my number and I’ll come check in the afternoon”. Ma S. thanked her and
left. Auntie Lizzy later told me: “Me, I know there is nothing wrong, but customers
usually they want to have someone to go with them and check with them. Then they are
satisfied”.

In assessing and negotiating bills with customers, Auntie Lizzy would often probe them
about their consumption use, attempting to unravel the “unbelievable number” sitting on
their bill. She would question them about their use of the premise (a room, house, or
shop) and ask pointedly about their electrical appliances and their functioning state
(“how many fridges? Do you have deep-freezer? TV? Is the AC new?”). In the course
of the exchange, she would push them to reveal the contents of their private homes and
offices (most often composed of fans, bulbs, fridge, TV, radio) and would often lead
them to reluctantly admit to using AC – considered the highest-consuming “gadget”.
Often, the appearance of the person, and deductions made from it, would prompt the
rectification or allocation of various numbers. People contested the numbers on their
bills, and accusations were made by ECG staff as to what those numbers referred to;
sometimes, when customers had gone, Auntie Lizzy would turn to me and say: “They
say they all live in ‘single room’, ‘single room’, don’t mind them – they are lying! We
have a lot of these people”.

Once, a young woman, Sister B., came in with an incredibly high bill of 2000 GHC
(approximately £400). She purported living in a single room, without AC. Auntie Lizzy
gave her a quizzical look: “No AC? Are you sure?” Sister B. acquiesced. “And you are
not giving the light to anybody?” Sister B. denied this. “Hmmm. eye strange. But you
are living with other people, right?” Sister B. nodded. “Are you sure they are not eating
into your account?” Sister B. vehemently protested, saying that they all had different
meters anyway, and that this was solely her own. “Are you sure about the separate
meters”? insisted Auntie Lizzy. “Because if the separation was not made right, then they
are eating into your account.” The case dragged on for a bit, and then Sister B. left to
Room 5, where Mr. Mensah would check her meter. As she left the room, Auntie Lizzy
turned to me and declared: “2000 cedis for 2 months, single room, eiiiish!!! She has AC.
She’s lying. She’s using but she will not tell you.” In the end, it turned out that Sister B. had inherited the accumulated debt of the previous tenant’s meter when she moved in, which had been transferred to her newly-installed prepaid meter. But the point had been made: it did not matter ultimately what had caused the bill to be so high; rather, Sister B.’s case demonstrated that all bills, and big numbers, are ultimately mysterious guises whose appearances must be probed, whose “truths” must be “reconciled” over or renegotiated.

Auntie Lizzie’s mini-interrogations of gadgets recalls the interrogations of corruption cases at the Serious Fraud Office in Accra described by Jennifer Hasty (2005b:289-93), in which a jovial, comfortable atmosphere is established to put suspects at ease, to make them work as “collaborators” in these investigations. This conviviality, Hasty argues, by forcing laughter or generating guilt, is particularly conducive to extracting confessions, creating what she calls an “emotional transfusion” between the interrogator and the suspect (2005b:291). Indeed, Auntie Lizzie’s mini-interrogations of gadgets should not be seen as an antagonistic exchange aimed at unveiling the immorality of customers. They were also a governmental numerical pedagogy (Appadurai 1993:124), attempting to bring customers to accept those whimsical truths. Reducing these numerical altercations to a strategic negotiation would be missing the point of the indecision of numbers themselves. These revelations were also attempts at visualising flows of invisible (and, at that time, quite literally unavailable) flows of energy and their compressed quantification process. In these number “trials”, appraisals of visual forms of quantifiable, revenue-bearing units create their own numerical logics of imagination.

**Estimated bills, uncertain numbers**

The calculation of infrastructural value and flows of matter and energy like electricity can be seen as part of the scientific, calculative methods devised in Western modern techniques of rule for enumerating bodies, people and things into numerical values of universal pretension and applicability. The rise of a “moral science” of the state – a “statistical society” – was accomplished, as Hacking has argued (1983), by an “avalanche of numbers” in the decades of 1820s-1840s, marking an obsession with the quantification of social facts and a new moral regime expressed in the negative, in which the law inscribed itself in rates of deviancy (Hacking 1983:281,289; Foucault 1988) –
crime, insanity, prostitution, suicide – creating the factual appearance of a moral crisis through those new “quantifacts” of the real (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). Like other measurements meant to commensurate complex and messy qualities bound to escape the rigid incarcerating techniques of censuses, surveys, and identification technologies, the standardization of electric power into kilowatt-hour and the translation of this energy into affordable values (reflecting dependence on US-defined oil prices, local infrastructure, workforce, and incomes) concealed and attempted to neutralize the messiness and inherent leakiness of infrastructural flows like electricity and water (Anand 2015).

Electricity, which cannot easily be stored, always incurs major losses; it thereby always implies the possibility of its own fugitiveness, in the form of tamperings, diversions, and other creative criminalities of “flights” of power (often in connivance (Herzfeld 2005) with state employees or third-parties, as described above), which have long become the target of ferocious campaigns by the state company (figure 32). As a measure dependent on speed and time, electrical power is “fungible”, “continually effacing itself” (Crump 1990:99-101), sustained only by the appliances that trap this fungibility into appearances of stability and permanence in the form of light, coolness, steaming irons and powered phones. The original Twi phrase for electricity, “nenam kanea”, the wandering light, aptly capturing this fugitiveness. In Ghana, as I describe below, this leakiness of electrical flow, and the concurrent incommensurability of its numerical representation, is openly acknowledged and forms a particularly productive ground for the political negotiations of state power and its techniques of governmentality.
The case-studies described here reveal anxiety about the infrastructural arbitrariness and causalities of electrical power. But this anxiety did not only result from the unfathomability of electrical flow itself; it also emerged from attempts to numerically assert unequivocal values according to an algorithmic calculation sporting the pretension of constancy: numbers that poorly tallied with the experience of mysterious and intermittent blackouts, dubious “faults”, unreliable power, fluctuating voltage, and suspicious and humiliating recording technologies (such as the prepaid meters that were rolled out recently, and are discussed in greater detail in chapter 4). How was such a “turbulent experience” (Guyer 2011) of electricity supposed to ever become readily accepted in the form of fixed, hard numbers purporting to commensurability and, importantly, presupposing trust in the terms of their emergence and coming into the world (or paper bill)? The electricity crisis, periodic shortages, and fluctuations (the famously called “disco-light” phenomenon) exacerbated this instability and disruptive character of numbers, making more salient discussions of value, commensurability, and modes of accountability.

As the Comaroffs have argued in relation to crime statistics in South Africa (2006), and Diane Nelson (2010) with regards to victim counting in post-civil war Guatemala, numbers’ violence does not always reside in their “abstraction” of lived experience, purporting to convey facts in an objective, measurable and commensurable way. Rather,
numbers themselves give visceral substance to a “phenomenology of figures” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:211), provoking feelings of fascination, disbelief, and wonder – feelings that are made particularly acute in the experience of rather “banal” infrastructural technicalities. How could, indeed, something as mundane as electrical current be the bearer of such traumatic and inflated figures? Far from abstract and neutral signs, numbers are experienced as visceral facts disguised in mysterious forms (Bledsoe 2010), taking on “alien and menacing tones” (Nelson 2010) that call into being unsupportable “assertions of the real” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:209).

Those negotiations of numbers reveal, through “gadget interrogations” or the obstinacy and determination of customers to probe their bills, the irreducibly “estimated” character of all forms of enumeration and commensurability – their approximated character, that represents a fissure of negotiability rebuffing the intransient aspect of numbers and signs. This estimated nature of numbers caused a great deal of upsurge at ECG, and was responsible for most of the billing issues customers came to complain about – and, indeed, constitute the bulk of customer complaints in the archives of ECG. Customers who presented highly-inflated numbers, or witnessed a sudden rise in their usual bill, were often victims of the “estimated” billing technique at the Company, that is, bills for which an “actual” meter reading had not been taken, and had therefore been estimated “by the machine” or, as was believed by the general public (not unfoundedly), by looking at one’s household and inferring a particular lifestyle. At the time when I did fieldwork, bills were sometimes estimated for a year or two, leading to enormous accumulated debts when correct figures were finally taken. For instance, a customer, whose father had been “estimated” for months at a rate of 75 GHC /month, while the “real” readings were purported to fare around 225 GHC /month, finally received his father’s bill after 4 months, amounting to 918 GHC. Due to the high amount, the premises were promptly disconnected (“on a Friday, they always wait for the Friday 5pm, to make sure you will be in the darkness all weekend!”).

There were many reasons for meter readings not to be taken; the categories of “non-access” to customers’ premises, preventing meter reading by ECG staff, included: “meter locks” (many customers sealed off their meter with a personalized locking system, in a wooden box to conceal it or in an iron cage, or hid the meters away under their bed or in their toilets); “wild dogs” (the use of dogs or signs advising wild dogs);
“vacant” (abandoned or closed off premises). These estimations were perceived by ECG customers as deliberate attempts to prevent customers from probing their bills and challenging their calculations, as the “correct” bills would only arrive after months of accumulated debt, often leading to disconnections – which necessitate a reconnection fee and payment of all arrears at once. As the customer mentioned above cried out, “why would you even do “estimate”? Then you get into situations like these… you can’t challenge. You see? How can you challenge this?”, he said, flaunting his bill. “You can’t!” He left ECG tense and anxious, saying he would go to his office now to try and collect money from his fellow workers and relatives to reconnect his father who was now in darkness.

Yet ECG customers had a different theory on how those estimations were produced: they believed the values imprinted on their bills resulted from ECG staff’s unscrupulous deductions of the value of a customer’s consumption from the visual assessment of the house and the inferred lifestyle of its occupants. Estimates, in this understanding, were part of a speculative “economy of appearances” (Tsing 2000), in which visual cues produced their own numerical imaginations and fantasies. This produced a kind of reverse “aesthetic governmentality” as that discussed by Ghertner (2010) in slum-clearance efforts in Delhi, in which visual cues and designs are used to create the “looks” of order, progress, and “aesthetic normativity” of legality overriding the calculative practices of enumeration and statistical categorization. Here, dwellings themselves produced their own “aesthetical governmentality” and numerical logics. These were not completely unfounded suspicions, in a context in which appearances very often “do something” (and sometimes quite a lot) for people, as will be discussed in chapter 7 on the moral aesthetics of ironing and the notion of appearances as a “prosperity gospel” in the political and religious institutions of Accra. Buildings, therefore, often masked their interior affluence in their visible facades. Once, I went on a meter reading visit with Kofi, a meter reader, to a civil servants’ living quarter; the tenants had apparently not received bills for months. The courtyard was full of rubble, empty porcelain toilet bowls on the ground, and the rooms looked, from the outside, completely abandoned, with rusty and torn mosquito nets hanging from the window frames. But the garage shed, where the meter was located (which was revealed to be faulty, and had been there for “at least 10 years”, according to Kofi) revealed a gleaming Porsche and a Mercedes Benz. This imagination of ECG staff’s indiscriminate estimation of electrical
consumption foregrounds the uncertainty of numbers and distrust in their modes of calculation discussed above. But it also reiterates warnings about the importance of modesty, of controlled display, of the dangers of flaunting wealth, and of the distrust in visibilities, analysed in greater depth in chapter 7.

**Conclusion: ECG’s Vision Statements**

“The System is rotten”, complained an elderly customer. “And sometimes, you know, I feel very sad. I’m the frank type! Some of us – many of us – know what is going on. Some of your people”, he said, pointing to Auntie Amy, “are involved in those illegal connections! We know what is going on here – and I’m not afraid to say it”, he said, looking squarely at me and back at Auntie Amy. “Why would I cover up? It’s my country. Why would I cover up? We are not fools. This is Africa: everything goes bad.” At this point, he looked at the electrical installation board mockup in the Customer Hall (a board representing a “correct” electrical installation) (figure 33), and accusatively erupted: “They are just giving you this, this, this management thing, this vision statement. This vision statement. You see this thing, there? If I had my way, I would just go and cover these red wires, I would just paint it all white. I would take off all these wires and throw it in the gutter. Because all of this, they just whitewash it all, but inside it’s darkness!” When I asked Fred, the man who designed the board mockup, why it was on display in the main hall, he replied: “It’s to show to customers how it should look like before I come to you. Otherwise I’ll fail you!” he said, and laughed. One day, as a customer was looking at the meter board mockup, Fred approached him and playfully snapped: ‘Look at this beautiful board! I should be paid for it, no? You should pay me for it, I’ve seen you’ve been looking at it!” They laughed, but the man immediately replied: “Eiish I pay every month so I have the right to look!” In these semi-serious, semi-comical encounters, Fred’s play on the authoritative figure of the board as a prescriptive tool is here satirized and derided by a customer who expresses his “right to look” dispensed onto him through his status as a paying “customer”. In this playful exchange, the very values and premises of visibility and numeracy, of transparency and accountability, are satirised, probed, and laughed over. As I have argued, accountability in matters of infrastructural governance at the Electricity Company was achieved in part through idioms of incomprehensibility that bills and numbers provide. The interactions described in this chapter enounce attitudes of “infrastructural doubt” (Carey and Pederson 2017) about the opacity of technical
machinations, computation, and billing systems, in part stemming from the fleeting nature of electrical flows themselves. But they also denote the possibility to make systems ‘work’ through illegibility, incomprehension, and scepticism. Encounters between civil servants at the Electricity Company and customers reveal the amenability of numbers and the realm of the ‘official’ to personable and subjective inflections, creating intimacies of power between the state and citizens. Numbers, as I have argued, are seen as ‘estimations’ both in their incomplete and uncertain referentiality, but also in the sense of being the result of moral deliberations, the outcomes of situated judgments involving feelings of trust and distrust, of quantitative uncertainty and qualitative plausibility.

Figure 33. ECG’s electrical installation mockup board.
CHAPTER 3. THE POSTCOLONIAL ‘CONTRACT’ OF ELECTRICITY

Throughout the political history of Ghana, the legacy of electrical systems of power has left an incredibly important yet thoroughly neglected predicament for the postcolonial realities, relations and imaginings of Ghana today. From the electrification of Ghana as a national and Pan-African icon of infrastructural independence and literal empowerment during Kwame Nkrumah’s rule, to today’s use of electricity (and its failure) as a bait for gathering electoral votes, electricity’s propensity to shape power flows has been harnessed into competing visions of infrastructural politics, citizenry, and modernity. In this chapter, I look at the ways that the patterns of electrification in Ghanaian history have informed a particular relationship to the national grid and to notions of delivery and the public good. I look at the types of connections that infrastructures promise, and fail to deliver, by drawing some of the patterns of connectivities that electrification has traced over time on the Ghanaian landscape and the ways that these material assemblages have delineated the premises of an infrastructural, political contract in postcolonial Ghana. I chart the changing guises of this contract throughout Ghana’s political history, from the initial promises of Nkrumah’s nationalist electrical citizenry through the Akosombo Dam, to the increasingly hollow and dubious tenets of the contract itself, seen as a tool of political trickery that promises illusions of connections for political gains, during the extended period of military years and the turn to neoliberal reforms.¹

Indirect Rule and Selective Infrastructure

Electricity was first introduced in Ghana in the early 1900s in the gold mining town of Obuasi, in the Ashanti region, shortly after the British-owned Ashanti Goldfields Company was registered in 1897 (Dumett 1988; Turner 1947). Mary Gaunt, an

¹ ISSER’s “Guide to electrical power in Ghana” (2005) divides the energy history of Ghana into three periods: 1) “Before Akosombo” (that is, pre-1966), which includes colonial rule and the first decade of independence, characterized by isolated generation facilities and low rates of electrification; 2) “The Hydro Years” (from 1966 to the mid-1980s), prominently marked by the construction of the Akosombo Hydroelectric dam. This is also the growth of the national grid; 3) “Thermal Complementation” phase, from the mid-1980s to date, which marks efforts to improve energy security by complementing the increasingly unreliable hydro-generation from the Dam with thermal plants (such as the Takoradi Thermal Power Plant) (ISSER 2005:16). In the energy history I draw in this chapter, I am more interested in linking particular infrastructural developments to key political events and policies.
Australian novelist who visited the gold mining town of Obuasi around 1910, which she described as a “jewel” shining in the night (335), as it was then the very first electrified town – electrified, that is, for the Company’s Manager’s bungalow, a “palatial place”, where she was invited to dine. She found West Africa to be “a land of immense possibilities, a land overflowing with wealth, a land of corn and wine and oil”, which showed “immense value to the English crown” (11). The infrastructural history of (West) Africa, including electricity, emerged from material entanglements of desire, nurtured by European fantasies of gold, diamonds, and other natural riches (cf. Pinney 2002; Thomas 1991) – a fantasy encroached in the very name of colonial Ghana as the “Gold Coast”.

In its early days, electricity is intimately linked to colonial routes of mineral and resource extraction; it becomes publicly administered in 1914 by the colonial Gold Coast Railway Administration to operate the railway lines built in 1898 along the “Golden Triangle” (Owusu in Obeng-Odoom 2012:124) formed by Ghana’s main gold-mining and exporting cities: Accra, Kumasi (and the nearby gold mines of Tarkwa and Obuasi) in the Ashanti hinterland, and Sekondi-Takoradi, a major coastal town in the Western Region (figure 35), facilitating the export of timber, gold, and cocoa (Jeffries 1978:9-10; Obeng-Odoom 2012:124). Electricity inscribed patterns of colonial infrastructure that were typical of indirect rule in British Africa, consisting of broken networks of railway-port combination selectively connecting inland enclaves of resource extraction geared towards foreign export (Debrie 2009; Magobunje 1990:150-1; Owusu and Otiso 2008:149) (figure 35). Public electricity was extended to the town of Sekondi in 1928 (figure 34), and diesel generators were progressively introduced in major towns in the 1920s and 1930s – though mostly limited to key sites, such as the mines, factories, and hospitals (ISSER 2005:16) – following the 1920 Electricity Supply Ordinance on electricity provisioning through diesel generators regulated by government officials, which also provided electrical appliances for hire. In 1947, the Electricity Department was established under the Ministry of Works and Housing, taking over from the Public Works Department and the Railways Administration (ECG, n.d.).

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2 Accra received a limited direct current supply in 1922, for the Gold Coast Hospital, now known as 37 Military Hospital in central Accra (an alternating-current project was started in November 1924). Koforidua had a small power plant installed in 1925; works for electricity distribution for Kumasi started in 1926, with generation starting in October 1927; Winneba, Swedru, and Cape Coast were electrified in 1932, Tamale in 1938 (ECG 1976).
Figure 34. Illuminated Building, Sekondi, 1937. The National Archives, Kew; CO 1069/39/11.
Figure 35. 1922. Gold Coast Railway, with locations and major roads and railway lines to natural resources and mineral areas: cocoa, mahogany, gold, timber, oil palms, bauxite, kola, rubber, manganese. The National Archives UK, CO 1069/42/89.
Until Kwame Nkrumah’s industrial revolution through electrification after Independence in 1957, the provisioning of electricity remained limited and operated by small power stations run by the Electricity Department (Botchway 2000:182). Electricity in the colonial Gold Coast, as in many other colonies, was not subject to a “discrete logic of colonial governance”, providing incidental support to more strategic infrastructures such as railways and roads (Kale 2014:455). This “oversight” characteristic of the logic of non-intervention and selective infrastructural development of British indirect rule in West Africa served the extracting needs of the colonial power at a minimal cost.3 The conspicuous absence of rule and highly differentiated and strategic presence of electrical infrastructure on the Ghanaian landscape made all the more persuasive Nkrumah’s insistence on electrification as a social, collective, nationalist project of decolonization and racial empowerment during the Independence movement. If infrastructure can be seen as a “standard-bearer of modernizing colonial governance” (Kale 2014:454), a work of “state representation” through the staging of the “colonial sublime” (Larkin 2008:19), colonial infrastructure in the Gold Coast was characterised by its highly-selective presence in mining and shipping sites, and its relative disregard for social development.

Before mass electrification during the construction of the Akosombo Dam in the 1960s, electricity remained affordable only to a select few, predominantly white European and elite Ghanaian households, inscribing racial and class privilege onto the segregated housing arrangements of the mid-colonial period in Accra, delimited by the European elevated suburb of Victoriaborg, an enclosed residential community of government bungalows (figure 38) furnished with airy verandas and electric fans, and the central neighbourhoods of middle-class affluent Ghanaian households and white residents such as Adabraka and Ridge.4

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3 Botchway (2000:182) notes that “the colonial regime did not intend any rigorous energy programme”, after the departure in 1927 of Governor Guggisberg, whose 10-year development plan did include some important developments for infrastructure, particularly for railway and road construction. Some colonial officials disapproved of Guggisberg’s plans, whom they deemed “tainted with the disease of reckless extravagance” (Gocking 2005:58).

4 In 1955, an official report of the Legislative Assembly recorded a heated debate on differential electrification and accusation of infrastructural racism in the towns surrounding Accra: “What is the reason for so unjustly treating these towns? [by not providing them with electricity] Is it because New Tafo has some Europeans stationed there, and these other towns have no Europeans?” (Jahoda 1961:63).
Colonial infrastructures in Africa such as water, sanitation and electricity networks materialised segregated conditions of living and differential access to the practices, values and material world of modernity (Crow and Dill 2014; Hungerford and Smiley 2015:75; Njoh 2008). Patterns of electric light and darkness mapped racialised patterns of exclusion and identification (e.g. Chikowero 2007; Coquery-Vidrovitch 2003:351; Jaglin and Dubresson 2016; McDonald 2009:1). But infrastructure also helped to create, materialise, and exacerbate sometimes unspoken and implicit racialised distinctions and associations, giving them material reality, practical enforcement and interpretive significance. The former mayor of Accra, architect and historian Prof. Nat Amarteifio recounted to me a childhood story that “stuck to his mind” to this day and illustrates the racialised cartographies produced by electric light. When he was about eight years old, around 1951, his father received a peculiar visit one evening at his childhood home of Adabraka, a central neighbourhood in downtown Accra:

“There was a knock on the door”, he started. “My father’s security guard – watchman – at our gate brought in this young Indian man. He introduced himself to my father – I was with my father, we were all alone. The Indian man introduced himself and told my father that he had come down to Accra for some thing or the other, and somehow he needed some money to take a taxi back to Osu, where he was staying. And he had run out of money. My father, said “Oh sure. I’ll give you something”. Now, my father then asked him: “Why did you choose to come to this house?” I don’t quite recall what the boy said. But then my father went on to say: “Did you see the fluorescent lights from outside?” The
boy said yes. My father said: “Did you think this house belonged to a European because of the lighting?” I don’t quite recall what the boy said. But it somehow stuck in my mind, why would my father assume that having fluorescent lights meant Europeans lived there?”

The racial association of electric lighting and, as we will see in the following chapters, other electrical appliances, would endure into the post-independence era, during which electricity was posited by Kwame Nkrumah in his ambitious plans for the construction of a hydropower dam at Akosombo as a marker of economic emancipation for the African continent at large. In 1950, around the time of Prof. Amarteifio’s marked encounter with the mysterious visitor, Kwame Nkrumah was imprisoned by the British. A year later, he was released as his party, the Convention People’s Party (CPP), won the 1951 elections and ruled the 6-years diarchy (CPP-British rule) before leading Ghana to Independence on 6th March 1957.

**Independence and the National Grid**

In March 2007, as Ghana marked 50 years of independence from colonial rule in the midst of an energy crisis, the question was raised: was Ghana really independent when it remained “in the dark”? Independence, proclaimed K.B. Asante, a former diplomat, was a “mirage”: in 2007, Ghanaians remained economically and ideologically – and one might add infrastructurally – chained to their former colonisers (Akyeampong and de Graft 2008). The question of independence in Ghana is frequently framed today, as it was in 1957 by Kwame Nkrumah, in terms of infrastructural emancipation and self-sufficiency through electricity provisioning, and electricity in Ghana remains a paradigmatic site for revisiting and re-imagining these political, social and infrastructural legacies.

Famously, Kwame Nkrumah made electricity his “baby” in the form of the Akosombo Dam and the Volta River Project (VRP) (Miescher 2014). Paraphrasing Lenin’s flagship equation, Nkrumah asserted: “Electricity is the basis of industrialisation” (1961:2), and industrialization, through infrastructural development, was to lead to economic independence – without which “political independence would be valueless” (Nkrumah

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5 “Communism is Soviet Power + Electrification”.
Nkrumah’s ambitious projects of development and industrialisation aimed to create new modes of binding and belonging through infrastructural networks. In Accra, the rise of buildings and construction sites linked particular sights of monumentality with “believing” in the new nation’s intentionality and capacity to provide material forms of freedom and modernity (Plageman 2010:150).

The colonial economy of Ghana inherited at Independence was heavily dependent on Britain, characterised by the export of a single commodity (cocoa) controlled by a monopolistic company (Cocoa Marketing Board in London). The VRP, which included a hydroelectric dam, an aluminium smelter, new cities, and a deep sea harbour, was to diversify the economy and improve welfare through industrial growth, creating fisheries and irrigation for agriculture, improving communications through inland navigation, and

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6 Indeed, Nkrumah’s vision of the VRP underlined his political campaigns for decolonization and independence; in 1951, the election manifesto promised to do “everything possible” to get power from the Volta. The VRP symbolised the launch of an African industrial revolution intimately linked to decolonisation movements.

7 Nkrumah’s “Second Five-Year Plan” drafted in 1959 allocated 80% of expenditures to infrastructure and social services (Mold 2012:241).
developing schools and hospitals from the revenues of power sales. Electricity became a measure of autonomy, emancipation, happiness and national prosperity: “We shall measure our progress by the improvement in the health of our people; by the number of children in school, and by the availability of water and electricity in our towns and villages, and by the happiness which our people take in being able to manage their own affairs” (Nkrumah 1957:2).

As Botchway has argued, “the story of the energy industry in Ghana is very much the story of the Volta Hydro-electricity Project” (2000:183), and much attention has been dedicated to the study of the VRP’s political and foreign policy negotiations (Decker 2011), including Cold War tensions over the rise of Communism in Africa (Anglin 1958; Iandolo 2012; Metzmeier 1982; Nwaubani 2001); the environmental impact of the Dam and the resettlement of the 70,000 people affected by its construction (Tsikata 2006; Miescher 2014; Yarrow 2017); and the emergence of an Afro-modern model of development, science and technological expertise (Miescher 2012; Moxon 1984; Hart 1980). The Akosombo Dam was an exemplary project of “modernisation as spectacle” (Bloom, Miescher and Manuh 2014) that underpinned the decolonisation efforts yet remained subject to the “deeper continuities” lain by the colonial past, marking new visions of nationalist reconstruction and prosperity in stark defiance to colonial aesthetics of austerity and selective development (Demissie 2007). As Nkrumah himself put it, they constitute the “new places of Pilgrimage in this modern Age of Science and Technology” (Nkrumah 1997 [1963]: 23). Akosombo, with its “gigantic Hydro-Electric Power Station”, reveals “the wonders of nature, science and technology” that “hold spell-bound fascination for tourists”, advertises the VRA Akosombo brochure (VRA, n.d.). A delegation from Dahomey to the Dam in 1965 described it as “a masterpiece” of “Africa’s technological awakening” (Daily Graphic, 1965). The VRP thus became the speculative site of an Afrofuturistic imagination, prefiguring Ghana’s “glorious future” in the “numerous expectations, inspiration and hopes” it invoked.

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8 The 1958 plan of Accra (Hood and Trevallion 1958) envisaged to give the city a character of “seriousness, grace and lightness combined with dignity” with contrast to the “monotonous, overbuilt and often depressing form of development such as one sees in some of the cities of Europe and America”.

9 The VRA was established for power generation and transmission; it remained the main power generator until the mid-1990s, when the electricity sector underwent a first wave of reform programs leading to the introduction of thermal generation and the unbundling of transmission to GRIDco. The VRA were also responsible with resettling the 80,000 people displaced by the project.
(Miescher and Tsikata 2009:21-22). Less attention, however, has been devoted to the less spectacular, and more dispersed and fragmented imaginaries of this project, as well as the ways that particular visual technologies relying on the movement and powering of light became linked to post-independence electrification whilst remaining moored to racialised and colonial associations of power. Nkrumah’s reign instituted particular icons of (electrical) light as both literal and figurative images of power: in a 2010 Volta River Authority commemorative stamp series, Kwame Nkrumah appears as “the prime mover of power generation in Ghana” (Fuller 2015:53), an electrical upgrade of the “torch of freedom” lit by Nkrumah at Independence to lead the way to pan-African empowerment (figure 40).

![Figure 38-39. VRA Commemorative Stamps, Nkrumah’s birth centenary. In: Fuller 2015:55.](image)

![Figure 40. Akosombo Dam stamp.](image)

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10 But see Yarrow (2017) on the ruins of the unrealized visions of the Akosombo township.
11 On July 2nd 1963, Nkrumah announced that he lit the Flame of Liberty, or the African Perpetual Flame, “in sacred duty to the millions of Africans… to whom we are bound by common destiny” (Hess 2000:50).
12 It is alleged that in pre-independence CPP mass rallies the Christian hymn “Lead Kindly Light” was sung (Owusu 1989:387).
In the years immediately preceding and following Independence in 1957, Nkrumah’s vision of infrastructural development was starkly contested, both at home and with international players. The VRP provides perhaps the starkest example of the difficulty of developing an African, postcolonial vision of infrastructure and modernity from within the enduring structures and effects of imperial formations. Nkrumah’s presentation of the initial White Paper of the VRP in 1953 at the National Assembly provoked outcry from Assembly members, who opposed the project on the grounds of its “imperialistic” premises, conceived by the colonial government to serve mining needs, and warned Nkrumah of taking “shortcuts to Utopia” (Miescher 2014:345). The scheme was challenged as a return to “economic enslavement” and “economic bondage”, and the Assembly expressed the fear that Independence underway for Ghana would merely amount to a political game continuing, and legitimating, a legacy of exploitation under the guises of freedom, doubting that economic independence would ever be reached (ibid:347-8) – a fear which, as seen in the beginning of this chapter, persists today. Indeed, the VRP project had first been conceived by colonial officials in the 1920s, following a 1915 survey by geologist Albert Kitson on the bauxite resources.
of the Volta River and the possibility of establishing an integrated aluminium scheme which would provide enough power for Accra and serve the needs of industrial consumption at the site in the form of an aluminium smelter.\textsuperscript{13} Initial reports on the Volta’s projects conceived of electricity development as a byproduct for mining, resource extraction and processing.

The financing of the project in the early years following Independence proved a difficult task: Ghana’s economy was crippled by rising imports and government expenditure, while its chief export, cocoa, declined; the rates on foreign loans were unfavourable; the proposal was competing with other dam projects in Africa (e.g. the Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River, to which the British government had already committed (Gocking 2005:118), and falling aluminium prices due to decreased demands and increased production ultimately led the British to pull out of the scheme. The VRP struggled for support before the Cold War, in the early post-independence period, came to the rescue. The maze of negotiations that followed in the first 5 years of independence (1957-62), at the heart of the Cold War and spanning the transition from Eisenhower’s administration to Kennedy’s (in 1961), reveal tensions about racial equality, postcolonial empowerment, and foreign policy after the dissolution of the colonial powers. From 1957 to 1962, the VRP was torn in back-and-forth agreements and retractions between the United States and Ghana. Ghana’s political and international affinities were subject to constant suspicion, as Ghana “experienced the delights as well as the dangers of being wooed on all sides – by the Western powers, by the Soviet bloc and by the Afro-Asians” (Anglin 1958:153). Ghana emerged as the “test case” for Kennedy’s new policy towards the neutralist African states (Metzmeier 1989:95).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} In 1950, a preliminary report by Halcrow & Partners was commissioned, which advised that the only way the project would be economically viable and feasible, given the insufficient existing and future electricity consumption of the Gold Coast public, would be in the form of an integrated aluminium scheme combining electricity generation with an Aluminium smelter (which requires high power for processing) and the transport of bauxite from the mines to the factories, and of other raw materials by barge traffic on the river from a port to be established at Ada (RG 5.1.269).

\textsuperscript{14} The VRP is often cited as the illustrative case of Kennedy’s sympathy for African independences and their policies of nationalism and neutralism, in sharp contrast to Eisenhower’s selective and conditional granting of economic aid in exchange for political support (Noer 1984:61). During his presidential electoral campaign, Kennedy had criticized the Republicans for “slighting Africa” and treating its nations as “pawns” in the cold war – urging a “no-strings” policy (Metzmeier 1989:82) – and this certainly played a role in Eisenhower’s interest in the VRP, also as a way of alleviating racial tensions at home. But Noer’s analysis of Kennedy’s role in the VRP following the declassification of documents in the 1980s provides a critical view on his foreign policy towards Africa, arguing that the final decisions to fund the
Nkrumah, a fine pragmatist, played on the dreams and fears of the Western powers (primarily the US) in attempts to secure funding for his project, recognising the cynical contradictions of seeking infrastructural decolonisation from the very financial structures of neo-colonial capital (Pierre 2012:55). The VRP has often been seen as a “neo-colonial predicament” (what Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan (1986:144) called the “development of underdevelopment”) that exposed the deeper continuities of colonialism in the modernisation process of the postcolonies. I would add that it also evidences the contradictory, competing political projects and temporalities at play in infrastructural events.

VRP were made “reluctantly and only after Nkrumah was forced to accept a set of conditions that bound him to accept at least verbally American principles in economics, politics, and international relations” (Noer 1984:62).

E.g. see correspondence between Eisenhower and Nkrumah between 1957-8 (RG 17.1.88). In a speech in October 1953, Nkrumah astutely compared this obsession for categorizing him as a communist, East Bloc-leaning, or an ally of the West, as a form of imperialism transposed: “As we would not have British masters, so we would not have Russian masters, or any other masters for that matter. It is not our intention to substitute one Imperialism for another. We want to be free and independent in the management of our own affairs. The men and women of the Gold Coast understand freedom… They are not fooled by false prophets”. It is worth noting, as well, that the financial assistance offered by the Eastern bloc was highly enticing, in comparison with the crippling interest rates and ideological underpinnings of those of Britain and the US: Soviet loans had low interest rates, could be repaid back over a long time, and in local currency or by using traditional exports, and the USSR did not seek share of the profits or management of the projects built with assistance (Iandolo 2012:685).

See revealing passage in Nkrumah’s inauguration of the VRA speech (in Pierre (2015:55): “We live in a world of contradictions. These contradictions somehow keep the world going. (…) We are trying to reconstruct our economy and to build a new, free and equal society. To do this, we must attain control of our own economic and political destinies”, including allying with “great friends” such as the US, and going as far as to declare that the US had a “dual mandate in its relations with the developing world” – an uncanny and judicious use of terms, recalling the system of indirect rule of the British “dual mandate” in West Africa.

But see Viviana d’Auria (2016) who points out the nuanced roles played by expatriate expertise involved in the early plans of the VRP, notably in the North American firm Mayer & Whittlesey’s plans for the Kpong smelter, which strove to establish a “multiracial, multiclass [town] unmarked by segregation” (209) – a rather remarkable endeavour given the acutely racist climate of the US divided by the Civil Rights movement. D’Auria argues that the international experts involved in those “high modernist” projects defied clear geopolitical logics of classification as neo-colonial (though whether these logics are ever clear is, I would argue, also debatable). I would add that looking closely at the key players involved in those projects reveals the level to which personable encounters and affinities also challenge these overarching narratives, such as the highly amicable relationship between Nkrumah and Edgar Kaiser, which no doubt played a large part in the outcomes of the VRP – Kaiser playing the role of a “corporate diplomat” between Nkrumah and Kennedy (Miescher 2014; see also Moxon 1984:268-71 for a (slightly paternalistic) account of the “Nkrumah-Kaiser rapport”). Yet Mayer & Whittlesey’s attempts to evade racial segregation produced and obscured other, emerging forms of differentiation and exclusion based on economic and employment status (d’Auria 2016:217); the Kpong smelter project was ultimately never undertaken because of the falling demand for aluminium in the late 1950s.
Nkrumah finally reached an agreement with the US aluminium company Kaiser & Co, the main shareholders of a compendium, the Volta River Company (VALCO), to run the smelter by purchasing power from the Dam on a commercial basis. This final agreement, it is sometimes told (Duodu 2006; Pierre 2012:54; Noer 1984:62), was reached with the turning point of “a glass of orange juice”. The story was this: in October 1957, Komla Gbedemah, Ghana’s Minister of Finance and second to Nkrumah, pulled over at a diner in Dover, Delaware, on a visit to the US, and ordered breakfast. He was refused service under the Jim Crow segregation laws, and as the story of the racist incident made the headlines around the world, Gbedemah was invited by President Eisenhower for breakfast the next day and promised the US’s financial commitment to the VRP. The project’s negotiation lingered for a few more years in the midst of Cold war suspicions and the Congo crisis of 1960, during which Nkrumah was increasingly profiled as a “dangerous radical”, an “African Castro” opposed to US foreign policy (Nwaubani 2001; Noer 1984:64).

The CIA, in a musing portrait of Nkrumah, reveals all the conceit and hatred for the Ghanaian leader, who was eventually overthrown in 1966 in a coup backed by the CIA:

“When you cut away all the trappings and the fanfare you are left with a 49-year-old showboy, and a vain opportunist… A brilliant politician but not a statesman, a man with a few set ideas and no great flexibility or depth of vision, a man beginning to slip just a bit and too conceited to see it, a politician to whom the roars of the crowd and the praise of the sycophant are as necessary as the air he breathes” (CIA 1961, quoted in Noer 1984:70).

Despite increasing pressure at home to abandon the scheme, the importance of Ghana in the overall picture of Africa, at a time when the political affinities of the newly-

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18 VALCO’s rates for electricity proved a “sticky point” (Miescher 2014:356) in the negotiations, and have been subsequently criticised as highly disadvantageous to Ghana.

19 Gbedemah was the second most important leader of Nkrumah’s CPP, and was editor of Nkrumah’s newspaper, the Accra Evening News. He later formed his own political party in 1969 (defeated by Dr. Kofi Busiah), the National Alliance of Liberals, whose slogan was inspired by his experience of discrimination in the US on that particular October day at the Delaware diner, and taken from the lyrics of a popular James Brown song: “Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud!” earning him the nickname “Afro-Gbede” (Duodu 2006).

20 Following a speech at the UN in autumn 1960, Secretary of State Christian Herter declared that Nkrumah was “very definitely in the Communist Camp” (Noer 1984:65). His proposed visit to the US to discuss the Volta Project was refused by Eisenhower. The situation worsened after the murder of Lumumba, as a demonstration was held against the American embassy in Accra, with protesters shouting “down with US Imperialism in Africa” and “America murdered Lumumba” (Noer 1984:68).
independent African states were uncertain, made Kennedy hold on to the project. The Master Agreement that was finally signed by Nkrumah, the US, and Edgar Kaiser in 1962 was extremely disadvantageous to Ghana: Kaiser’s agreement guaranteed cheap power supply for 30 years (1967-97), with an option to renew for another 20 years. On top of that, it was granted tax exemptions for 10 years, followed by a 40-year cap on corporate income tax (Metzmeier 1989:96). The smelter did not actually use bauxite from the Akosombo deposits, but imported bauxite from its facilities in Jamaica. Ghana bore the major financing of the project, contributing $60 million in dam construction costs, borrowing $117 million from the World Bank and $140 million from the American Export-Import Bank and the Agency for International Development; by contrast, Kaiser only put the remaining $32 million for the smelting plant (figure 42).

Figure 41. “Who will pay the bill”? In: VRA (1963:9).

Materially, the Akosombo dam was an incredible feat in gathering a national public, in stark contrast to the enclaved, isolated electrical infrastructure of colonial times. The VRP can be seen as a typical project of what James Scott has called “high-modernist ideology” (1998:4-5) – combining a belief in scientific and technological progress, in the mastery over nature and focus on expanded production, with an aesthetics of rational order, creating the “appearance” of order and control through spectacular

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21 Ghana and Guinea were nations of choice that “met the ideal conditions” for Moscow to “test the socialist model of development” and export it to the rest of Africa (Iandolo 2012:684).
22 Also fearing a replay of the consequences of Eisenhower’s withdrawal from the Aswan Dam in Egypt.
monumentality (cf. Mitchell 2002:44). Yet the project, I would argue, was not simply important to Nkrumah because of its propensity for control, mapping and order, but because of its collectivist, democratic properties as a socio-material assemblage that gathers. The visual and material properties of the dam allowed for a particular form of assembly: the dam connects and distributes; it establishes new forms of intimacy, new associational networks, and new cartographies of distribution. The gathering capacity of the Dam, by collecting and distributing power to the nation, was materially fit to realise Nkrumah’s vision of national unification through the connectivity of electricity – and indeed, dam projects are often constructed as monuments of national integration and representation (Tischler 2013; Mitchell 2002:44). Infrastructural projects are efforts in national mobilisation, in collective participation in shared paradigms of modernity (Larkin 2013:333). Infrastructure was particularly suited to the creation of a national publics (Marres 2005; Collier, Mizes and Schnitzler 2016), bringing people and households together (sometimes, as we will see in the next chapter, despite themselves), linked by “vast currents” of circulation (Dewey 1927:99). Yet, John Dewey adds, infrastructures also bypass and disregard the political boundaries and ideals they are built to materialise (ibid). As elderly residents of my neighbourhood described to me, the national grid in the 1960s and 70s, like roads, grew haphazardly, “following people” where they took residence. In my neighbourhood, a peri-urban area of north-west Accra, electricity first came to the Palace (the ancestral residence of the Ga family owning the land); from there, connections were extended to the houses that emerged around it, as poles and wires were gradually built to follow them. Electricity, in other words, did not precede urban growth, as promised by Nkrumah; it grew partly as a consequence of it. Despite Nkrumah’s idealist notion of the national grid as a unificatory assemblage, people’s relations to this gathering project were more dispersed and fractured, experienced as a “flashing” mode of address – a disrupted form of attachment and connection coming in and out of reach, providing distorted reception. Much has been said about the Akosombo dam as a paradigmatic site of imagination and narratives about “nationhood, modernity, and development” (Miescher 2014). In what follows, I pay attention to the rippling micro-effects of postcolonial infrastructural policy on people’s daily lives, traced in the details and dissents, expectations and non-materialisations of electrical power. I look at the ways those ideological aims and visions of Nkrumah were received by the newly-independent citizens of Ghana, using two examples: 1) the reception of Akosombo propaganda films, and 2) the post-Independence disillusionment
expressed in a short story by Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo who describes the infrastructural hopes harboured by those “for whom things did not change” (Aidoo 1975[1969]).

**New Electric Visions**

If Nkrumah was often seen as a “visionary”, the VRP perhaps stands as one of his most impressive visions, designed as a sight of wonder for the world to envy: “I have in mind a plan whereby, without any loss of power, water can be diverted from the dam so as to provide a series of fountains and pools set in terraced gardens which climb up to a first-class hotel. At night the fountains can be lit by thousands of multi-coloured lights” (Nkrumah 1961:9). The project was would provide a “true attraction for tourists, not only because of the world-wide interest which so great a project will arouse, but also because the area will be made into a delight to the eye”. The VRP was to materialise postcolonial desires for global visibility and “competability” (Ferguson 2002), an Afrofuturistic site of admiration that would redeem and revamp the image of Africa at large. From the moment Nkrumah made the VRP his flagship project, it was publicised at length in pamphlets, films, radio programs, and travelling exhibitions organised by the Department of Information Service, the Ghana Film Unit, and the VRA. Despite its “circus-like appearance” (Miescher 2014:352), the mobile exhibit of the VRP project was not very popular; it was the Cinema Show of the project that attracted the crowds, a popularity that was due as much (if not more) to the technological apparatus and its wonders than to the content or message of the films (Larkin 2008:92-93). The mobile cinema vans featured documentaries and films promoting the industrial efforts of the new nation, with such titles as *Packaged Power*, *Man has a thousand hands*, *A river creates an industry*, *Work in Progress*, *Beyond the Volta*, *Volta River Exhibition* (Miescher 2014; GFU), in a way which resonates with the “infrastructural films” of

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23 The mobile exhibit included “models, bas-relief maps, photographs, explanatory panels, illustrated booklets, and films”. It toured the country for almost 2 years (Miescher 2014:352), from 1955 to 1957, setting up in public parks, school grounds, or football fields. The exhibit had a 50 feet marquee, a generator, loudspeakers, flags, two cinema vans, and 20 staff members, “resembling a traveling circus” (ibid).

24 “Packaged Power” was a survey of Alcan’s (a Canadian aluminium company initially involved with the VRP) global projects; “Man has a thousand hands” was about Alcan’s Kitimat-Kemano-Nechako project in British Columbia; “A River Creates an Industry” was about the aluminium industry in Quebec, and the possibility of replicating this for the Volta (Miescher 2014:352). The Ghana Film Unit was first established by the colonial government in 1949 as the “Gold Coast Film Unit” (GCFU) whose function was to “interpret the wider aims or specific
majigi mobile cinema described by Brian Larkin in Northern Nigeria (2008). Majigi or state cinema were political and pedagogical events, addressing audiences as civic spectators of colonial development, modernity and technological progress (Larkin 2008:85). Similarly to majigi, and its differentiation from sinima or “commercial cinema” (ibid:123-124), the mobile cinema vans of newly-independent Ghana emerged from the history of “cinema aban” (Garritano 2013:29) or “government cinema” of the Gold Coast Film Unit established by the British Colonial office in 1948, and taken over by Nkrumah’s Ghana Film Unit at Independence (which later morphed into the Ghana Film Industry Corporation), which complemented – and attempted to supplant – the independent commercial film exhibitors and theatres that had been present in the Gold Coast since the 1920s (Garritano 2013:27; Rice 2010). Cinema aban grew partly from the Second World War effort during which Ghana provided “the site for the most extensive propaganda initiative in West Africa”, with dramatic impact on communication media through the introduction of touring cinema and loudspeaker vans, radio broadcasts, and mass rallies (Holbrook 1985; Smyth 1988).25 After independence, Nkrumah rallied nationalist support through the majestic – if often incredibly boring – visions of infrastructural development, through mobile vans as well as commercial cinema houses, where exhibitors had been ordered by Nkrumah’s state officials to screen them before their private programme (McFeely 2015:41). The films showed Kwame Nkrumah in a white coat, posing next to machines and construction sites, looking at models and explanatory panels, as was typical of the infrastructure films of the postcolonial state characterised by repetitive detail and the absence of narrative (Larkin 2008:98-9). As Larkin argues (2008:93) the content or message of the films was often irrelevant to the experience of moving van cinema; rather, the films constituted a kind of backdrop or visual noise for the real actions taking place in front of and beyond the screen: the dancing, new visual atmospheres and experiences of mobility that the video vans created.26 As Prof. Amarteifio, the former mayor of Accra, commented, one “didn’t
look at them for drama; the mere fact that there were moving images in them was satisfactory in itself!”. A former cinema van commentator told anthropologist Jennifer Blaylock (2011) that it was the electricity that the mobile vans provided (operated through generators) that brought excitement, transforming a place normally in darkness into a magical – and magnetic – field of blasting tunes and all-night dancing. They provided the first glimpse of the kind of collective experience that electricity could provide, not in the form of the Akosombo Dam, but in the very tangible, electrified atmosphere of the mobile cinema audience. If the films aimed at screening new “scientific wonders” in the “technological complex” (Larkin 2008:74) of dams, new roads, modern township, and the national grid, these were reformulated as a local complex of politically-sanctioned leisure and pleasure, formed by the imagery of movement of the films, the cars that carried them, and the generators on which they operated.27 As Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer argued, the electrification of the modern city and the new visual and sensorial experiences that it enabled through new media like the cinema, redefined the experience of time and movement, and created new urban and modern publics (Charney and Schwartz 1995). In the case of Ghana, the films provided by Nkrumah’s state-run information and communication services made visible, and sensorially tangible, the nationalist aspirations and collective networks that the Akosombo Dam – and the national grid – could provide. In the times before television, in places where cinemas were not readily available (e.g. in rural areas and the suburbs of Accra), “any chance to see something different was exciting”, recounts an elderly gentleman who grew up in the Accra suburb of Bubiashie in the 1950s. Moreover, the Akosombo films always included a “teaser, a short film, that has some drama on it”; this short exciting teaser was like “taking the castor oil and something sweet to let it go down, so they sweetened these boring movies with a musical or something to make you go ‘Woawoawoa’”. Thus electricity, through the VRP, gathered a particular publics, not necessarily because of its role in the industrialisation of the nation, but because these new networks of electrical connectivity induced new atmospheres of excitement,

27 On the history and importance of motorized transportation in Ghana, see Jennifer Hart (2016a; 2016b). See also Okraku (2016). Mobile vans have seen a resurgence in contemporary Ghana, attesting to their popularity: the Ministry of Information recently gave the Information Services Department 146 mobile cinema vans to disseminate government policies and educational programmes, as well as cultural entertainment – including Ghanaian comedies, music videos, documentaries and drama, to ensure “a mix of information, entertainment and public education” (GhanaWeb 2007).
soundscapes of freedom, and visual modes of experiencing and representing the postcolonial ‘good life’.

**Infrastructures of Dignity**

The “white elephant” projects characteristic of the Independences in most African countries, designed to materialise ideas of national unification and notions of the collective good, quickly turned into the most evident signs of the limited feasibility of these projects, of the propensity of the ruling class to disappoint and win consent through infrastructural promises, and of the questionable definition of “independence” itself. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, infrastructure, with its “voracious” tendency to strive for more and defect to less, was a particularly apt medium to accommodate the retractive and expansive aspects of “service delivery”. The failure of these ambitious projects to materialise for the nation at large “led to profound pessimism about infrastructure” (Mold 2012:238). Ama Ata Aidoo’s short story *For whom things did not change* in her book *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* (1975[1969]) exposes the failed promises and disillusionment of Independence in Ghana through a conversation between Zirigu, a houseworker, and his new master Kwabena, a young “Unifartisy”-educated man (16). Hopes for racial, postcolonial redress through infrastructural renewal are painfully expressed by Zirigu’s desire for electric lights and modern lavatories in the changeover from colonial rule to Ghanaian independence:

“‘When they said they were going to do something about it [the living quarters] I hoped they would put in a good lavatory, like the water-closet, and give us good lights. *Electric lights*. Yes, my Master, in the boys’ quarters have you noticed we use kerosene lamps? So I thought, ‘Zirigu, now you can really become something.’ When the white people were here, and they were our masters, it was only understandable that they should have electric lights and water-closets and give us, the boys, latrine pails and kerosene lamps. But now we are independent they are going to make this house new” (27-28; emphasis mine).

This project of renewal is seen by Zirigu as a new democratic economy of infrastructural provisioning, harbouring dreams of racial equality materialized through the modern fixtures of the domestic sphere: “*My own people* will give me a closet and an electric light” (28). He asked the man in charge, who said “‘that should not be difficult’” (28). But when Zirigu came back from work, his dreams had been cruelly deceived:

“‘They had put fresh paint on the walls. They had repaired the steps leading to the rooms (…) But *there were no electric lights (…)* Ah, my Master, I did not
know I wanted these things so much until I knew I was not going to get them. (...) My own people who are big men do not think I should use these good things they use. Something went out of me then which has not returned since. (...) Is one or two electric bulbs too much to expect? (...) I have thought and thought and thought about it. I have never understood why. For a long time, I was drinking. I wanted to go away. I wanted to kill somebody (...) We should never forget who we are, that’s all. Now the anger is gone, and I stay here. My young Master, what does ‘Independence’ mean?” (28-29).

Zirigu’s descent into self-depreciation and disillusionment was a common response to the experience of the “gigantic confidence trick” of African Independences (Wright 2000:798). This postcolonial “modern materialist malaise” has often been seen through the lens of a “dependency complex” on western consumption and the signs of privilege and prestige that it carried (Wright 2000:799).28 Yet the ready ascription of the appurtenances of modernity to a mimetic desire obscures the “imperial durabilities” of power that endure in the “less tangible emotional economies of humiliations, indignities, and resentments” (Stoler 2016:4; emphasis mine). Zirigu’s desires for the electric light in the post-independence decade can be seen in part as motivated by the racialised differentials of access to electric power and the possibilities that electrical independence promised. Ama Ata Aidoo’s crafting of the subtleties of desires, and the ordinariness of dignity, evokes the difficulty of reckoning with the “divided inheritance” (Dathorne 1969) of colonial rule, felt in the personal conflicts of participating in a world whose standards for good living had been set by the perpetrators of discrimination and exploitation. In colonial Rhodesia, Chikowero (2007:292) describes that electricity circumscribed a racial, electrical modernity by denoting luxury even as it enforced control: it created an aspirational electrified lifestyle for “cooking imperially” with electrical stoves and refrigerators reserved for the white settlers, and enforced the policing of Africans through lighting rules whilst preventing them from this “electrical civilisation”.29

28 See Murillo (2010; 2012) for the history of consumerism in colonial Gold Coast through the United Africa Company and the Kingsway store. Upon inaugurating the Kingsway Store five weeks before independence, Nkrumah referred to it as a “pact with the devil”, but at least with the “devil it (Ghana) knows” rather than “the devil it does not know” (2010:318).
29 Similarly, Udumukwu (1991) describes the “negation of independence” in Chinua Achebe – and other West African writers in the postcolonial period – and the “vista of irony” and illusion that they painted, through the satirical exposure of the Independent state’s inability to deal with basic infrastructural necessities (479).
This desire for re-inhabiting and refashioning the white world of postcolonial housing and to “unwhite” its things is apparent in many works of post-independence fiction, such as J. Benibengor Blay’s *Coconut Boy* (1970) that describes that “for the first time Africans could sit at the same table with a white boss and write with a white man’s pen in a book previously used only by the white bosses” (Newell 2000:55). This preoccupation with white things illustrates both the fascination with and difficulties of relieving things from their correlation with Western consumption, and of dissociating power itself from its association with whiteness. The political potential of electricity in post-independence Ghana lay in these sites of domestic encounters, in the aspirations and hopes for things that had hitherto been the preserve of the whites and the rich, in those demands for ‘small things’ as a gesture of postcolonial redress, of dignity, of the possibility of living a ‘good life’ in houses furnished, illuminated, and equipped with the previously-inaccessible. Electricity was meant to define a new form of freedom in Ghana, one partly defined by the privations that its selective presence had made explicit. Freedom, in Ama Ata Aidoo’s story, was not the absence of rule from colonial power, but the access to particular goods that materialised new status of equality and belonging. As Paul Gilroy has argued (2010), access to forms of consumption has sometimes preceded institutional and legal forms of subjectivity and recognition; in the United States, he argues, consumer culture acted as a form of “interpellation” and identification for African Americans that preceded their access to citizenship rights (see also Thompson 2015:10). Freedom sometimes expresses itself in the trivial details of the material world; Karen Fields (2014:34), for one, describes freedom for one emancipated slave as “a blue dress with polka dots”, taking its significance from the sumptuary rules in slaveholding America forbidding slaves from wearing particular fabrics or colours. In turn, those commodities that bear the signs of freedom also retain repressed histories of the oppressions through which these freedoms were made necessary, that remain “quietly active” in their ordinary use (Gilroy 2010:16-20) – as we will see in chapter 5 on the colonial legacies of air-conditioning. In the following chapter, I describe the ways in which this freedom also created new situations of dependency and precarity, challenging a notion of dignity as simply evaluated through the “delivery” of public goods, and of precarity as material scarcity. The privileged and discriminatory world of colonial power, I argue, lingered in lasting, if less immediately visible, effects and atmospheres (as described in chapters 5 and 6), in the enduring stain of whiteness as a
mark of power on the material world of postcolonial Ghana, and in the particular forms of assemblies of the national grid.

The Hollowing of the Contract

In 1966, during a visit to China, and only a month after the opening ceremony of the Akosombo Dam, Nkrumah was overthrown in a coup led by Colonel E.K. Kotoka and army officers, supported by the CIA and a number of Western powers. By the end of the 1960s, Ghana had developed “a culture of political corruption” characterised by bribery, graft, nepotism, favouritism; civil servants in particular – such as ECG staff – earned the reputation of engaging in widespread “subterfuge, dishonesty, and mendacity” (LeVine 1975:12-13). The economy was “teetering towards bankruptcy” (Konadu-Agyemang 2000:473), entering a “long period of decline” (Herbst 1993:18) which eventually precipitated the adoption of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs (SAPs) as a last resort by the Rawlings administration in 1983. Nkrumah’s overthrow by the military instigated a long period of social and political turmoil from the late 1960s until the permanent re-turn to democracy in 1992, which saw three other military coups, a Revolution staged by J.J. Rawlings in 1981, and two successive but short-lived turns to civilian rule (2nd and 3rd Republics).

From 1966 to 1969, Ghana was ruled by the National Liberation Council (NLC), a military junta that endeavoured to dismantle all the pillars of Nkrumahism: it banned the CPP, denounced socialism, privatised state enterprises, and broke off diplomatic relations with the USSR. In 1967, the Electricity Department was established as the Electricity Corporation of Ghana. After a short return to democratic rule between 1969-1971 following the election of Dr. Kofi Busia, a second military coup was staged by Lt. Colonel Ignatius K. Acheampong under the National Redemption Council. The first part of Acheampong’s rule (1972-5) was full of promises, reviving Nkrumahist and Pan-African values of self-reliance and empowerment through such programs as

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30 Also known as the “Notorious Liars Council” (Cappelaere 2007:19)
31 The NLC of Joseph Ankrah signed an IMF disinflationary package, initially intended to privatise many of the state-owned enterprises established by Nkrumah, but in the end only a few (7 out of 42) were put for sale. This move of the NLC was unpopular (expressed in popular feelings that Ghana was being sold lower than her value), and led the way for later hostility towards privatisation and IMF reforms (Herbst 1993:21-22), as we will see in chapter 4.
32 NLCD Decree 125
33 Despite his short rule, Busia significantly extended the electricity grid to rural areas (Cappelaere 2007:19), emphasizing the redistributive role of the state (Nugent 1995:25).
“Operation Feed Yourself” and the “Charter of Redemption” that denounced all forms of imperialism, racist exploitation, and foreign dependency. But by the mid-1970s, corruption had reached “unbelievable heights” (Herbst 1993:24) and turned into a “kalabule” regime – a kleptocracy for the ruling few, a “get-rich-quick racket” (Gyimah-Boadi and Jeffries 2000:38) plundering public funds and setting up embezzlement schemes for family redistribution. The irony of this reversal was “as cruel as it was absurd” (Fraser 1986:301), as the poor were left to contemplate their imputed “dependency complex” on foreign and imperialist legacies while the ruling few thrived on the imported BMW cars (re-baptised locally as “Be My Wife”) that Acheampong was notorious for bestowing upon his numerous mistresses. “Fa wo to bɔgye golf” is the expression by which Acheampong’s later regime is colloquially known in popular Ghanaian historiography, that is: “bring your ass and come get a Golf car”, a particular form of “bottom power” (Adichie 2014; Nugent 1995:28) in a Sugar Daddy economy characterized by greed and exploitation.

The double vision of populist socialism shading into authoritarian rule and corruption is one that would linger in Ghanaian political history and profoundly shape attitudes

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34 From Hausa: “kere kabure” – “don’t say it”. Since Acheampong’s rule, Kalabule is used to designate all forms of corruption.

35 Rathbone described the NRC of 1972-5 as a “boy-scoutish CPP in army uniforms”, and Joe Appiah described Acheampong as “a young, dynamic and religious soldier with a sense of mission” (Gyimah-Boadi and Jeffries 2000:37-38). Compare changing perceptions of the NRC between the early 1970s and late 80s in Owusu (1975) and Owusu (1989).

36 A Nigerian expression for a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men: “but bottom power is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power (…) just has a good route to tap another person’s power” (Adichie 2014:44-5).

37 All political parties (particularly Busia’s party, the Progress Party – PP) were banned. Attending political party meetings were punishable by fines or imprisonment, and about 1800 ministers and functionaries of the PP were arrested, their assets seized and bank accounts frozen (Owusu 1975:34). Military drills were commonly administered by soldiers: the victims, which included “civil servants found sleeping or idling at work or late for work, people who refuse to pay their basic rates (local taxes), suspected prostitutes, suspected criminals, workers who demonstrate for higher pay, those who misuse state or local government funds, officers who fail to account properly and honestly for money voted for the buying of cocoa or other goods, or even women wearing miniskirts” were made to do humiliating exercises in public – “squatting, repeated arm stretching, carrying heavy stones while walking to and fro, rolling on the ground, being shaved, and pairing up to fight each other” (Owusu 1975:47).
toward democracy, political power and public services. Despite the corrupted and authoritative nature of Acheampong’s later regime, some (though limited) electrical developments took place. From 1972-5, Ghana started to supply electricity to Togo and Benin from the surplus generated by the Akosombo Dam. Projects were undertaken for the construction of the Kpong Dam, intended to add 160MW extra capacity to Akosombo. Yet, if Nkrumah’s rule wrote an initial “contract” of infrastructural provisioning, Acheampong’s rule is the moment at which the spectre of the bogus double of the contract materialises in popular imaginaries: Acheampong is the era of contract bribe (Brydon 1999:368), when documents start taking on a farcical look, similar to the “culture of contracting” and the “art of the contract” of late 1970s Nigeria, which paved the way for the emerging culture of 419 (Apter 2005:232).

By the end of Acheampong’s rule, when Flight Lieutenant Jerry John (“JJ”) Rawlings takes over on 4th June 1979, the economy is in shambles, and Ghana has slumped from “a prospering middle-income developing country with great hopes at independence to a nation suffering from Fourth World poverty” (Herbst 1993:27). The value of the cedi fell so spectacularly, Lynne Brydon describes (1999: 370), that between the early 1970s and 1979 the price of a bottle of beer went from costing 2/3 of the minimum daily wage (already a worrying ratio) to 4 times the minimum daily wage. (Of course, she adds wryly, that was if you could find the beer!). The 1970s saw a rise in informal economies and strategies of resilience described by Keith Hart’s seminal study of informality in Nima, Accra (1973). Brydon recounts (372) from the wife of an electrician working for the Electricity Corporation in the 1970s that they were dependent on his “private jobs” to survive, as were most salaried workers on public payroll at the time. The global oil crisis of the 1970s, which affected the price of foreign imports of petroleum,

38 Following a palace coup a year earlier by Gen. Akuffo, and the temporary rule of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) from 1978 to 1979.
39 Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan (1986:167-172) describe four strategies of “economic survival” in Ghana: 1) “suffer-manage” technique (adjusting one’s taste, cutting back on purchases, finding substitutions, enduring hardship, doing without, returning to traditional usages, making purchases outside the country; 2) “Beat-the-system” strategy: the “kalabule” illicit dealings described above, including smuggling, hoarding, black-marketeering, corruption, embezzlement; 3) “Escape-migrate” strategy: travelling to Europe and West Africa for employment, which was particularly prevalent in the late 1970s (during which an estimated 2 million Ghanaians – most of them highly educated – left the country (Herbst 1993:27); 4) “return-to-the-farm” strategy: return to subsistence farming.
40 During the global oil crisis in the 1970s, the Ministry of Fuel and Power is established. It will change names numerous times. During Dumsor, in 2015, it was eventually renamed the Ministry of Power.
machinery, and manufactured items on which Ghana’s economy was heavily dependent, was compounded by a drop in cocoa prices (Ghana’s main export) in 1971, along with a decline in other chief exports such as timber and diamonds (Rothchild 1991:5). In fact, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, electricity consumption decreased dramatically – it fell from 3917GWh in 1976 to 1151 GWh in 1984 as a result of the deteriorating economy (Eshun 2016:2).

“Boom Times”: J.J. Rawlings
The crisis and the crowds cried out for a divine intervention, found in the revolutionary figure of 32-years old Flight Lieutenant Jerry John, “Junior Jesus”, “JJ” Rawlings who ruled Ghana for 19 years. The coup of June 4th 1979 was staged as a “Holy War” (Owusu 1989:376) against corruption and injustice, marked by a short and violent three-months interregnum of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) during which serious human rights violations were perpetrated. Rawlings’ “house-cleaning exercises” included torture, detentions without trials, confiscation of property, public shaming and flogging of market women accused to have sold basic items at exorbitant prices. Rawlings’ rule is notably difficult to characterise, and has left a contradictory legacy to the minds of Ghanaians. Rawlings was described by the Western press as “a colourful fellow of uncertain temper”, the “Darling of Ghana’s impoverished masses” (The Economist 2000). “JJ” lends itself equally well to “Junior Jesus” as to “Junior Judas”, bringing for some “a nostalgic sense of hope and joy”, for others “anger and sadness mixed with rage and fury” (Akoloh 2017), and acting as a kind of “moral compass” for the different factions of Ghanaian society (Nana Ato Dadzie, quoted in Mordy 2017).

Indeed, the Rawlings period cannot be seen simply as a “military dictatorship” or a regime of “predatory power” (Cappelaere 2007:23); for many, it also conferred a sense

41 Export earnings fell by 52% (Konadu-Agyemang 2000:473). On top of this, in 1979 over a million Ghanaians were deported back from Nigeria overnight, causing additional pressure (Brydon 1985).
42 First in a 3-months interregnum under the AFRC, which relinquished power to the elected Dr. Hilla Limann 1979; then in a second coup in 1981, the “Revolution”, under the PNDC (Provisional National Defence Council); and finally, as the first President of Ghana’s newly-restored democracy under the 4th Republic for two consecutive terms (1992-2000).
43 Acheampong, along with his successor Lt-Gen. Akuffo and NLC leader Lt-Gen. Akwasi Affifa were executed without trial by firing squad on the beach.
44 These contradictions stem in part from the length of his rule (19 years), especially when compared to the extremely short-lived regimes of Busia or Limann; and in part from the dramatic and contradictory changes that Ghana experienced under his rule, including his two coups, a famine and drought in 1982-3, the adoption of stringent SAPs in the 1980s, and the re-turn to multiparty democracy in 1992. For an analysis of Rawlings’ contested legacy, see Yeebo (1991).
of coherence and stability many still mourn today. The various military regimes that ruled Ghana from 1966 to 1992 differed widely in social and political outlooks, acting alternatively “as a conservative, reformist, dictatorial, populist or revolutionary force” (Chazan 1989:336). A pastor, writer, self-publisher, and former stenographer working for Rawlings’ wife Nana Konedu Agyeman’s “Women’s movement of 31st December” summed up to me the Rawlings era succinctly, in a revealing comment that could stand for much of the experience of implicit violence in Ghanaian political history: “In Ghana”, he said, “they don’t kill you, but they make you die inside”. During Rawlings’ years, a “culture of silence” (Boahen 1989; Nugent 1995:163) prevailed, and many intellectuals and critics of the regime were fined or imprisoned but, as the above quote dryly puts it, people were generally not killed – only made to “die inside”, recalling the “gentle violence” (Bush 1999:9) of colonial indirect rule.

Infrastructurally speaking, Rawlings’ rule was in many ways more “democratic” than some of the leaders before him: infrastructure and public goods ranked high in his priorities (to the detriment of cultural institutions, education, and freedom of the press) and won him the support of the urban poor in particular (Gyimah-Boadi and Jeffries 2000:47). Rawlings notoriously rejected Western liberal definitions of democratic government as neo-colonialist (Chazan 1989:338), devising instead a formulation of “Ghanaian democracy” in which infrastructure becomes evidence and medium of state responsibility and political accountability. Democracy, in Rawlings’ programme, involved creating a “material basis” for the set of abstract civil liberties it entailed, built through “housing, food and transportation to ensure the physical, spiritual, moral and cultural quality of life of our people” (Rawlings 1982, quoted in Gyimah-Boadi and Rothchild 1982:68). Infrastructural development, in Rawlings’ democratic programme, aimed to restore an economy of basic dignities; as he put it on 2nd January 1982, two days after the Revolution on 31st December 1981:

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45 See Hoffman 2017 on the mourned sense of coherence expressed by ex-combatants under Charles Taylor’s violent rule in Liberia and the incoherence of peace in the post-Taylor era (154), pointing to alternative liveabilities of coherence and inhabitations of military rule.

46 The movement was founded in 1982 to rally women’s support for the Revolution, and provide a range of initiatives for women’s interests and rural development (Nugent 1995:145). Nana Konadu Agyemang was criticized for her “violence, arrogance, and corruption”, and known for her “barbarous acts” (Cappelaere 2007:31).

47 62% of the total funds of the first phase of the ERP (1983-6) was apportioned for physical infrastructure – compared to less than 5% for social services (health and education) (Konadu-Agyemang 2000:475).
“Democracy does not just mean paper guarantees of abstract liberties. It involves, above all, food, clothing, and shelter in the absence of which life is not worth living. Fellow Ghanaians, the time has come for us to restructure this society in a democratic manner, to ensure the engagement and active participation of the people to the processus of decision making” (Rawlings 1982, quoted in Anan 2017:58).

In 1983, the first historical case of “Dumsor” was diagnosed in Ghana (though the word “Dumsor” would only make its appearance in 2008), due to a drought in 1982-4 that affected the water levels at Akosombo. Power supply was rationed (including to VALCO). Ghana’s energy system entered a “thermal complementation phase” in order to diversify energy sources, ease the dependence on the Dam, and meet the rising consumption demands. The subsequent power crises of 1998 and 2002 gradually increased the number of thermal power plants and private sector participation in the generation system (ISSER 2005:22); Mahama’s turn to emergency energy solutions described in chapter 1, and the current privatisation of ECG described in chapter 4, were very much motivated by these antecedents. 1983 was, according to anthropologist Lynne Brydon (1999:370), “the nadir of Ghana’s decline”; she recalls that in July 1983, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning was surrounded by a sea of vehicles – none of which had any tyres! (369). Official documents such as pages from receipt books, company reports, and even pages from the archives were repurposed as wrappings by street food vendors (373) – a rather radical “democratisation” of knowledge and bureaucratic commensality! Less amusing was the new term “Rawlings’ chains” used to describe the prominent collar bones that appeared in the early 1980s as a result of the droughts, bushfires, famine and economic crisis (Brydon 1999:370).

In these circumstances, in 1984, Rawlings, in a seemingly schizophrenic (Nugent 1995:157) reversal, turned away from the populist, nationalist, anti-imperialist orientations of the 1981 Revolution to adopt some of the most conservative and stringent financial sanctions of the Economic Recovery Programs under the IMF and the World Bank. The economic policies under the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) included a drastic reduction in size and functions of the civil service, the privatisation of state

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48 Unofficial estimates by the TUC state that between 140,000 and 150,000 workers had lost their jobs by 1990, and 200,000 by 1992 (Boafo-Arthur 1999:51). Konadu-Agyemang (2000:474) estimates this at over 300,000.
companies and assets, incredibly high currency devaluation,⁴⁹ and the progressive retreat of the government and increasing role of the private sector in matters of governance. The legacies of the SAPs in Africa have been hotly debated (e.g. Wakumonya 2003),⁵⁰ even as Ghana emerged as one of the “most successful” countries in Africa (Gibbon 1992:50) – or perhaps as the better among the worst. General consensus on the Ghanaian case concurs that while the SAPs might have had positive effects on macroeconomic growth in the short term (which, given the situation in 1983, simply prevented the economy from total collapse (Boafo-Arthur 1999:46), at the micro-level the experience of the SAPs were disastrous for most Ghanaians,⁵¹ who faced the rising cost of services and introduction of user fees for basic healthcare and education, unemployment or redundancy, and low salaries (Boafo-Arthur 1999:53; Konadu-Agyemang 2000:474; Aryeetey et al 2000). The nicknaming of SAPs as “Spiritual Adjustment Programs” owing to the rise of international revival churches at the time bespeaks the search for solace in the midst of rising inequalities and disillusionment (Hackett in Asamoah-Gyadu 2017:10). Importantly for our purposes, while most subsidies to services and utilities were cut, subsidies to electricity consumption were not withdrawn, and in fact under Rawlings electricity access was dramatically extended to such an extent that by 1988, 77.8% of households in Accra had access to the grid (Rothchild 1991:12). Indeed, Rawlings is known for having substantially increased electrification to the rural areas and the northern regions, through the National Electrification Scheme (NES) implemented in 1989, with the vision of making electricity available to the entire population of Ghana by 2020.⁵² The NES included the “Self Help Electrification Programme” (SHEP) that encouraged rural communities to partially finance electrification in their areas by applying for governmental subsidies.⁵³ Rawlings’ infrastructural policy promoted a kind of “vernacular neoliberalism”, as Michael Stasik (2015) has described the trotro (public transport) operators’ practices, or of “indigenous neoliberalism”, as the current president of Ghana, Nana Addo Akuffo-Addo put it, that

⁴⁹ A devaluation of 80,000% from the adoption of the SAPs to the end of Rawlings’ rule: from 2.75 GHC = 1$ in 1983 to 2300 GHC to the $1 in 1998 (Konadu-Agyemang 2000:474).
⁵⁰ For instance, in the case of utilities, privatisation (assumed to lead to better service) often resulted in a disadvantageous transfer of government monopoly to a foreign monopoly (and indeed often foreign-government monopolies, as in the case of Cameroon) (Wamukonya 2003).
⁵¹ Especially for the rural and urban poor populations (Konadu-Agyemang 2000:481).
⁵² For an account of electrification in rural Ghana, see Sackeyfio (2018).
⁵³ To qualify for SHEP, communities must fulfil the following conditions: 1) be within 20 kms of any existing network; 2) initiate the process by requesting supply from the government; 3) send an application to the ECG Head Office through their regional director (ECG 1991b).
is, a form of neoliberal self-help branded as a “deliberate nationalist strategy” that was central to Rawlings’ decentralising agenda (MacLean 2017:119). In a speech entitled “The Vitalising Spark of Electricity” inaugurating the connection to the national grid of Bolgatanga, in the Upper East Region, Rawlings discusses energy in a manner reminiscent of Soviet propaganda. Electricity is praised as the driving force of the economy through the creation of an energetic, strong and exuberant workforce: “Lack of energy results in apathy, dullness and the absence of personal development. The energy of the farmer, the teacher, the housewife, the administrator, determines the quality of our lives” (Rawlings 1990). But, he warns, energy “is precious and must be channelled towards positive ends”: if the electricity serves only “to light your streets and homes, to keep hotels and nightclubs operating through the night, to generate a further eruption of dubious video houses to distort the values of our young people, then I wonder whether we can justify the cost of bringing electricity to this area” (Rawlings 1990).

Under Rawlings, electricity becomes a moralistic, reformist programme aimed at creating a work-focused citizenry that will not fall prey to the attractions of bright lights and enticing beats that electricity made possible (and irresistible). If the electrical contract under Nkrumah implied a sense of entitlement and redemption, under Rawlings electricity becomes a medium of moral reform intended to establish a responsible electrical citizenry anaesthetised to the immoral attractions of electrical power. Against this, we can begin to see, as I describe in the next chapters, people’s desires for ‘bright lights’ and the use of expensive, high-consumption appliances like electric irons and air conditioners as a resistance to this discipline (a history with which current campaigns for, and international studies of sustainable energy use should contend – Ericson and Winther 2013; Winther 2008).

In 1992, Ghana returned, for the fourth time, to civilian democratic rule, with Rawlings winning two consecutive terms in office (1992-2000). The historical confluence of the

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54 In the commissioning of Kpong power station, Rawlings announced plans for “mini-hydro schemes” at various points on the nation’s rivers, fitting with his economic policies of decentralisation that departed from Nkrumah’s emphasis on the national grid and the incorporated type of electrical citizenship it entailed, accommodating Rawling’s nationalist ideals of self-sufficiency within a neoliberal structure. However, Naaborle Sackeyfio’s study of electrification in rural Ghana argues that decentralisation allowed Rawlings to implement donor requirements of accountability and decentralisation while targeting discretionary spending on public goods (2018:19).
4th Republic multiparty democracy with neoliberalism at the end of Rawlings’ repressive regime has left a popular conceptualisation of democracy as a neo-colonial venture. The increasingly important role played by international financial institutions in matters of governance could be seen as a return to “indirect rule”, especially following the “political conditionality” of loans after the 1989 World Bank report on adjustment in Africa (MacLean 2017). Ghana in the 1990s progressively became a “borrowing economy” increasingly dependent on foreign aid, recording “abnormally high levels of assistance from donors” (and incurring incredibly high levels of debt) (Boafo-Arthur 1999:52). Today, Ghana is decried as a country surviving on ‘borrowing binges’ from the various administrations and ‘injections’ of foreign capital, and infrastructure is seen as one of the key areas for foreign investment, loans, debts, corruption and neo-colonial influence. The disenchantment with democracy that many Ghanaians express today finds its roots in the contested democratic projects outlined in this short historical overview, and in particular with the various attempts to define a type of “Ghanaian democracy” through an infrastructural endeavour for common dignities.

“Strategic Borrowings”

The period following Rawlings’ departure from power in 2000 after two consecutive mandates saw a further liberalisation of the economy, increased foreign investment and private sector participation in infrastructure. Taking over from Rawlings, John Kufuor presented himself as the “President of Ghana, Inc. Company”, inaugurating “Ghana’s Golden Age of Business” (Arthur 2006) under the catchwords of “good governance”, “accountability” and “transparency”. As Ghana consolidated its international image as the poster child of democracy, the political scene became increasingly divided between two dominant parties, which partly operated along the Nkrumah and Danquah-Busia axes that evolved during the struggle for Independence: the New Patriotic Party (NPP), the descendant of Nkrumah’s opposition party in the 1950s the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), which has a stronghold in the Ashanti region, often seen as more elitist and business-oriented; and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Nkrumah’s and Rawlings’ lineage, with primarily Ewe and urban poor supporters, and seen as more populist and interventionist (Morrison 2004; Skinner 2015). Yet the two political parties are not strictly ideologically opposed between a “leftist”, statist, socialist party (NDC) and a “right-leaning” liberal elite (NPP): as Paul Nugent has argued (1995:8), state
welfarism and private accumulation developed in complex interactions in Ghana’s political history – and in both parties –, and have never been starkly opposed as they are in the West.

The discovery of oil off the shores of the Ghanaian coast in 2007, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Ghana’s independence from colonial rule, inspired new dreams of energy and infrastructural independence (Rupp 2013), and consolidated the parallel histories of infrastructure with moments of freedoms – from colonial overseers, international sanctions and regulators, and foreign exports. Sekondi-Takoradi, which had been the first electrified city in Ghana, has come full circle as West Africa’s “newest oil city”, invaded by international oil magnates and utopian satellite cities such as “King City” (Obeng-Odoom 2012). In the first decade of the new millennium, Ghana appeared once again as the “rising star of Africa”, with a growth rate of 14% in 2011 – among the highest in the world (Ayelazuno 2014:83). But by 2012, the economy was in decline again; the dreams of energy independence fostered by the discovery of oil were crushed in widespread scepticism about its invisible presence – doubting that oil would ever materialise for the masses if gold and cocoa never had (Rupp 2013:115), especially as a period of energy shortages took place in 2007-2008. Importantly, the energy shortages of 2008 during an election year strengthened in the 4th Republic the equation of voting with access to electricity, and bestowed upon energy the entitlement of a national right (Rupp 2013:113,124) – something that resurfaced virulently in the 2016 elections. By 2012, economic growth had been halted, interest rates were rising, and while extreme poverty had been eradicated as per the MDG 1 Target, promoting Ghana in 2010 to a “lower middle-income” status, most Ghanaians today still live in extremely challenging and precarious conditions, just above the threshold of extreme poverty (Ayelazuno 2014:81).

55 The oil field discovered in 2007 was symbolically called the “Jubilee Oil Field”, and the oil vessel the FPSO (Floating Production Storage and Offloading) Kwame Nkrumah (Rupp 2013:114).
This brings us, finally, to the era of “Dumsor”, dominated by a single political figure: President John Dramani Mahama, also known as “Dumsor Prez” (and later, during the 2016 elections, as “Commissioner General”). As described briefly in the introduction, the Dumsor crisis of 2014-2016 was not so much a matter of generation capacity but of technical, economic and political challenges of circulation, including high levels of losses in distribution at ECG, the gradual degradation of ECG’s equipment, non-payment of revenues (mostly due to massive debts incurred by government MDAs), overdependence on unreliable hydro and thermal sources (including challenges in gas delivery from the West African Gas Pipeline and rising prices of imported fuel), and poor tariff structure at ECG (Kumi 2017:2). During the crisis, it was estimated that Ghana lost about US$ 2.1 million of production daily, or an estimated $320 to $924 million per annum (ISSER 2015). Partly due to the 2014-16 crisis, and to the increasingly unreliable condition of the energy sector since the turn of the millennium, Ghana embarked on a massive restructuration program of the energy sector, whose main

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56 In 2016, 82.5% of Ghana’s population had access to electricity. In 2016, Ghana’s generation mix stood at 57.21% thermal against 42.79% hydro (Kumi 2017:11).
project was the privatisation of the national electricity company, which the following chapter explores in greater detail.

Figure 43. Map of Ghana’s current electricity infrastructure. From: ISSER (2005:55).
Conclusion: the postcolonial “civil contract” of electricity

Since Nkrumah’s vision of national electrification, electricity has been seen as a “social commodity” and a national right, crucial to the development of national belonging, claims of citizenship and political affiliation (MacLean et al. 2016; Rupp 2013; Sackeyfio 2018:12). Nkrumah laid the terms of a new “social contract” in the postcolonial nation, one predominantly underwritten in the connecting and collective networks of infrastructural developments; it presented the state as a “promoter of collective benefits” (Nugent 1995:24), through the provision of the hypervisible signs of modern metabolic flows of water, electricity, and roads. The contradictory associations of Pan-African, anti-imperialist sentiments and populist military rule with infrastructure would prove a lasting influence on people’s expectations of public goods delivery and experiences of connection to a national grid and as a political and socio-material assemblage of belonging. As Prof. Amarteifio told me,

“the problem (with electricity) today is that we all take it so much for granted. The idea was given to the population that it’s their right; and nobody talked much about the costs of paying for electricity (…) The government worked very hard to spread the use of electricity, to supply every village. It was their boast (…) and everybody thought it was great. Nobody asked them how they were gonna pay for it”.

Echoing this view, Ghanaian artist Ablade Glover, who worked on the travelling exhibits of the Akosombo dam as an officer at the Department of Information Services, regretted that the state told “a lot of lies” by promising “free electricity and new factories”, nurturing unsustainable expectations of electricity as a national right (Glover in Miescher 2014:360). The state, I was often told by officials in government, had the mandate to “cushion” its citizens by providing subsidized electricity. The discourse of illegal connections, for instance, was framed as a result of excessive “pampering”, of having “cuddled” citizens to the point of spoiling. ECG, the staff often reminded customers, was not “Father Christmas”, spraying goods for free to its undeserving children. The “rot” at ECG, as it was described, was a longstanding self-inflicted sore, choking on its own toxic sweetness – and I use this word intentionally to indicate the long history in Ghana of associating “power” with “sweetness”, seen as both the irresistible and addictive taste of power, but also the working of power by sustaining forms of desire.
Electricity has thus woven a particularly intimate complex of expectations, promises and rights in postcolonial Ghana, what I suggest to see as a particular type of infrastructural “civil contract”. In her book on the civil contract of photography, Ariella Azoulay (2008) contends that the very premises of photography’s indexicality presuppose a citizenry, a civil duty of political mobilisation independently of and often bypassing the state. The photographic citizenry she describes allows for recognitions and forms of assemblies that are not subject to the state’s sanctions or dependent on its approval. Infrastructure in Ghana suggests a similar contract in the sense that it binds people into an infrastructural publics organised around common concerns (Collier, Mizes and von Schnitzler 2016). The binding fixtures of the electrical grid created a material site of civil restitution in post-colonial Ghana, but also marked a gridded dependence on national networks increasingly subject to international politics and conditionalities.

The notion of the contract also invokes a culture of transparency and accountability, in the circulation of official documents available for public scrutiny. Recall the AMERI scandal described in chapter 1: in the accusations of “fake” and “inflated” deals, the contract, in its official relation to technocratic expertise and to the bureaucratic encumbrances of politico-legal matters, becomes a prism through which to re-envision citizens’ relations to the grid and to the state. In his book on oil and visual culture in Nigeria, Andrew Apter (2005:232) describes the emergence of an “art of the contract” and a “culture of contracting” in the oil boom of the 1970s, dramatised in advertisements on TV as the sealing symbol of a visual economy increasingly dominated by the “arts of dissimulation” and the “confidence tricks” of forgery and deceptive appearances. It is in that sense that I talk about the “contract”, to evoke the ironic subterfuges and crumbles of doubt that lodge themselves into the sleek and sanitary surfaces of infrastructures. The “contract” of infrastructure I have in mind is not a legally binding document certifying and authorizing a particular relationship of duties and rights between its willing signatories, upon whom are bestowed and distributed particular roles, responsibilities, and positions of power; but rather, the artefact of political trickery and its “bogus shimmers” of promises and hopes, increasingly tinged by the possibility of their deceptive hollowing and spectral manifestations (de Boeck 2011; Simone 2014). The contract is the accessory par excellence of the conman, the trickster politician, the 419 scammer; in the Dumsocracy, rocked by countless scandals around the unscrutinised signing of contracts for emergency solutions, the contract has come to evoke the
unstable, alluring and deceptive character of political enunciation itself. It alludes to the magical resonances and the potency of words and visual signs like “infrastructure”, “transparency”, and “good governance” that resonate with the promises of trickling foreign currency. Indeed, the word “infrastructure” in Ghana is seen as the epitome of the language of power, the “mystifying Big English” spoken during election time and in IMF and World Bank loan proposals and contracts (Hasty 2005a:58). The history of public infrastructure in Ghana, and especially electricity, is situated in a tension between nationalistic ideals of self-sufficiency developed by Nkrumah’s vision, and a history of private concessions and foreign investment, whose key challenge has been to forge a vision of Ghanaian-ness that was inherently opposed yet dependent upon foreign participation. This reflects a more fundamental tension in Ghana’s political history, between a socialist, interventionist and pan-African state as envisioned by Nkrumah, and the mercantile, liberal policies that many administrations have increasingly adopted since the 1980s (Shipley 2015:7; Nugent 1995:18), which has made the notion of the public good – and especially electricity – a key site of national affirmation and unification but also of contradictory visions of the role of the state.
CHAPTER 4. “THEY MAKE US LOOK COLO”¹

“Privitalising” ECG

In 2016, rumours were that the “people at the top” were bringing in the “private man” and “selling off ECG” in an attempt to resolve the energy crisis. In 2014, the Government of Ghana had embarked on a Millennium Challenge Compact (II) with the United States, a project-led grant from the US Millennium Challenge Corporation, a bilateral US foreign aid agency.² The Compact allocated close to US$ 500 million for a comprehensive restructuring of the energy sector, of which $350 million specifically targeted the reorganisation of ECG through mandatory private sector participation – which, as was decided later, would take the form of a 25-year concession.³ Rumours of the privatisation sparked outcry at ECG. The Public Utilities Workers’ Union (PUWU) decried the privatisation as a neo-colonialist venture, invoking the role played by electricity in Nkrumah’s decolonisation struggle and nationalist vision. In a forum on the privatisation organized by energy think tank ACEP (Africa Centre for Energy Policy), the Chairman of PUWU dramatically opened the event by quoting Rousseau’s social contract: “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”. “59 years from Independence”, he continued,

“Are we really free? (…) Will we be active participants, and not just passive observers? (…) We want to avoid this option of somebody coming to take the best out of our country and we will sit there and cry. We will cry and say, ‘You see? When the private man comes, see what happens?’ First our gold, our cocoa,

¹ From “colonial”, used to indicate backward, old.
³ The concession functions along the “Build, Operate and Invest” (BOT) model of public-private partnership, in which the private sector invests, builds, and upgrades existing infrastructure, as well as running the service for an agreed period of time (enough for the private sector to have recovered their investment costs). In the case of ECG, the private Company to which ECG would be handed over would invest, build and upgrade existing infrastructure, take over its operations and run the utilities for the next 25 years – after which period the Government would regain full control. The choice of this form of private sector participation was strongly disapproved of in Ghana – by most parties as well as external think tanks and policy advisers – as it essentially amounted to a handover of a state monopoly to a private/foreign monopoly without addressing the future viability and sustainability of ECG – a concern that lies at the heart of private sector privatisation debates (Koppenjan and Enserink 2009) – and the continued risks of government intervention with unchallenged ownership.
and now our electricity, we want somebody to come and exploit it! Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains."

The Chairman’s denunciation of the privatisation scheme situates electricity in the cataloguing of Ghana’s natural resources and mineral riches, ensconced in the transatlantic and colonial histories of rapacious trade networks. His denunciation aptly mobilises what I described in the previous chapter as the postcolonial civil contract of infrastructure (and particularly electricity) in Ghana, in which electricity has been intimately tied to the rise of a nationalist, anti-imperialist imagination. The privatisation of state assets as an affront to the economic independence preached by Nkrumah (in his creation of multiple state-owned enterprises and Africanisation of the workforce) is an association that resurges at various points of the privatisation debates in Ghana’s political and economic history. After Nkrumah’s overthrow, the privatisation of state companies and assets attempted by the NLC (the National Liberation Council) left “bitter memories” to the Ghanaian intelligentsia that opposed it (Gyimah-Boadi 1991:202). In a June 1988 editorial of the Daily Graphic, privatisation is described as “a loaded word” that “conjures up in some minds past experience where state-owned businesses were disposed of cheaply behind close doors to favoured cronies. It also raises issues of exploitative rich businessmen taking over and kicking helpless workers into the street to face unemployment” (Gyimah-Boadi 1991:202-3).

The current privatisation of ECG dates back to almost thirty years of debates about its inefficiency, its future viability, and possible privatisation. In the early 1990s, ECG was in deep crisis: in their 1990 annual report, ECG reported a loss of nearly GHC 21 billion (for a profit of only GHC 1 billion). The report stressed the need to “remove the canker at ECG” (ECG 1991b) – a canker which, much like the situation described in chapter 2, included problems of billing, revenue collections, and staff discipline. Today’s prospect of ECG’s privatisation brings out the same challenges as it did in 1995 (Awotwi and Ofori-Atta 2015), when a first series of power sector reforms were implemented in order to improve ECG’s financial and operational activities, with the view of preparing it for private sector participation. ECG embarked on a “Total Quality Management”

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4 Fieldnotes, “ECG Private sector participation dialogue”, held on 07.07.2016 by ACEP at the Golden Tulip Hotel.
5 The 1993 Statutory Corporations (Conversion of companies) Act (Act 461), which was drawn to convert 35 state-owned corporations into public limited companies included ECG, along with other state companies such as Goil and GNPC (Botchway 2000: 183-4).
programme, opening up six Customer Service centres in Accra and introducing performance management targets (Mmieh et al. 2011). A tariff regulatory body, the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC), and an Energy Commission were established in 1997 to reduce government interference. In 2005, the VRA – the main generating company – was split for its transmissions operations into GRIDCo, which now works as an intermediary between ECG (distribution) and VRA (generation).

In the wake of rumours about the privatisation in January 2016 (which were only confirmed, reluctantly, by the government around the summer), some of the particularly frustrated customers at ECG would make passing comments and references to the upcoming privatisation and the resulting job losses that would ensue. They would make jocular threats and sometimes open provocations to the staff, going as far as to suggest that my presence at the company, as a white researcher, proved that the privatisation was imminent. Indeed, at a meeting with residents in Osu, a nearby neighbourhood, about the deployment of new prepaid meters (as part of the privatisation reforms, described below), a protester exclaimed: “Anyway, we have heard that ECG is being privatised – you are selling off ECG! We have been seeing this white lady going around, so we know you are selling it off to the whites!”.

The customer relations officer couldn’t stop laughing as she told me: “They thought you were working with a foreign company to come and organise things for them!” She explained the confusion: “Because you know, here, when we say ‘privatisation’, it means we are selling it to the whites. Privatisation means the whites”; and “The private man is often associated with Americans”. Quoting a line from Henry Kissinger she remembered from university, she said: “We learned that Americans have no permanent friends – only temporary interests”. She concluded: “Neo-colonialism is still here!”.

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6 My presence at the company was interpreted in different ways. Some would express their perception that the Company would finally be “working well-well”; for others, my presence seemed to confirm the corrupt and untrustworthy nature of ECG as a rapacious, opaque power operating through dubious global networks of international finance – associating whites with positions of privilege and extortive practices (cf. Pierre 2013:88). On my first day at the Electricity Company of Ghana I was introduced, humorously, to the team by the district manager as “our ECG ghost-worker!” “Ghost-workers” designate fake or duplicate names on the public sector payroll, which at the time of my fieldwork was a contentious issue in pre-election politics, seen as symptomatic of a failed state system and encroached corruption practices. What interests me here, is the association that the District Manager drew between the corrupt, greedy figure of the ghost-worker and the presence of white people as ‘watchdogs’ in local state institutions.
Yet many Ghanaians also saw this as an opportunity for the “privitalisation” of the company, as a friend put it. Seeing private sector participation as a privitalising venture wonderfully expresses the ambivalent status and effects of neoliberal reforms on the state (Chalfin 1996), confusing their assumed separateness and binary opposition in their functions and governance. Early scholarship on neoliberalism tended to proclaim the “end of sovereignty”, the increased “retreating” of the State from sites of governance and delivery of public goods (e.g. Harvey 2007; Sassen 1998) and its replacement by transnational, international, diffuse modes of governance and provisioning. More recently, scholars and critics have challenged this claim and studied the more “flexible” or “graduated” forms of rule that neoliberal processes produce, including the rekindling of political intimacies and nationalist sentiments (Ong 2012; Mains 2012). Africa is a particularly interesting place to challenge the historical emergence of neoliberalism and question its novelty, if it is to be characterised by the rising importance of private interests and governance (Weiss 2004). As the Comaroffs have argued (2012), Africa during colonial rule was a kind of ‘laboratory of capitalism’, and colonial forms of extraction could be considered as precursors to neoliberal reforms, prompting us to think of neoliberalism as a return to the continent.

As I have described in the previous chapter, the notion of the ‘public good’ in Ghana has always been fraught, as an ideal site of collective unification, democratised access to rising standards of living, and national affirmation – that has had to contend with the longstanding effects and dependencies on foreign aid and investment. The state’s reliance on private investors and foreign loans for large-scale infrastructural projects and modernisation has been the dominating experience in Ghana’s infrastructural history, rather than a recent development. The story of the Akosombo Dam, of thermal power plants, of the restructuring of state utilities, bespeaks this dynamic tension between the state’s policy and ideology of nationalisation, anti-imperialism and sovereignty, and the practical needs to seek foreign investment and funding, to bend to external interests and conditionalities. In that sense, the so-called rise of the neoliberal state in Ghana, of which the privatisation of ECG seems a typical development, is not simply a “return” of colonialism in new clothes (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Weiss 2004), but stems in part from earlier modes of relating to services and the promises of delivery. The “privitalisation” of ECG talked about by many of my interlocutors expressed the popular sentiment that foreign capital could serve as an ‘injection’ to the ill-health of state
institutions, in a similar way to the privatisation process described by David Mains in Ethiopia, where privatisation was actively welcomed as a way of rebuilding relations with the state and, indeed, a sign of state recovery and re-emergence (Mains 2012:20). The prospect of ECG’s “privitisation” also reinforced the vision of electricity as a vital current, and of ECG as the purveyor of the “metabolic flows” sustaining the nation (cf. Silver 2016). In other words, if private sector participation entailed the introduction – injection – of private capital into a state institution, this did not seem to diminish the *distributive* and metabolic role of the state.

Indeed, while some customers, following longstanding frustrations with the energy system, welcomed the advent of privatisation as a retaliating opportunity to threaten a Company that had aggrieved them for decades, many were also extremely anxious about the coming of “The Private Man”, as they called it, and his/her profit-oriented outlooks. Charlotte, a seamstress working in Osu, expressed some of those fears: “If they privatise electricity, we are going to die! Ghanaians should own it. Because at least, if Ghanaians own it, they know we are suffering, they know the state of the economy very well, they will consider us. But the foreigners – they take it as a business.” Although Dumsor had destroyed Charlotte’s livelihood, and the sight of her bills were keeping her up at night, she still had faith in the possibility of a state-owned company, and in fact wanted *more*, rather than less, interaction with ECG: she said that ECG should “invite them to discuss it with them”, that “they have to involve” them, invoking the need for a renewed engagement with the Company. In the imagination of global finance and international relations, people pick their affinities and manage their dissatisfactions carefully. The PUWU Chairman’s speech described at the beginning of this chapter also attempted to moor deeper this social aspect of the infrastructural contract with the state; as he pleaded, “We should not only see ECG with economic spectacles; there are things ECG does for this nation that are not economical – there are social indicators to consider.” Mentioning rural electrification and subsidies, he claimed that ECG’s debts were also to be accounted for by its social generosity and solicitude towards the poor and vulnerable segments of the population. A member of the Energy Commission declared that the private man would have to “treat electricity really well”, because “it is dear to the hearts of Ghanaians”.

159
The rest of the chapter looks more critically at the way in which this “social contract” can, in attempting to survive through (not despite) neoliberal reform programs, in fact further “precaritise” (Butler in Puar et al. 2012:169) certain livelihoods, that is, exacerbate the dependencies that the project of “delivery” promises (von Schnitzler 2016:3), and the impossibilities and marginalities that it prefigures. I look in particular at the introduction of prepaid meters in certain neighbourhoods of Accra as part of the reforms involved in privatising the Company, which profoundly impacted existing housing patterns, redefining the domestic micro-politics and (a)socialities of infrastructure, and transforming notions of “precarity” and “dignity”. If the previous chapter described the changing contours of the electrical ‘contract’ in Ghana through particular political periods, this chapter explores the forced violences, the processes of inclusive exclusion, and marginalization in connection inscribed in this contract, located in the very connecting cables of the national grid, rather than in its de facto absences or gaps.

Prepaid Meters as “CNN Broadcasters”

The Ghana Power Compact negotiated with the US Millenium Development Corporation (on behalf of the US) through MiDA (the Millenium Development Authority based in Ghana, established to implement the Compact) comprised nine projects, including the restructuring of ECG and NEDCo (the equivalent of ECG for northern Ghana), regulatory bodies (such as the PURC), access, power generation, energy efficiency, monitoring techniques, environmental impact and social and gender integration. Of these, the project that received greatest priority, attention and funds was the “ECG Financial and Operational Turnaround Project”, aimed at completely restructuring the Company through private sector participation. The turn to privatisation was partly justified by the Dumsor situation, as well as aiming explicitly at introducing “transparency” and “creditworthiness” in the Company – seen to be lacking both of these things (Fritsch and Poudineh 2015). Some of the technical changes that were introduced to this aim included the deployment of prepaid meters, the introduction of a new customer management software (CMS) and the revision of tariffs and subsidies. I explore here the ways in which these new techniques of “revenue recuperation” affected

the daily operations of the Company, relationship to its customers and between neighbours.

Prior to this, ECG had engaged in “revenue collection” campaigns largely dominated by “waging wars” against illegal connections (ECG 1991a). Illegal connections are often decried by ECG as the prime cause of deficit. The campaigns paint a disproportionate picture of losses incurred by a relatively small portion of the population, and invoke a scandalous and morally titillating sense of criminality by enjoining citizens to turn in suspects of illegal connections and act as vigilantes in their neighbourhoods (even offering rewards against denunciations), impervious to the sociality, morality, and difficult decisions involved in “contracting” an illegal connection (Degani 2017:302). In fact, as was well-known at the time, the real “losses” of ECG are not incurred from illegal connections but from the debts the Government itself owes to ECG (figure 6). When I was there, any attempts by ECG workers to go and disconnect ministries, especially the Ministry of Finance responsible for repayment, were immediately foiled by some “important phone calls”. Unsurprisingly, privatisation evoked the concern among Ghanaian customers that profit-oriented ventures would now forcefully take precedence over social empathy. This was particularly reflected in the replacement of postpaid meters with prepaid meters. Formerly, postpaid meters allowed people to run into arrears for several months or years before being disconnected. By contrast, prepaid meters require customers to “vend” (purchase credits) before getting access to electricity. At the time when I was doing fieldwork at ECG Makola, a mass meter replacement campaign was taking place, in order to maximize revenues and avoid debt accumulation in customers’ accounts. The campaign led to open discontent on the part of customers who complained that the new meters were “running faster than UsainBolt”, finishing the paid-for credit in a few days. The rumours of the new meters and their “disappearing credits” made the rounds, and in May 2016, there were protests in Osu (a neighbourhood near Makola) about their implementation. Yet the protests were not only motivated by the supposedly-dubious internal calculations of the new meters, but also by the new visibilities and forms of (a)sociality that they provoked. The new meters were placed outside the houses, in the street, for all to see (figure 45). This heightened publicness was justified by the problem of “non-access” caused by certain meters placed outside. For example: “Pre-paid meter users raise hell” (GhanaWeb 2016); “Outrage: Twitter angrily reacts to ‘fast vanishing’ ECG prepaid credits” (Mubarik 2016); “Teshie residents invade ECG office over ‘vanishing’ credits” (Allotey 2016).
inside houses – a situation in which meter readers are unable to take meter readings because the meters are locked away or hidden, or premises are closed off (a problem which, as discussed in chapter 2, dates back to the very beginnings of electrification). The publicness of the meters, it was alleged, would ensure easier access to technicians. But the new publicness of the meters, of course, assumed a new sociality around their uses, premised upon the knowledge of the importance of social pressure, gossiping, and moral commentary in the city. As we were walking down the street one day with Freddy Beach, he looked at them and said:

“Ah! Our leaders they always want to make us look colo colo ... Not civilized, you know.... So that they can [manipulate] us, because they say we are cheating. Why would you put the meters outside like this?? What is this?? The meter should be in your house! Now we have to take this card (top-up prepaid card) and put it outside – it should be inside!”

“Colo” originally comes from ‘colonial’, and indicates backwardness, stupidity, and a sense of technological obsolescence. Here, the neoliberal reforms at ECG – in the form of the prepaid meters – were assessed as a peculiar return to earlier forms of rule, control, and marginalisation.
Antina von Schnizler (2013) traces the genealogy of the prepaid meter in South Africa to the invention of the gas prepaid meter in Victorian Britain as a project of moral “uplifting” of the working class, in response to concerns about hygiene and the unsavory activities developing in the warm and well-lit pubs where workers spent their evenings. The deployment of the prepaid meters in Accra was a moral project of a different kind, one that catalysed the commercial potential of social relations and local information networks. The humiliation felt by Freddy Beach was one that was explicitly counted upon by ECG and its privatising programme. In my neighbourhood – as in many others in Accra (e.g. Pellow 2002:131) – rumours and gossiping constituted a major daily activity, and was often cited as the reason for containing closely and reducing one’s friends circle. As an Auntie put it: “People talk too much. They will come to your house and talk talk talk about what they saw. I don’t like people who come with their mouth. They just want to get in your house and see what’s happening. Then they will broadcast it everywhere – *they are like CNN!*” ECG was well aware of these local ‘broadcasters’, and rightly envisioned that public meters would more strictly regulate people’s economic transactions to the electrical infrastructure than any feature of “technological design” would.9 Meters thus became the new “eyes of the street”, as Deborah Pellow (2002:131) once described neighbours’ system of social surveillance and commentary in Sabon Zongo, a popular neighbourhood of Accra. People’s transactions with their meters were now open for all to see; one could literally monitor and comment on the frequency of top-ups, assessing one’s financial situation, access to wealth, and consumption of electrical goods. Although the meters were encased with a new protective plastic layer, making them more difficult to tamper with, the real buffer was their publicness, and the social networks and regulations that they worked through.

Those ‘pole meters’ were humiliating because they already presupposed, and publicly indicated, the perceived untrustworthiness and immoral practices of particular consumers, discriminating between areas and residents of Accra. As one of the managers at ECG explicitly told me, postpaid meters only work for the “enlightened people”, those who can be trusted with paying their bills and do not run on credit indefinitely as most of her customers, she argued, did; hence, she explained, ECG was deploying those

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9 This complements de Boeck’s anecdote in Kinshasa that to be “planted like a pole” means to be seen and heard by all (de Boeck and Plissart 2015:242).
prepaid meters to those neighbourhoods were people are notoriously less ‘inclined’ (or able) to pay their bills – such as the neighbourhood where Freddy Beach and I lived. The prepaid meters pre-categorized residents as unlikely to afford their connections to power, already discarding them from an infrastructural network they are deemed unworthy of. In that sense, Freddy Beach’s comment about the obsolescent aspect of the meters is incredibly perceptive of the forms of temporal discrimination involved in these devices. While the prepaid meters are designed as a method of revenue recuperation and energy efficiency, imposing new calculative and metrological regimes of payments and delivery (von Schnitzler 2016:6), they simultaneously, paradoxically already pre-annihilate the existence of their users as valid, viable consumers and trustworthy citizens.

**Compound Housing and the domestic politics of infrastructure**

There was another aspect to the implementation of these new prepaid meters, one that reverberated acutely amongst tenants living in shared compound housing. In December 2015, as the power barge Ayşegül Sultan had just arrived in Ghana, and the Ministry of Power Dr. Kwabena Donkor was urged to step down in the midst of unbearable Dumsor, the government announced a 59.2% hike in electricity tariff, including additional taxes and service charges (energy and street light levy). Soon thereafter, protests broke out, and a national outcry broke out in Accra, lasting for months. Bills were suddenly recording extraordinary increases of up to 300%, and as described in chapter 2, customers rushed to the customer centres to challenge and “understand” these improbable amounts. Surprisingly, people did not so much object to the tariff hikes (a well-accepted fact of life that “no condition is permanent” and constantly subject to change), as to the suspicious nature of the new Customer Management Software (CMS) that had, it was claimed, caused the scandal – and is discussed further in this chapter.

The issue of overbilling during the tariff increase and the introduction of the new software had (allegedly) unforeseen and widespread consequences on domestic micro-politics, notably for those living in “compound housing”, due to the gradated system of tariff banding. As a measure of social security for the poor, the tariff structures of electricity consumption have – since “time immemorial”, according to the Projects Manager in charge – comprised different bandings for their residential customers, categorising customers according to their consumption and increasing the price of
consumption with each kWh bracket (see figure 46). The new tariff banding, which calculated the utility tariff according to the level of consumption, was meant to benefit low users and encourage energy conservation. But what was initially designed as a social security measure to ensure affordable electricity for the poor ended up marginalizing massive segments of society by ‘failing’ to take into account the shared compound system of urban housing prevalent in Accra, where families or individual tenants occupy one building or room within a large compound, and usually share an electric meter. Since 15 or 20 people would typically share the same meter, their consumption automatically categorised them in the highest tariff band, resulting in a massive increase of their bill (see figure 45), leading to widespread conflicts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARIFF CATEGORY (RESIDENTIAL)</th>
<th>OLD TARIFF (EFFECTIVE APRIL 01, 2015) GHp/kWh</th>
<th>NEW TARIFF (EFFECTIVE DECEMBER 14, 2015) GHp/kWh</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE INCREASE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 – 50 (Exclusive)</td>
<td>21.0795</td>
<td>33.5586</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 – 300</td>
<td>42.2910</td>
<td>67.3273</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 – 600</td>
<td>54.8855</td>
<td>87.3777</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly Service Charge (GHp/Month)</td>
<td>3.9772</td>
<td>6.3317</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For customers in the lowest bracket, on “lifeline”, that is consuming between 0 and 50 units, the cost of a unit was 34 pesewas (p) on the new tariff (increased from 21p); but as soon as the customer crossed into the next bracket, the 51st unit, the meter recalculated the total with the next bracket’s tariff, at 67p per unit! This, of course, led to enormously inflated sums, particularly for those sharing a meter, whose compounded consumption “made them seen as ‘rich’ by the meter”, as an engineer explained, and placed them in the highest tariff. In addition, once crossing the 51st unit line, the government subsidy of about GHC 22 was deducted. Hence, if one would pay GHC 17.66 GHC for 50 units, 51 units came to more than twice that – GHC 40.02. Summarising the situation, one of the technical engineers at ECG Makola explained: “Our tariff structure is cumbersome and confusing. Now, people on prepaid want postpaid, and people on postpaid want prepaid. Everyone thinks they are paying more, the other is paying less.” Customers
“falling out of the lifelines”, he explained, led to the situation described above, in which the meter recalculates, gives a grand and impossible total, and “takes from your credit if you have some, or cuts you off”: “So people think ECG has put something at the backdrop of the meter to siphon it to us.” In an article in Pulse Ghana, reportedly from “an insider ECG source”, the issues with the prepaid meters were imputed to the “dubious renewal” of a contract with a Chinese electronics company, CB Electronics, that had been contracted to provide some of the prepaid meters. Vanishing credits and overbilling, it was alleged, resulted from the fact that “the entire operation system of the company is in Chinese”, “including the interface that Technicians use to resolve meter issues in our various offices” (Quist 2016).10 While the rumour was quickly rebutted by ECG’s PRO William Boateng, the story exposes some of the anxieties and popular imaginations of infrastructural devices’ political and economic designs. The inscrutable signs of Chinese characters, as the fetishized signs of alterity and unintelligibility, expressed the doubtful nature of the state’s governance technologies, but also the perception of foreign powers’ complicity in the opacity of infrastructural devices and global financial circuits. Prepaid meters and softwares were not just “techno-political devices” enforcing new moralities and behaviours onto their users (Von Schnitzler 2016:6), but also “technologies of the imagination” (Holbraad, Pederson, Sneath 2009) that staged anxieties and projected the “dystopian potentials” (ibid: 9) of geopolitical relations and infrastructural projects.11

The tariff banding issue did not only create suspicion and discontent towards ECG, but also between neighbours, tenants, and landlords. Of course, disputes and conflicts had always been an issue in compound housing, particularly around communal infrastructure like electric meters and sanitation (Addo 2013). Compound houses are Ghana’s predominant form of housing (Afram 2009), especially in urban areas, providing relatively cheap accommodation for the lower- and middle-classes unable to afford separate residential houses. According to the latest government census (Ghana Statistical Service 2010), 51.5% of all dwellings in Ghana consist of compound houses,

10 ECG’s spokesperson, PRO William Boateng, in response to these allegations said that while ECG does have a contract with CB Electronics – for a fraction of the meters in the area of Dansoman – the company is not responsible for billing, and refuted assertions that “the Chinese company is ripping Ghanaians off” (Quist 2016).
11 In the early phase of prepaid meter implementation in Accra in 2007, there were already speculations and rumours about the dubious quality of Chinese-made prepaid meters and other electrical appliances on the market (Klutse 2007).
compared to 27.7% of separate and semi-detached houses. In Greater Accra, compound housing reaches 55% of all dwelling units, with separate houses and semi-detached houses a combined 26%; kiosks, makeshift structures and containers also make up a substantial 6.2%. A compound is usually composed of several rooms (or sometimes separate bungalows) organised around a common courtyard, where various domestic and social activities take place, including food preparation (cutting vegetables, pounding fufu, cooking, roasting peanuts), childcare, laundry, clothes-drying, and celebrations or meetings.

Compound residents usually share infrastructural facilities like electricity, toilets, bathrooms, and sometimes kitchens.\(^\text{12}\) They have become a predominant form of informal social housing in the current housing crisis in Accra (Gillespie 2018), providing relatively low rent, especially for low-income, young single professionals and migrants. The current rental form of the compound housing in urban areas derives from the traditional form of rent-free family compound in Ashanti housing, which accommodated the extended family and served as a kind of social safety net, providing free housing for less affluent members of the lineage (Danso-Wiredu 2018:666). The compound or “courtyard house” in rural areas can be made up a few free-standing houses around a common courtyard, whereas compound houses in urban areas are often a closed, tighter rectilinear building with a series of rooms around a common internal courtyard (Afram and Korboe 2009:37). In her analysis of Sabon Zongo (from Hausa, meaning the “new stranger quarter”), a predominantly Hausa neighbourhood in Accra, Deborah Pellow (2002) describes the increasingly “involuted” form of compounds, as additional rooms and structures are constructed onto the central courtyard to accommodate growing demands for cheap housing. In effect, compounds in Sabon Zongo become mini-villages in themselves, as the structures of accreted housing define an “intricate pattern of interior lanes around rooms” (151).

In compounds, electricity meters were particularly problematic because one tenant’s inability to pay would either prevent the electricity supply to the whole compound, or unwillingly put the compound into debt, forcing other tenants to cover his/her share.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^\text{12}\) For details of categories of rooms and rental value, see Table 3.3 in Ghana’s Statistical Services’ 2010 Population & Housing Census (2014:18).

\(^\text{13}\) With postpaid meters, not paying would eventually lead to disconnection, and incur reconnection fees (as well as the paying of debts); with prepaid meters, it was even more problematic, as the disconnection was immediate when credit finished.
Desires, obligations, and impossibilities mixed; sympathies strained, resentments intensified. Tenants had found different ways to cope with this. In compounds with prepaid meters, tenants took turns to top up a certain amount – say, GHC 50, in the meter. Often, however, when the credit finished after a short period of time (one or two days), speculations immediately arose as to whether the person in charge of buying credit had actually only recharged 10 or 20 GHC rather than the agreed-upon GHC 50. In postpaid meters, with monthly billing, a widespread strategy was the “gadget points” through which billed amounts were divided and each tenant given a proportionate share according to their consumption. “We have a formula”, explained Christopher, a young bachelor living in a compound with three rooms. “We look at your room, we take points, and we calculate points based on what you use”. Thus, Nii Kwame, a taxi driver living in a compound housing, explained that he was given 7 points for his consumption: 3 lightbulbs – 1,1,1; Fridge, 1; Fan, 1; TV, 2. He believed the points were calculated by ECG – but in fact, these were approximate strategies developed by landlords and tenants based on an energy consumption sheet provided by the company (figure 47). Accordingly, suspicions about one’s gadgets and consumption were rife: as a friend explained, jokingly calling herself “Madame Electrician”, sharing meters generates disputes and suspicions because some tenants might be using high-consuming gadgets, such as standing air-coolers, kettles, or deep-freezers, in the privacy of their room, consuming the current paid for communally. While tenants initially surveyed each other’s rooms to ascertain the points distribution, one could easily introduce new gadgets unknowingly to the compound.

![Figure 46. ECG Consumption guidance sheet.](image)
Meters and infrastructural governance

This resulted in pervasive disputes between tenants and with landlords, leading to a massive rush for individual, separate meters (a “one-room-one-meter” solution) to resolve tensions. In shared housing, the primary meter or “Mother Meter”, as it was called, was quickly supplemented by a myriad of individual separate meters to cater for individual consumption, and lower the overall billing cost by breaking down high consumption into smaller tariff brackets. Poles became loaded with rows of meters – an exacerbated, grotesque public sight. As Felix, a tenant in a compound, explained: “I want separate meters for my peace of mind. Because then at least you can manage your light. When I leave the house I turn off everything. Unless I’m watching a programme, I will off the TV. I only iron on weekends. For church. Because the consumption now is too high, maybe the other person you are sharing the meter with is using when you are not there; but at the end both of you will pay”. For these reasons, he explained, and “in order that we don’t quarrel”, he took the initiative to get a separate meter. His story was indicative of many others, who professed being extremely careful in their electricity consumption (one of the purported design of the prepaid meter is to encourage energy saving), and yet felt unreasonably betrayed by the tariff banding that unjustly placed them as “high consumers”.

It is unclear how the rather blatant omission of such a pervasive domestic arrangement occurred, but one cannot rule out the possibility that the ricocheting effects of the incremental banding system, by literally pricing out tenants living in compound housing, would lead to a kind of self-initiated subjection to stricter ECG regulations and individual monitoring. The compound housing system had always posed challenges to ECG’s (and indeed other government institutions’) revenue collections. Deborah Pellow (2012:153) recounts people’s exploitation of the internal expandability of the compound to evade Accra Metropolitan Authority’s (AMA) property taxes by registering various properties under the same number, a practice supported by the “maze-like” character of compound housing in certain areas that complicate and indeed render illegible the mapping systems used by the AMA. Jonathan Silver, in his study of electricity and forms of collaboration and material improvisation in the Accra district of Ga Mashie (2014), argues that the increasing introduction of the prepaid meters in 2008 in the district were a direct response from ECG to households’ deliberate attempts to confuse meter ownership and customer identification in order to hook multiple households onto the
chief meter through clandestine connections to the electricity network. By being priced out of electricity consumption by the new tariff banding devised by the PURC and self-willingly acquiring a new prepaid meter, residents facilitated the infrastructural governance of ECG, allowing for better revenue collection and monitoring, and weeding out illegal customers.

This was precisely the aim of the new Customer Management System (CMS) software implemented during that time. The CMS was implemented by a Spanish technology company, INDRA, commissioned by the GEDAP (Ghana Energy Development and Access Project, sponsored by the World Bank).\(^\text{14}\) Prior to the CMS, customer information had been managed under the Customer Billing Information System (CBIS), which had different databases and operating systems for each region. The CMS, as an integrated digital platform, aimed to centralise customer information and management, in order to better monitor transactions, to control the meters’ locations and operations, and relations between ECG staff and customers. Prior to this centralised system, the Projects Office Manager of ECG admitted, loopholes were often found and exploited by staff for private gains. For instance, if a customer moved to a new region, or transitioned from a postpaid meter to a prepaid meter (a policy that had been increasingly adopted in recent years, especially in urban areas), customer information – and by extension their debts – could be “lost”, either “inadvertently” or by “pure mischief”. The CMS, he said to the press, would put to rest “allegations of deliberate sabotage or favouritism on the part of some staff” (GBN 2015). In addition, the CMS included stricter monitoring measures to control the dispatch of meters, tracing their routes and tracking their operations. Prior to this, meters could easily change hands (or houses) and be hooked onto the grid without proper customer identification. The CMS thus revolved around the meter itself as a “tracking” device, recording any changes in customer’s whereabouts or suspicious activities. The CMS, Ghana Business News declared, would “monitor all activities” and “expose individuals, including staff, who engage in unauthorized commercial activities” (GBN 2015).

\(^\text{14}\) Indra’s CMS software has been implemented in 88 different utility systems worldwide, including in Latin America, Europe, and Africa. More details on the CMS can be found here: www.indracompany.com/sites/default/files/indra_incms_en_baja.pdf. Details of the agreement with Indra can be found here: https://www.indracompany.com/en/noticia/indras-technology-will-manage-commercialization-electricity-ghana (accessed 25/07/2018).
But the software’s lofty ideals of transparency and accountability were quickly disproved by the growing discontent about its scandalous overbilling ordeals. In May 2016, the issue assumed national proportions as the regulatory commission, the PURC (Public Utilities Regulatory Commission) ordered ECG to suspend the use of their “rogue software”, and established a taskforce to investigate the alleged scandal (Graphic Online 2016). Within ECG, workers did not take the accusations seriously: “Don’t mind them! It’s all ‘radio talk’. Just listen to them, laugh and go!” said a billing officer. But some staff threatened to strike and bring the whole electrical infrastructure of the city to a halt following harassment and intimidation from the public. For a while, the office stopped dispatching their disconnection teams, fearing repercussions following beatings of ECG staff in Kumasi and Teshie. Ultimately, ECG published a reply to the PURC that admitted to discrepancies in the billing software – a declaration which, according to the Project Manager in charge of the software implementation, was a contrived attempt on the part of government to “save its face” during an election year, forcing ECG staff to take the blame.15 “It is important to state”, said the press release written by PRO William Boateng, that “there is no problem with the CMS software”; he urged “all our customers and the general public to have confidence in our metering and billing system” (ECG 2016). INDRA, the company providing the software, complained of the difficulties they had in implementing the CMS in Ghana; ECG, they said, had been “one of the most challenging countries”, because “it’s like they want the system to be God or something. They just want to sit and for the system to do each and everything for them!”.

It is in this context that people increasingly sought out the very prepaid meters ECG had also been trying to implement in order to facilitate the management of customer accounts. While some of the functions for tariff banding calculations were adjusted (for instance, to ensure a gradual increase in consumption from the 51st unit, rather than a full re-calculation under the superior band tariff), they left the structure of the tariff bands (and their impact on different housing types) intact. As far as I am aware, compound housing still falls under a higher consumption rate; considering that more than half of Accra’s population lives in compound housing (and this does not even include other types of shared housing or housing that might share utilities), it is highly likely that these tariffs had a different design in mind than their – quite ironically –

15 Interview with Mr. Osei, 01/08/2016. When the matter was brought to Parliament, the NDC Chief whip Mohammed Muntaka Mubarak accused ECG to have deliberately undermined the President’s attempts to end the power situation.
purported “social security measure” of subsidising the poor in lower consumption brackets. In fact, in an interview with INDRA (the software developers), they joked that all this convoluted story of software accusations from the media had been orchestrated by the PURC to get their own cut of the money!

Conditions for a separate meter included a consumption of at least 300 units, and the settling of arrears, with the last payment slip attached to the application. The electric wiring must also be checked, and certified by an Energy Commission officer (at the rate of GHC 50). Then, according to the availability of meters, a new separate individual meter would be installed. A few weeks into the overbilling scandal, meters had run out. Besides incurring additional paperwork and delays, the increasing demand for separate meters resulted in a chaotic distribution: some meters were dispatched without proper standardisation, and some were installed before the customer information had been migrated to the new software database. Customer information ‘disappeared’ in this mismatch between technicians in the field and commercial staff at the Company, including customer debts – an additional blow to ECG’s already-crumbling balance sheet. In desperate attempts to reduce their bill and stop the conflicts arising in all the compound houses, people attempted to find meters for sale through bypass routes. Some customers even came to the Company, only to find out with surprise that meters were not for sale (though they incurred an 82.25 GHC application fee). Some had paid as much as GHC 350 (£70) for a meter, bought from landlords, received from politicians, or negotiated with ECG workers themselves. At ECG, adverts popped up: “Meters are not for sale!” One customer, disappointed to hear that the meters were not available, pointed to the meter wall model described in chapter 2 (figure 35), and asked: “Is that one for sale?” To avoid meters being sold and connections being wired illegally, they implemented a new rule – the Energy Commission now needs to certify the installation for a separate meter, to the fee of GHC 50. At ECG, one staff joked: “They also want their cut!” (of the money). The tenuous conviviality of compound living became more precarious. People, I was told, had become “selfish”: the perception of politicians’ corrupt behaviour during the crisis fostered a resentment and bitterness that made people

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16 *In consonance with Government of Ghana’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), PURC has maintained its policy of instituting lifeline tariffs for low income consumers with significantly low consumption levels. The lifeline tariff continues to be provided at below the cost of electricity provision*, states the PURC tariff setting guidelines (PURC tariffs: http://www.purc.com.gh/purc/node/177 (accessed 06/08/2018).
turn to themselves and their inner circles. If energy outages created new forms of collaboration and improvisation (de Boeck 2012; Silver 2014) characteristic of infrastructural moments of failure or inadequacy, the privatisation reforms that were implemented during the crisis (and had been adopted in large part in response to it) also made electricity an increasingly individualizing and divisive force. Access to plugs and usage of domestic appliances were now subject to real objections, as people found themselves unable to afford basic domestic tasks.

**Precarity and Marginality: the right to non-infrastructure**

Prepaid meters are often a preferred form of revenue collection and consumption monitoring because they eliminate the ‘human element’ in infrastructural relations. As Antina von Schnitzler has argued in her book on the political history of infrastructure in South Africa (2016:116), prepaid meters inscribe a different relation to authority: while postpaid meters operate through a ‘contractual relationship’ between customers and revenue collectors, based on trust and creditability, prepaid meters remove this contract, operating through a direct relationship solely dictated by the demands and affordances of the meter. As such, they enforce socio-economic (and racial, in the case of South Africa) segregations and make visible these distinctions that, as Freddy Beach enounced earlier, are felt as acutely humiliating, as well as bringing back resonances of earlier resentments and marginalisation. Yet the elimination of this human element was not necessarily unwelcome, especially to those residents who had long suffered from the questionable practices of ECG staff. For instance, the meters were seen as economically more relevant to people’s own payment practices. Indeed, one of the things that people welcomed about the prepaid meters was their ability to control the frequency of payments. In contrast to post-paid meter bills, which people would take months to settle, endlessly dividing the final amount into manageable parts, the prepaid meters allowed one to top up “small-small”, that is, topping up regularly, “as and when”, rather than covering a large amount at once. Paying small-small reveals an elasticity to numbers I described in chapter 2, in which numbers are seen as processual projects rather than fixed objects. It is a lengthy process that follows a logic of contingencies in an economy overwhelmingly dominated by informal businesses, creating a ‘habitual’ relation with infrastructure, requiring frequent visits to the ECG vending booth or one of the
Company’s vending offices. The prepaid meter worked within the logic and temporalities of the informal economy, giving people with informal incomes and occupations the ability to top up in their own time and measures. In protests about water as a (human) right to dignified existence in South Africa, the work performed by the meters, as Von Schnitzler argues, is one that attempts to quantify this “dignified existence”, of calculating a value without a price (von Schnitzler 2014). Yet here, the possibility of controlling one’s own calculations and modes of payment gave a different twist to the notion of prepaid meters as “technologies of precarity”, an alternative ethics for conceptualising what it means to be “living prepaid” (von Schnitzler 2016:6).

When the credit has run out, the prepaid meter provides automatic disconnection; as an ECG worker put it, “there’s no talk talk talk and negotiations, when it’s finished it’s finished!”. Yet this technocratic enforcement also comported a sense of reassurance and comfort: if it left people ‘in darkness’, it at least gave them control over their non-consumption. Indeed, those on post-paid meters unable to pay their rising monthly bills or their accumulated debts sometimes complained and begged the company to come and disconnect them. These contrived demands expressed their inability to participate in the electricity network, but it also denounced the marginalisation that comes from a forced integration into the electricity grid and its economic network. At least, with the prepaid, people said, “they were free”: when they didn’t have money they could be left in peace (and in darkness) without worrying about the shameful and violent visits of ECG’s disconnection team. Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur (2015) argue that the neoliberal techniques of fiscal discipline and transparency implemented through such devices as the prepaid meters have become new “public goods” operating through limited social contracts, resulting in increasingly precarious and partial forms of citizenship. Yet the prepaid meters, intended as a neoliberal measure of “revenue recuperation” through technocratic disconnection and control (von Schnitzler 2016:10), also eerily provided a sense of self-control over one’s own precarity even as it exacerbated its lived consequences. Controlling one’s inability to consume – enforced, ironically, by the very devices supposed to increase revenue – was in fact preferred to previous practices of state regulation and infrastructural violence. When prepaid meters’ credit finishes, the darkness in which one is plunged is evidence of a new condition of impossibility and is

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seen as a sign of the deterioration of the state’s social and welfare capacity; but it also defines a new field of controlled agency over one’s own precarity. Controlling one’s own precarity, by giving residents the power to exit from the de-facto implicating network of the national grid, conferred a certain sense of dignity even in the face of exacerbated marginality. The prepaid meters made publicly visible the increasingly unliveable nature of contemporary life in Accra, exposed in the unavailability and unaffordability of electrical power. After the tariff hikes, the scandal of the new prepaid meters, and the new tariff banding policies, the unaffordability of power that resulted reinforced the particular infrastructural form and political address materialised by Dumsor: a state of being putatively, materially connected to electrical power, but structurally left out of the very network that seemed to promise universal access.

In this case, marginality itself became a form of dignity, indicating an ability to opt out, a right to non-infrastructure (cf. Corsin-Jimenez 2014). Ironically, the meters that were designed as technologies for revenue recuperation became, instead, technologies of non-consumption, technologies that enabled customers to exit from the system altogether. The prepaid meter became not so much the technocratic apparatus of moral behaviour, the extended hand of the enforcing state, or the “techno-political device of citizenship”, but actually the means of opting out of the state altogether and the unaffordable relations that its social contract predicated. Precarity, indeed, does not simply derive from material scarcity, but rather exacerbates a sense of sociality and our (political) condition of interdependency (Butler 2004; Das and Randeria 2015). Precarity is precisely not an “abandonment that pushes us away from a liveable life” (Byler and Shaw 2016), but a manifestation of the potential toxicities fostered by relationality and the dependencies it yields.

This notion of precarity as a relation and manifestation of interdependence goes beyond an existential humanism – acknowledging our dependence on others and our own mortality (Butler in Puar et al. 2012:169). Instead, I take Butler to mean that precarity is an inherent feature of social relationality, that it is produced, precisely not by a lack of means, but by an excessive bind to socio-economic and political relations that reveals “the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency”: “Precarity is dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions; it is indissociable from
that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs” (Butler in Puar et al. 2012:170). In that sense, the “social contract” of electricity emphasised and proclaimed by the Ghanaian state, even in the midst of neoliberal reforms, precaritises even as it attempts to care. This is not, then, a debate about the intended designs of the state as a “benefactor” or as a “castigator” of the public and its needs, but a recognition that materials and technologies complicate political and social relations, bringing forth potential contradictions, unwanted or unforeseen effects, exceeding the terms of their existence. As James Ferguson has argued in the case of cash transfer payments in Southern Africa (2015), neoliberalism and its associated techniques and modes of reasoning can also yield “pro-poor” effects, not in spite of those reforms, but in their service. History, he reminds us – and we could add technologies – have no respect for original intentions. As I have attempted to show here, the “social cushioning” project of ECG and its infrastructural contract also harbours toxic forms of connection, forms of ‘inclusive exclusions’ that are made manifest not only in the obvious gaps and lacks of institutional provisioning, but in the very connections and bonds that it provides. I have tried to show the ways in which desires for state-forms of delivery, duty, and responsibility produce their own situations and techniques of marginalisation. But I have also attempted to argue that marginalisation, precarity and dignity arise in unforeseen locations and situations, sometimes doubling as one other. The prepaid meter, while ostensibly “marginalising” consumers, also created a certain form of dignity, experienced as the absence of connection, in the possibility of a temporary, yet controlled “exit” from the binds and bonds of political sociality. Prepaid meters, far from simply being the neoliberal instruments of technocratic rule or the impervious autocrats of economic austerity, were both sympathetic and suspicious, precaritising and dignifying. In the darkness, when their voracious credits have finished, their red, flashing light conveys this ambivalence: a signal that things are still putatively connected even as they can no longer afford to be.
CHAPTER 5. “THOSE SITTING IN AC”

Heat of Darkness

The newly-renovated office of the Electricity Company in Accra’s Industrial Area stands as a perfect illustration of the divided visual landscape of Accra (Shipley 2012:102), superposing the gleaming sights of private capital in the shape of imposing banks, glass and steel office buildings, highways and flyovers upon the decaying nationalist architecture and infrastructure of the 1960s, and the informal economies of petty traders and street sellers. The imposing dark glass-and-steel building of the new Company office is also reminiscent of the sprouting Pentecostal Churches’ monumental structures and sleek, tainted blue glass tiles that materialise new visions of opulence in all corners of the city. Inside the lustrous, cream-tiled and freshly-painted corridors that embalm citrus soap sanitizer, ECG workers sport crisp white shirts and suits adorned with the ECG corporate logo on a scarf or pin. Offices are fresh with blasting air conditioning and plush leather chairs; portraits of corporate efficiency and national symbols adorn the large gleaming desks and transparent glass cabinets. Outside the office, herds of goats and rams bleat and brawl their way through the dirt road and buses parked across potholes and splashes of red earth. The first sight of the Electricity Company seems to conjure up two different temporal scenes, or rather, two different thermic worlds. “Ticket number F-0-5-9 please proceed to service point 5”.

In Makola, on the other side of the tinted glass walls of the Company, market women are leaning over the burning AC airboxes, using it to display their wares – the heat-island effect of air-conditioned privilege. Hawkers pass through with Ghana-must-go bags and heavy crates implausibly balanced on their heads, sweat drops pearling down their faces. Yoghurt and purified water vendors squeeze through the honking trotros. On their heads, plastic sachets of purified water sit smugly onto miraculously compact ice cubes. Uncle A., accountant for an industrial materials’ shop across from the fire station nearby, has come to challenge his bill today. He looks at me and smiles: “My sister! They are killing me”. He tries to explain to me how the Dumsor works, how it creates the “hardship” that is on everybody’s lips. He points to the AC under which we are sitting, and explains: “Look at me!”, he says. “I’m sweating and I’m sitting under the AC. But look at you – you are not sweating kraaa (at all)! Ah, enye easy (is not easy).” We talk about the
Dumsor, the electricity company, and the ‘darkness’ that Dumsor plunges him in. Uncle A., like everyone in Accra, invokes darkness to indicate the unbearable heat in the absence of a working electric fan. One of the first things that drew my attention in narratives about Dumsor was the use of the word ‘light’ to denote ‘air’, and of ‘darkness’ to indicate ‘heat’. “Sleeping in darkness” was the expression used to describe the frustration of Dumsor, which did not mean sleeping in the absence of electric light, but sleeping in the heat. The darkness was also considered a place of death, uncertainty, danger, and threat. Customers would often complain that ECG staff threatened to “leave them in the darkness” if they did not “dash” them some money. As a friend explained: “Dumsor Dumsor… it’s very very serious! People’s lives have been lost – lives and property. If we don’t have light, we run the risk of going to join our ancestors in the darkness....” Similarly, “having light” did not always refer to the light bulb, but also indicated the presence or absence of ventilation, associated with the fan. Dumsor, I came to realise early on, proffered a particular electrical atmospherics that did not quite fit the distinction of light and darkness that “dum” and “sor” seemed to imply.

Pshiouuuuuu. Light off. Peoples’ heads rose to the ceiling, turned to the sides. My supervisor Auntie Maggie stooped up, she frowned: Eyy Dumsor. In a few minutes the sweat drops appeared under frustrated foreheads, the stains on the crisp ironed shirts. White wiping handkerchiefs appeared from everyone’s pockets. The sweat and stuffy heat engulfed us, exposing the props of the office to the sweaty reality of the market outside. In this moment of thermic suspension, Dumsor seemed to democratically reveal the universality of a condition laid bare in its heat, in our sweating bodies, the deception of contemporary atmospheres and the irony of infrastructural expertise: people laughed – the State of the Nation is at play here: what do you do when the Electricity Company itself goes Dumsor-Dumsor?

In My Cocaine Museum (2004:31-40), Taussig discusses the affective, suffocative, evocative qualities of heat and dismays at its conspicuous absence in ethnographies, despite it being a crucial aspect of many anthropologists’ fieldwork experience. Taussig reminds us that the history of imperialism and resource extraction is fundamentally immersed in heat: gold and silver were only one side of the exploration narratives of riches and pillage, the other being death, through heat and fevers (37-8). Slavery was partly ‘justified’ on the grounds of heat, as Africans were deemed to better accommodate
the burning sun and therefore considered “fitter” to slave labour (Puckrein 1979). Nowhere has heat, and its association with abundance, as a phantasmagoric complex of power and violence, death and paradisiacal riches (Arnold 2000:13), been more vividly present in Western colonial imaginaries than on the West Coast of Africa, and particularly in today’s Ghana. Following Taussig, then, I suggest to explore heat as a conditionality of power. The provisioning, quality, and breakdown of air conditioning and fans are the topic of constant discussion and banter in the ECG office – as well as in everyday conversations. Darkness and light invoke a whole complex of visual and sensory associations, often unconnected to the absence or presence of light itself.

When I first started doing research at the Electricity Company, they specifically assigned me to the Customer Service front room, where standing ACs were blowing 18°C. As the research progressed and I decided to transfer to various other rooms and locations of the ECG, I encountered quite some resistance. Was this part of the restrictions on information I was not allowed to delve into? Were there rules of access I was breaching? Were there worries about undercover reporting of corruption? One day, as I asked the engineers to accompany them on one of their trips, things finally became clear. I had been granted authorization for it, but as I sat in the plush chair of Engineer S.’s office, waiting for ‘the boys’ to eat and set off, he announced that “it would not be possible”. As I let out a rather unhappy “Please, why??”, Engineer S. fumbled behind his large desk, uneasy. “Well… these cars we have, you see… they don’t have Air Conditioning.” Surprised, I laughed: “That’s ok! I don’t have AC at home.” Now he laughed, and gave me a long, quizzical look: “Oh, now you are just teasing me!”

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As fieldwork went by, I came to realise that the circulation of air, and the properties of wind, sweat and heat do constitute a major power system in Ghana: who controls and has access to various flows of air is an important sign of social – and racial – distinction. AC formed part of the hierarchical atmosphere of the office at ECG. In Auntie Lizzie’s office (described in chapter 2), the broken AC became a veritable saga, commented on for months. She would come to sit in the room with her employees, and ask the big circular fan to be directed towards her, teasing them: “Eyy I came here for a purpose, turn it this way to me!” She would turn to me: “Paulina, it’s not easy. This is Ghana for you. You can work in a hot place like that!”
The use of air conditioning in what may appear as excessive and wasteful ways (e.g. leaving the door open to the heat, but never reducing or turning off the AC) was related to the prestige of cold air. As one of my interlocutors said, “Even if they are cold, Ghanaians always pretend they are not cold. Otherwise, if they turned off the air conditioning they would be called ‘okrasini’! [villagers – an insult in Accra] – like, ‘they have not come to the city and sat in AC before’”. Discussions of electricity and AC were also bound up with racialized references to the climate and the weather. My supervisor Maggie got into such fits of laughter when I told her that I didn’t have AC at home, that she burst out: “Ah! We will give you one of the AC from the office for you to take home!”. This seemed to entertain her for the rest of the day and the ones to come. In all official meetings I had during the rest of my fieldwork, every time, without fail, someone would comment on the AC in my presence.

These uncanny repetitions, and the persistence and inevitability with which they were enounced, led me to reflect on the peculiar tenacity of these invisible, weightless forms of privilege, immaterial aspects of wealth, and modalities of racialization. The AC, I was repeatedly told, was the “legacy of our colonial overlords”. In contrast to fans, that were seen as the signs of modernity and middle-class affluence, ACs were directly associated with immense wealth (and indeed with unaffordability, and the prohibitiveness of consumption) and with the colonial legacy. This was a puzzling fact, as colonial housing did not have AC – AC making its way into Ghana around the 1980s. Here I explore further this apparently anachronistic association of AC with the colonial overlords as part of “recursive histories” (Stoler 2016:23,26) that, like atmospheres, create their own “resonances” beyond visible and material sources (Lepselter 2016) – their own networks

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1 As is often observed disapprovingly by foreign observers in international energy reports. USAID’s 1999 report on energy in Ghana, for instance, stated that their team was “astounded by the extravagant use of residential electricity”, describing that “when they have electricity, they don’t use it sparingly while doing without power during blackouts” (16) and that “in spite of the electricity shortages, outdoor lights were observed turned on during sunny daylight hours” (22). The report recommended a reduction of AC usage so as to “slow the penetration of appliances such as AC, refrigerators, and electric stoves” (17) – all highly problematic injunctions if one gives even a cursory look at the history of commodification along the West African coast, and the colonial history of consumption and creation of consuming subjects in Ghana in particular (Murillo 2010).

2 Okrasini, as Suzanne Gott points out (2007:84), does not so much refer to a socio-economic distinction but to a group identified by (a lack of) “fashionable dress” and awareness of the latest styles.

of meaning, correspondences, causalities, evidences and effects. In what follows, I trace such resonances through particular moments and stories: I start with contemporary associations of air-conditioning with a form of labour that does not produce sweat in Ghana; I then revisit 19th century descriptions of the West African Coast as an Africanist atmosphere in which air acted as a deforming medium to the bodies and landscapes of the Coast; I look further at this deformative capacity in miasmic theories, and conclude with a short account of a West African epic of the God Mosquito as the first anti-colonial, “atmoterrorist” fighter (Sloterdijk 2009).

**Political history of AC: “Those sitting in AC”**

Science and technology studies of air conditioning chart its emergence to places of mechanical labour and industrial work, in printing, textile and tobacco factories; AC was only later gradually introduced to department stores, banks, movie theatres and eventually private homes (Cooper 1998; Nye 2010). AC was developed as a way of regulating the heat produced by new electronic technologies’ “heat sensitive” requirements in offices and factories, demonstrating that “technology generated a crisis of its own making” (Shove, Walker and Brown 2014:118). This thermodynamics of an increasingly electrical modernity set new material conditions and cultural conventions of urban and domestic atmospheres, defining new normative standards of “comfort” such as the “22 degrees room temperature” (Ackermann 2002; Shove 2003). As David Nye has argued (2010:110), the normalisation of AC as a necessity to modern living in 1970s North America was also a political project actively supported by the federal government that created a self-reinforcing feedback loop of energy consumption and dependency, redrawing climatic patterns and differentiated housing conditions in the city.

In this chapter, I argue that in Ghana air conditioning is linked to the colonial and post-colonial state. Accordingly, the history I want to trace here is not simply one in which fans or air-conditioning units appear as the “markers of modernity” (Ackermann 2002) or purveyors of “comfort” (Shove 2003) that one aspires to. Instead, I am more

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4 For a nuanced account of “comfort”, see Choy 2011 on “shufuhk” in Hong Kong as an aesthetic notion of comfort, defined as a “saturating pleasure”, “like a cool breeze on a hot sticky day”, “clean sheets on a bed, or the way a cup of tea might warm you from the inside when you’re cold” (154).
concerned with the political history of these atmospheres of power, as ways of feeling like a state (to paraphrase James Scott) and as material imaginations or “moods” of power (Meyer 2004:95). Concentrating solely on the “object” of power, the AC box, misses the point and indeed masks the experience of power, the modality of inhabiting spaces of authority and “inhaling the political” (Nieuwenhuis 2016:501) that cannot adequately be gleaned from the visible trajectories and defined contours that a history based on this object would produce. Instead, considering the “atmosphere” of colonial and state authority entails looking at some of the immaterial infrastructures of power (de Boeck and Plissart 2004:226-250) – of which the object is only one particular material moment in a network of invisible, unscripted, unchartered effects.

“Those sitting in AC” is a popular denomination for wealth and privilege in Accra, most often used to denote government workers or the political elite: those who are seen to ‘bleed’ their countrymen dry and ‘haemorrhage’ the economy, as common tropes of corruption have it. As Jennifer Hasty has argued (2005a:275-8), corruption in Ghana is described in popular idioms of corporeal flows, and particularly blood. The popular saying “sika ye mogya” – money is blood – alludes to this economy of vital matter and flows. But a friend once put forth an alternative explanation to this popular saying: money, he said, was associated with blood and the body because money derives from the flowing of sweat from the heat of hard work. Blood flows when sweat drops, an ‘honest labour’ devoid of suspicious undertones; by contrast, this recasts the common myth about white people being considered too weak and soft for hard labour as an implicit denunciation of their lack of discipline and dubious morality – because they just “sit in AC” and never do any physical work. The popular discourse about AC, referring to government officials and bureaucrats, could therefore be seen as a subtle commentary

5 Popular, widespread beliefs hold that whites are incapable of manual work (Jahoda 1961:81), that their skin is “nmre” (soft), inform a racial conceptualization of labour, engrained in decades of colonial rule and centuries of interactions with Europeans who rarely engaged in any form of physical labour – although this perception, Prof. Amarteifio told me, changed slightly during the Second World War with the arrival of American soldiers to Accra’s transit base: “For the first time, we saw white people taking off their shirt, take a shovel in their hand and dig trenches”. These stereotypes persist up to today: when I was walking around town I could sometimes hear ‘obroni nante’ (the white is walking) exclaimed incredulously by street observers. Similarly, Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham describe in their book Parallel Worlds (1994) the belief in northern Ivory Coast that white people can’t ride bicycles (117). See also Ira Bashkow (2006) on whiteness in Orokaiva, Papua New Guinea, where impressions about white people’s inability to work the fields led to a conception of their material wealth as produced from unlawful accumulation and dubious sources.
on the inequalities of power in Ghana today and the particular atmospheric remains of power. Here, capitalism is seen as a sudorific cannibalism, capitalising on another man’s sweat, in a way that is not simply indicative of the new “millennial capitalism” that produces wealth without labour (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), but is also a racial commentary on past colonial exploitatations. In popular Ghanaian video films, Birgit Meyer perceptively notes, the modern office figures as “an icon of pride” rather than a site of labour and struggle: the sleek office involves “no hard work, no sweat” (Meyer 2002:76). AC and its undemocratic, concentrated flow of air (by contrast with the ceiling fan, which distributes air more evenly) is associated with the elevated seats of power, those sitting high in the sleek Land Rovers and the cold offices of steel and glass in Accra’s Financial District. It literally produces bodies of power and authority: “AC is The Bosses”, as the retired banker and owner of the house where I stayed put it.6 In Kwei Quartey’s detective fiction Wife of the Gods, Inspector Darko Dawson of the Ghana Police Service dreams of his future promotion to chief superintendent that would finally get him “a big office with the AC blasting” (2010:25).

Historically, technologies of air conditioning such as fans had long been part of the “coolness” (Thompson 1973) of divine and political power in the regalia of the Akan royal court, seen in the dazzling state Umbrellas at official functions (figures 48-49). Fans and umbrellas during the precolonial and colonial period were routinely exchanged as diplomatic gifts.7 They were part of the cultivation of “an aesthetic of the cool” (Thompson 1973) in West Africa, a way of exuding control, composure, stability and nonchalance, affecting an air of detachment, dignity, serenity and balance. Today, slang parlance in Accra comprises an elaborate lexicon of air and its circulation: to “blow” can mean to excel (e.g. at an exam) or to act superior. Being “hot” indicates being under pressure or difficulty; and being “fresh” describes an aesthetics of newness and sharpness in one’s sartorial style.

6 “Sitting in AC” also evokes particular connotations of “sitting” or the “seat” with the accession of power, such as the Ashanti Golden Stool (Patton 1979).
7 Twi proverbs attest to this political and religious importance of air and its conditioning technologies: “If you wish to tell anything to the Supreme Being (God), tell it to the winds” (wopɛ asem akyere Onyankopon a, ka kyere mframe). Another goes: “He who has an umbrella over his head is the king” – (nea kyinie si ne so ne ohene) (Patton 1984).
Infrastructural histories are often told through their manifest, monumental and hyper-visible signs such as dams, built walls, roads, tracks, or through the elite history of
diplomatic meetings, contracts and agreements (such as the overhauling of electrical history in Ghana by the Akosombo Dam and the Eisenhower/Kennedy-Nkrumah negotiations). Yet, as Mariane Ferme and Cheryl Schmitz argue in their study of Chinese involvement in African infrastructure (2014), this magnifying angle sometimes elides the sedimented and complicated infrastructural relations and their “palimpsestic reinscriptions” (375) in mundane objects and medical practices, such as the ubiquitous tins of Tiger Balm and bags of Chinese rice that were reinterpreted throughout Sierra Leone as features of American interventions (382-89). Their attention to the capacity of “traces” to “reveal as much as they conceal” calls for “an imagination attentive to the absences and intimacies of those relationships” (395). The “connectivities of imperial legacy” (Stoler 2016:4) in the atmospherics of power I attempt to evoke here are not as palpable and evident as a focus on the global, historical trajectory of the air conditioning box, for instance, would have allowed. Rather than tracing an object-centred history of colonial modernity through the “imperial remains” of power, I am more interested in reanimating some of the “toxins” (5) and “colonial effects” (353) of this particular ecology of power (367) that do not follow logical suit from their contexts of distribution or production, and always exceed their technological form. In what follows, I look at the Africanist atmosphere as an early form of “toxic colonialism” (Pratt 2011), and explore the tenacity, viscosity, and lightness of its enduring “duress” (Stoler 2016) that is, its durability and tenacity, expressed not as “haunting traces” but as “deep pressure points” (5-6).

Racial Atmospherics

Landscape and climatological imagery dominated the Victorian Africanist imagination in the nineteenth century. Minutely detailed scientific and literary descriptions of the climate, topology and meteorological features of the landscape figure as a constant feature in nineteenth century literature and travel diaries on the West African Coast (Curtin 1961). Travel narratives and medical treatises alike abound with elaborate descriptions of the weather, its visual and scientific properties, ranging from extraordinary spectacles of majestic and untamed Nature to the ‘necrography’ of the deadly coast and its fever-ridden shores. In what follows, I look at nineteenth century descriptions of the African landscape in defining an Africanist ‘atmosphere’ – a kind of Africanist “Orientalism” (Miller 1985; Said 1978) or “tropicalist” imaginary geography
(Arnold 1996a; Gregory 1994) – in which climate, darkness and light sketched the early contours of a pre-electrical infrastructure of power and racial privilege in Ghana. I refer to an ‘Africanist atmosphere’ to invoke this double-sense of the setting of a mood – the creation of a particular West African “aura” – and the pseudo-scientific appraisal of the African climate. I explore how this atmosphere circumscribed an ecology of race. Much has been said about Western characterizations of Africa as the ‘Dark continent’, the ‘Heart of Darkness’, or the place ‘Off the map’ (Brantlinger 1988; Miller 1985); much less attention has been paid to the way that dichromatic images of light and darkness, as metaphorical allegories of race, were mediated by understandings of coolness and air, as materially-ambiguous precursors to the more rigidly enforced visual and somatic racism of the 20th century.

While many have described the importance and changing descriptions of the atmosphere in Victorian fiction (Ford 2013; Howell 2014) and its association with femininity (Castle 1995; Pizzo 2014) or an aesthetics of toxic modernity in the Impressionist paintings of J.M.W. Turner and novels of Joseph Conrad (Connor 2010; Faris 1989; Taylor 2016), not much has been said about the imperial, and racist expressions of these atmospherics. On the other hand, urban scholarship that attends to the “new metabolisms” (Gandy 2010) and “vital materialisms” (Bennett 2009) of the city has studied the political ecology of air (Graham 2015) and its new forms of “aeropolitics” (Feigenbaum and Kanngieser 2015; Virilio 2009), paying attention to the increased manufacturing of atmospheric forms of racism and discrimination (Adey 2013; Bullard 2001; Harper 2004), toxicities (Choy 2011; Pratt 2011), and technologies of warfare or “atmoterrorism” (Adey 2010; Nieuwenhuis 2016; Sloterdijk 2009; Weber 2013). According to Sloterdijk (2009), the development of new energy models in the 20th century has made air increasingly “conditioned” to make life possible – or destructive – to humans in a way that was not so explicitly developed before. Air differentials become the harmful consequences of accelerated capitalist destruction whose ruins we must all contend with but whose direct toxic effects will be discriminately felt and distributed (Graham 2015). Recognising atmospheric risks and violence also means thinking back (and forward) about infrastructural precarity (Callon 2012). In the age of the Anthropocene, amidst rising concerns about increasingly lethal and stratified atmospheric effects (Graham 2015), “air turns out to be the matter of history, the substance the properties of which, however elusive, will determine the next phase of
human and planetary history” (Menely 2014:96). As the “matter of history”, the cultural and political histories of air become the elusive ligaments from which to imagine a common politics of the future. As early as 1884, John Ruskin was prophesizing that the “modern plague-clouds” of industrial coal pollution in Britain, which he witnessed progressively over decades of observations recorded in his meteorological diaries, were inaugurating “a period which will assuredly be recognised in future meteorological history as one of phenomena hitherto unrecorded in the courses of nature” (Ruskin 1884:2) – in a lecture that has been referred to as the first aesthetic and environmental critique of man-made climate change (Kirchhoff 1984). The clouds of “poisonous smoke”, Ruskin describes in a haunting image of capitalism’s atmospheric and spiritual toxicity, seemed to be made of “dead men’s souls” (Ruskin 1884:4).

Atmospheres are conceptually evasive, ontologically uncertain (Böhme 1993:114; Connor 2010:31-2; Menely 2014:93): their formal instability “eradicates the surfaces and boundaries of the body” (Pizzo 2014:6), making them intramediating zones between “environmental qualities and human states” (Böhme 1993:114). The Africanist atmosphere of the late 19th exhibits the tensions of this “commingling” (Ingold 2007:S29) informed attempts by colonial planners to segregate and rigidly impose racial differentiation that increasingly marked out bodies’ concrete outlines.

As Barnor Hesse argues (2007:653), race’s ambiguity and undecidability lies in the ‘viscosity’ of race to adhere to material forms. The materiality of race, he argues, is always deployed in excess of the corporeal, suggesting that “the body was less the ubiquitous metaphor of race than its privileged metonym” (ibid). Paying attention to this “excess” and plasticity of race allows us to “talk about the materiality and factness of race without embracing a naïve version of ‘the biological’”, and to “denaturalise without dematerialising” its practices (M’Charek 2013:424). As many have argued, sociological analyses of race that seek to discredit and eradicate once and for all the biological fiction of race by denouncing the truism that race is a ‘social construction’ are nonetheless problematically confronted with its enduring materiality and truth-effects. The social constructivist view of race must contend with the very experience of race as a material practice or as a “medium” (Mitchell 2012), which a (well-meaning) relegation to the realm of “construction” and the fictional threatens to obliterate (Mitchell 2012:4). In their account of “racecraft” as the process of reasoning by which beliefs appear as vivid
truths, Karen and Barbara Fields (2014:19) remind us that “fictions” wield their own violence into concrete realities, their monstrous fantasies into formations that matter, that “what depends on imagination and action is more flexible than nature, and has the power to create a quasi-nature more convincing than nature itself” (70). One could add that particular materialities of “nature” as racist practices also had their hold on creating their own fictions and violent fantasies.

Much has been written about the environmental determinism that informed nineteenth century racism, mapping ‘human races’ onto latitudes and thermostatic gradients (Livingstone 1991, 2011; Stepan 2001). As late as 1939, palaeontologist William Diller Matthew was declaring that “the higher races of man are adapted to a cool-temperate climate” which allows them to achieve the “highest physical, mental and social attainments” (Livingstone 2012:565). Climatic determinism, or the idea that certain climates impact on human composition and predispositions mapping onto certain levels of ‘evolution’ or intellectual development, had been present in popular imaginaries at least since Hippocratic teachings on “air, water, places” (Livingstone 2011). Its doctrines typified a certain ecology of race according to which human beings’ humoral compositions, temperaments and moral dispositions could be mapped climatically onto different temperature zones, normalising the ‘temperate’ climate of the Northern hemisphere and its inhabitants as the thermocenter of balanced composure and disposition (Livingstone 1991, 2011). In the deterministic climatic doctrines of the 19th centuries, meteorological and topological features stood in for racial differences, literally dwarfing human characteristics as direct products of topography (Pratt 2008[1992]:118). Tropical landscape and its alien features became a medium of racial differentiation, on which one could map and measure the “temperamental” qualities of men. Thus 19th century ecologies of race took an almost atmospheric approach to race, in studies and theories that encompassed air temperature and composition, the racialising

In particular, they look at the tendency of race to camouflage for racism, substituting a supposedly-innocent “fiction” for a crime against humanity (101). The substitution of race for racism induces a “weird causality” by which racist practices disappear, “in a puff of smoke – paff” and come to “masquerade among the causes”, becoming a property of those discriminated against (race) rather than the perpetration of an immoral, racist act (26-27).

In the Middle Ages, miasma was used as a blanket term for ‘disease’, and plague epidemics were thought to originate and propagate through the noxious vapours of crowded and filthy dwellings. Of particular import here was the idea that pestilence was carried to Central Europe by a “southern wind” originating in the miasmatic tropics (Grisby 2004), which Beagon (2005) traced back to popular explanations of epidemics in Thucydides’ account of the plague of Athens.
actions of the sun, perspiration, and heat, and the role of climate on the emotional disposition of man, and eventually would concentrate on the body as the instrument and visible sign of differentiation.

**Accra, 1899: “Prospects lose their charm”**

“One morning, you get out of your bunk with a start – in a few hours Accra, your port of destination, will come into sight. You make preparations, and become a prey to all sorts of feelings. Before long you will have left the dear old steamer, to live on the Coast for several years! The other passengers tell you Accra is a fine place: they only wish they could be at Accra. Why? Only about three-quarters of the whites die there. You begin to wish you had never come. The prospects, which in England seemed so good, lose their charm now.” – Anonymous (probably trader), 1899.

The voice of this anonymous trader set for Accra in 1899 epitomises construction of the ‘White Man’s Grave’ in the nineteenth century. “Beware, beware, the Bight of Benin, there’s one comes out, for forty goes in!” ran a popular rhyme and sea chanty, infusing dreadful statistics onto the “tropical Gothic” (Gregory 2001:103) repertoire of the West Coast. The climate and landscape of West Africa was in the 19th century sketched as a dark, fever-ridden, ghastly zone of pestilence where Whites came to meet untimely and mysterious deaths (Curtin 1961, 1989). In the ranking of British colonies, Africa fared the lowest, by contrast with the ‘first-class colonies’ of the East (Malaya, Hong Kong, Ceylon) (Frenkel and Western 1988:221). West Africa was the “last resort” (ibid) of all, the purgatory; officials sent there were stereotyped as the proletariat of the colonies, the doomed convicts set for tropical hell on the “Devil’s Poste Restante” (Chamier in Frenkel and Western 1988:219). The tropical grave was a recurrent target of cynical humour among European residents on the coast. The local joke that ran among newcomers to the Coast was that each colony should have two governors at all times: one arriving from England on a ship, the second in the colony burying the one who had just died (Goodrich 1844:208). Officials on the Coast devised a common “Coaster greeting”: “Fearfully bad climate, isn’t it? How many dead in your part?” (ibid:221).

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10 In Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), the colonial inspector Wilson in Sierra Leone describes how “the heat between the walls of rain, the musty smell of his companion, the dim and wayward light of the kerosene lamp reminded him of a vault newly opened for another body to be let down upon its floor” (Greene 2010:161).

11 Mary Kingsley recalls a visit to the Accra cemetery in 1893 under the guidance of a “gloomy Government official, who said he always walked there every afternoon so as to get used to the place before staying permanently in it” (1897:32). Taking her across to two newly-dug graves, he waved his hand “with a take-your-choice, they-are-both-quite-ready style” and said: “We always keep two graves ready-dug for Europeans. We have to bury very quickly here, you
The environment of the West African Coast was mapped as a necrography, part of an imperial imagery of “tropicality”, an environmental complex of alterity in the popular imagination (Arnold 1996a). Travel narratives often opened up with a chapter on climatology or topography, sometimes under the heading of “First Impressions”. Setting the Africanist atmosphere thus appears as a frontispiece to the experience and imagination of Africa at large. Arriving to the Coast is described as a dramatic atmospheric gloom casting its menacing shadow, an instinctive ‘air’ of warning:

“The atmosphere, so clear around the Cape de Verde, had thickened with mist; respiration was impeded by the heavy, hot air; the sea, too, had grown sluggish; the dolphins, those rainbows of the deep, and the high-wheeling tropic bird, the only snow-flake of these regions, had disappeared. Every object around wore a grave and warning aspect. This external gloom produced its effect upon the ship’s company. The evening sports and songs on deck had ceased to follow the toils of the day; the men had lost pleasure in their amusements, and many speculated upon their chance of surviving” (Rankin 1836:2; emphasis mine).

As the ship reaches the shore, the very first impression of Africa is one of ‘suffocation’ to the point of dizziness:

“The first feeling was that of suffocation, succeeded by a sudden faintness, which had nearly caused a fall: a volume of heat rushed upwards from the ground, and some moments elapsed before I could proceed.” (ibid).

The West African coast, as the “white man’s grave”, swayed as a place of paradisiac illusion and pathological fear, where white men became alternatively prone to unchained passions or plunged into a delusional, melancholic dreamspace from the apathy of the heat and the delirium of the “fevers”. The atmospheric ambiguity of the West African coast hovered between the real and the dreamed, the conscious and the unconscious, as a space that always exceeded stabilization and rationalization (Anderson 2009:77-8).

know”. Mary Kingsley, irritated by this fatalistic, dramatic attitude, exclaimed her view of how “exceedingly wrong” it was to “frighten people to death” in such a way, remarking contemptuously that “there are not enough white men in the whole place to keep the institution up”. “Why, the other day we had two white men to bury before twelve o’clock, and at four, another dropped in on a steamer”, exclaimed the official matter-of-factly. “At 4.30”, interjected another – “How you fellows DO exaggerate!”. Mary Kingsley bitterly concluded: “Subsequent knowledge of the Gold Coast has convinced me fully that the extra funeral being placed half-an-hour sooner than it occurred is the usual percentage of exaggeration you will be able to find in stories relating to the local mortality” (1897:32).
The miasmic imagination

“This sunniest of lands, so different from the notorious English climate, this God’s chosen land has been called “The White man’s grave”? the Gold coast is no more the white man’s grave than the November fogs of London are the black man’s coffin” – Danquah 1925, What I would try to see at the Gold Coast if I were a British Princess visiting the colony – West Africa, 3 January 1925.

In this tropicalist necrography of the coast, air, in the form of noxious fumes and vapours emanating from the soil, was believed to act as a dissolving medium, a poisoning agent. The miasmic theories of disease that informed colonial tropicology at the time pathologized the circulation and composition of air as the root cause of malarial (malaria: bad air) fevers and informed an extensive lexicon for assessing and describing its qualities and effects. In medical tropical textbooks such as colonial surgeon James Boyle’s (1831), air is granted prime agency in the etiology of diseases on the coast; claiming to “deal with actual practical facts” rather than “div(ing) into the boundless sea of speculation” (ix), it describes the “immense deposit of vegeto-animal matter” which “undergoes the process of decomposition, and, from being acted upon whilst in that state by the rays of an almost vertical sun, fills the air with noxious effluvia” (6). This effluvia, “combined with the remaining moisture and the high range of temperature, form the great cause of fever and of ague, which prevail during its existence to so lamentable an extent as to make this settlement appear a focus for those diseases, and the grave of Europeans” (6).

Miasmic theories proved strikingly resilient in accounting for disease and contagion up until the first decade of the twentieth century, coexisting with the development of germ theory in the 1850s following John Snow’s identification of cholera as a water-borne disease and the rapid advances in the field in the 1860s and 1870s (led by Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, and in tropical medicine Patrick Manson and Robert Ross) (Howell 2014:6). In the popular imagination, air was a far more persuasive explanation for the ‘mysterious and relentless fevers’ that characterized the deathly imagery of the West African coast. In the “miasmic imagination” of the Victorian period (Harris 2003), the

12 Kingsley recounts the common and “true no doubt” perception that “malaria is in the air, in the exhalations from the ground, which are greatest about sunrise and sunset, and in the drinking water”. But “owing to the great variety and rapid growth of bacteria encouraged by the tropical temperature, and the aqueous saturation of the atmosphere from the heavy rainfall, and the great extent of swamp, etc., it is practically impossible to destroy them in the air to a satisfactory extent” (1897, Appendix II:684).
qualities of ‘miasmatic air’ evoke decomposition, putrefaction, the disaggregation of form, the deformance of bodies, shores, and sanity. Here, I am less concerned with recreating the debates about the birth of biomedicine, the rise of pseudo-scientific racism, and the legacies of colonial hygiene (Arnold 1996b; Curtin 1985), than I am with the aesthetics of decomposition and the material ecology of putrescence that the miasmic imagination imprinted on those authors with such vividness (Arnold 1997). Air constituted a colonial “toxin” that challenged and greatly disturbed assumptions about the possibilities and impossibilities of different “lives” – and bodies – on the Coast.

Many of the travel narratives and medical textbooks of the 19th century for prospectors to the Coast had elaborate descriptions of the effects of the climate upon the white man’s body composition. Most men who went on the coast, if they did not die from fever, came back unrecognizable to Britain. The dream-space of Africa was the induced delirium of fever, which reduces one to shadows of oneself: “First cold and pain, then heat and pain, then every kind of pain, and every degree of heat, then delirium, then the life-and-death struggle. He rises, if he does rise, a shadow”, as a Scottish evangelist and writer described his experience on the Coast (Drummond 1882:43). This defiguration, decomposition of the body and one’s appearance bears peculiar resonance with the effects of miasmic air as the “impairment of a thing’s form or integrity” (Mitchell 2001:536). Miasma acted as mysterious and invisible solvents of the self in “that baleful, and most deleterious of all regions, that most pestilential bowers from which so few white men return that are induced to visit it”, and from which, “if they return, they only reappear as phantoms of their former selves” (Mitcham 2010:103).

The primacy of meteorological and topological features also stood in for racial differences, literally ‘dwarfing’ human characteristics as direct products of topography, as Mary Louise Pratt has argued in her analysis of von Humboldt’s tropical images (2008:118). In his critique of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Chinua Achebe (1983[1977]) has noted that Conrad’s Africa renders the Coast conspicuously non-human and dehumanized (13); Africa is reduced to a mere “setting and backdrop”, where natives appear only as “crouched shadows”:

“leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. … They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of
The Conradian dehumanisation of Africans here dematerializes darkness itself into an aerial, moribund spectre. A minute before this excerpt, Marlow was able to describe with accuracy the “imported drainage-pipes” (24) lying in the pit for the construction of railways – a dissonant contrast between the accuracy of this infrastructural image and the spectral representation of African bodies.

The control and circulation of air took central place at the turn of the 20th century, as advances in tropical medicine, notably through the discovery of the mosquito as a vector of disease by Ronald Ross (at the Liverpool School of tropical Medicine) in the late 1890s and the development of germ theory pioneered by Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur in the 1870s, influenced the spatial planning of the colonial capitals like Accra (Curtin 1985:594). Malaria transmission was taken up and reinterpreted into “sanitary measures” of racial segregation and the creation of “apartheid atmospheres” (Graham 2015:207) by the Colonial Office. The Colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain implemented measures of residential segregation for colonial officers in the Gold Coast, following his commissioning of two malaria expeditions in 1899 and 1900, headed by Ronald Ross and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (Frenkel & Western 1988). The 1899 report first stipulated elevation as a solution to contain contamination – a solution that had already been adopted in numerous colonies, such as the “hill stations” of British India and Sierra Leone. One of the few scholars to have studied the relation between race and infrastructure, Tim Choy (2011) describes that particular atmospheric qualities drew a “colonial poetics of difference” in Hong Kong; in 1904, a petition to relocate Europeans to a “Hill District” was (spuriously) justified by the belief that Chinese people were more immune to the effects of the heat than Europeans were (161-2). The 1900 report in the Gold Coast made very similar claims, but went a step further: it forcibly prescribed racial segregation in all the colonies, invoking the erroneous ideas of ‘native immunisation’ and a misinterpretation of Koch’s ‘native reservoir’ theory for scientific justification (Dumett 1968:154). The report commented negatively on the “practice in Tropical Africa to allow and even encourage native huts to be built close to European house”, arguing that “these huts always contain numerous children with parasites and Anopheles with sporozoites ready for injection”. Segregation was
complemented by “sanitary measures” of intervention, including the patrolling of “mosquito squads” (Curtin 1985), “brigades” and abatement campaigns (Dumett 1968) that searched native houses and destroyed “breeding grounds”. Two British doctors in particular, S.R. Christophers and J.W.W. Stephens from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine serving on Chamberlain’s 1900 malaria committee, were adamant that racial segregation from the “infected natives” was the only effective solution to improve the mortality situation on the coast:

“So closely associated indeed are malaria and the native in Africa, and so wonderfully constant is the presence of Anopheles where natives are collected in numbers, that we doubt whether any operations, now possible, directed against Anopheles will do much to diminish the danger of malarial infection. In fact, in Africa the primary aim should be to remove susceptible Europeans from the midst of malaria. To stamp out native malaria is at present chimerical, and every effort should rather be turned to the protection of Europeans” (Christophers and Stephens 1900:19).

Stephens and Christophers, in explaining the alleged concentration of mosquitoes in African dwellings, also suggested that mosquitoes were “race-specific in their taste”, preferring African blood to Europeans’ (Curtin 1985:599)! They emphasised the “prime necessity for isolation” of European dwellings over their elevation, arguing that “strict attention must be paid to the proximity of native dwellings” as this constitutes the “only efficient way of dealing with the extremely dangerous conditions of existence there”. As they put it explicitly: “It is not the elevated site in itself which will protect the Europeans there (…) it is the removal from the neighbourhood of the infected native”. They praised Victoriaborg as a model to emulate, describing appreciatively the European bungalows’ distance from native quarters:

“This condition of isolation constitutes an admirable feature, and the risk of primary infection here must necessarily be small. In the location of sites it is of the utmost importance that they should not approach the native quarters, and although bungalow 15 occupied by us was less than half a mile from the nearest large village north-west of Jamestown, yet throughout the dry season we did not detect a single Anopheles” (1900:18).

Aerographies of contagion previously identified by their “miasmic vapours” shifted to a clearer racialized demarcation of bodies as sites of contagion, advocating rigid racial segregation. The suburb of Victoriaborg was built at the turn of the twentieth century as a “piece of England grafted onto the townscape of Accra” (Brand 1972:41-42); it was demarcated from African residential areas by a large sandy area, and it hosted European
civil servants and their families in bungalows, surrounded by lawns and gardens, a race course, a golf course, polo and cricket fields, tennis courts, private clubs, and a racially-segregated hospital (Brand 1972:42; Gocking 2005:53-4).

Figure 49. Detailed map of malaria reconnaissance of Accra and environs, identifying breeding grounds of Anopheles (Christophers & Stephens, 1900).

Sir William MacGregor, Governor of Lagos from 1899 to 1904, in a letter opposing Chamberlain’s segregationist policies, argued that “segregation from the social point of view would be disastrous here. There is at present in this colony no racial question. It would be unwise to start one” (quoted in Frenkel and Western 1988:217).13

13 This also recalls Lugard’s use of “social standards” to cover racist practices of segregation: “what is aimed at is a segregation of social standards, and not a segregation of races” (Lugard 1922, quoted in Pierre 2013:29).
Notwithstanding the naïve assumption that there was no “racial question” as yet in a colony so deeply enmeshed in white supremacy, MacGregor’s comment reveals the changing colonial racist episteme as an increasingly corporeal and visual practice in West Africa at the turn of the century, as racist practices of discrimination increasingly marked out and typified bodies as the sites of differentiation and devised planned strategies for their exclusion and demarcation. Indeed, the segregation policy implemented by Chamberlain departed starkly from earlier housing patterns, as European merchants on the coast had long lived among Africans. As a result, the new segregated pattern of urban Accra was not only a form of racial distinction but emerged as a distinctive criterion and political policy of the colonial state, associated in particular with the colonial government and its architecture; it came to be associated, not only with whiteness, but with the racialised hierarchy of colonial bureaucracy and government offices, which left a lasting impact on the popular imagination of civil servants and ways of speaking about the state in contemporary Ghana.

**King Malaria & God Mosquito**

A few days before leaving the field, right before the elections, I was sitting across the main road of the neighbourhood, chatting with Akeem, a neighbour and bus driver. “Do you know the story of Kwame Nkrumah, when he had a meeting with those American people?” Akeem asked. He explained: “He wanted to open the window, so he said ‘let nframa (wind) blow in’. The people did not understand – he didn’t want to say “wind”, you see; he used the Twi, indigenous nframa.” He paused. “So I was thinking, maybe this thing you are doing”, he continued, “this research, you know, maybe you can do something like, a mixing: maybe you can also mix up – use the English and then the Twi. Let nframa blow in.” What kinds of emic interventions emerge from letting nframa, rather than the wind, blow in and draw their own political histories?

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The ‘miasma’ of the West African Coast constituted a “political predicament” for the British imperial project in West Africa (Livingstone 1999). In 1888, the meteorologist Ralph Abercromby wrote in his travel report *Seas and skies in many latitudes* that “the
best protector of the African savage from European aggressors is the deadly climate of that dark continent” (1888:366). He asserted that the “failure to open up such countries as Africa” was “certainly” due to “the climatic demoralisation of the agents employed” (ibid). A correspondent reporting on the 1900 Malaria Expedition to West Africa declared that the African “possessions” of the British Empire were “battlegrounds between Englishmen and King Malaria” – “conquests maintained only at the sacrifice of hecatombs of our countrymen” (The Malaria Expedition, 1900:36). King Malaria offered the strongest resistance to colonial rule and settler colonialism in the Colony; as Timothy Mitchell has argued, if the mosquito could speak, it would write an alternative history of colonial conquests, fought in the hybrid agencies and assemblages of human and non-human forces that always exceed the clear dictates of scientific expertise and national politics (2002:19-53). In the same vein, I want to write here a short alternative epic – partly rumoured, legend, and fact, following Ann Stoler in a mode of writing “historical roads not taken” and legitimising “unachieved visions and interrupted imaginaries” (2016:23) – of the colonial encounter on the Coast through the heroic figure of the Almighty Mosquito as the first anti-imperialist fighter in a multispecies assemblage against colonialism.

On a visit to Ghana at the dawn of Independence, Dorothy Height, the American civil rights and women’s rights activist, recounts seeing in the Ashanti region a “fascinating flag” that had “a field of red with nothing on it but a mosquito”. The flag, she was told, “means that but for the mosquito, the white man would have it all” (2003:228-229). Kwame Nkrumah suggested a tribute to the Mosquito for its participation in the decolonization efforts (Knight 2013:110), proposing that every African country should at independence erect a monument to “the Almighty Mosquito, for saving our lands from the settlement of colonial usurpers” (Ray 2015:752). Similarly, early flag designs of the 1950s political party Action Group in Ibadan, Southwestern Nigeria, proposed the mosquito as the emblem of independence (Brady 1956), in “gratitude for the part the Anopheles mosquito played as the carrier of malaria which prevented a likely white settlement” (Ezera 1960:11).

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14 Even before modern technologies for mosquito eradication were invented, David Arnold argues, the cure for malaria was seen as the direct conquest of the tropics (2000:15).
The historical exploits of the mosquito seem to have generated a new community of activism on the continent. One member of the GhanaThink Foundation blog – a youth-led community seeking to organize and mobilize Ghanaian youth through entrepreneurship and networking in Accra and the diaspora – wrote a humorous “Letta to Osagyefo”\(^\text{15}\) in 2008, entitled “Tribute to the Mosquito”. Commenting on that year’s independence day and celebrations, the writer recounts buying a shirt with a quote of Nkrumah, but questions his accomplishments and proposes an inter-species reconsideration of the decolonization movement:

“Did you really win independence for us? Was it not the mosquito? We all know the white man is terribly afraid of the female *Anopheles* mosquito that carries the dreaded malaria disease. Our cousins from the West could not handle the threat of this insect and were not prepared to fight it. So they kindly left us in 1957 and started following suit all over Africa. Some people believe that they stayed behind in Southern Africa because the mosquito’s presence there was not so dominant. So Osagyefo, join me in saying a tribute to the mosquito for the positive things it has done.”

Mawuna Koutonin, who describes himself as a “social activist for Africa Renaissance”, writes on his website Silicon Africa about an alleged African secret society that calls itself the “Mosquito Fraternity”, whose members “worship Mosquito as a God protector of Africa”. Koutonin recounts his encounter with the Fraternity at a malaria fundraising event in Paris, and shares some of their rituals and beliefs – including the frightening effects of their “god Mosquito” upon foreigners, the “wave of wet and cold fear” trickling down their mind and body upon hearing its name; their belief in Mosquito eradication as a foreign conspiracy intended to allow whites to resume their imperialist project in Africa; the celebration of Mosquito during September and October rainy season ceremonies, performing “Mosquito wave music” and, for maximum dramatic effect, offering their “flesh and blood to God Mosquito” as an act of prayer. The Mosquito traces an alternative historiography of colonialism, one which perhaps appears as an ironic riposte to the colonial dehumanization of the landscape in Africanist writing. And so it was that the poisonous air of the West African coast, with its attendant army of mosquito warriors, left in its stings the wounds that would harbour the “rot that remains” (Stoler 2016) in elusive, alternative histories of the colonial encounter.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Osagyefo is the honorific name for Kwame Nkrumah, meaning ‘redeemer’.  
\(^{16}\) The former General Secretary of the NDC party (then the ruling party), Johnson Asiedu Nketia, is popularly known in Ghana as “General Mosquito”, a nickname “bestowed on him by members of the opposition NPP (in attempts to ridicule him) after he single-handedly prevented...
things remain because their monumentality has been geared to defy and retain the passage of time; others, like the association of AC with colonial rule, endure precisely because their lightness and invisibility adhere to myriad spaces and forms of rule. Infrastructures’ temporalities do not adequately map the political histories that they are often thought or made to follow and serve; they slow down and accelerate their social processes; their material forms remain as hindrances, enduring structures, and gaps that complicate, restrict and influence the possibilities of the contemporary.

ex-president Kufuor from appointing a particular minister with a terrible track-record into his cabinet”: https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/I-was-named-after-a-rebel-leader-Asiedu-Nketa-281306 (accessed 13/06/2018). The name refers to Samuel Sam Bockarie, the Sierra Leonian warlord, known as “Mosquito” for “his ability to attack when his enemies were off-guard”.
“Boom light”

In 2001, British artist Martin Creed received the Turner Prize for his Work No. 227: *The lights going on and off*, an installation that consists of an empty room whose lights switch on and off every five seconds. The prize was notoriously controversial, drawing outcry from the public, including from an artist who reportedly threw eggs at its walls (Clark 2013). The work’s “sober minimalism” (Buck in Clark 2013) expresses a retrospective sublimity in the workings of contemporary infrastructure, confronting the invisible nature of electrical networks on which we have become so reliant and which, when confronted with their sudden breakdown, seem to take on a renewed magical aura. Are Ghanaians plunged in deep Dumsor, Martin Creed seems to suggest, in fact the privileged audience of a work of art worthy of sitting at the Tate, denied artistic appreciation all these years?

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17 The work was later acquired by Tate, who did not reveal its price; but earlier estimates put the starting price at auction at £70,000, and it has recently been valued at £110,000 (Clark 2013).
Figure 50. Martin Creed’s Ghanaian version: Makaveli’s cartoon of the psychological trauma of Dumsor. Credit: Makaveli.

Figure 51. Auntie Josephine’s electrical shops, advertising bulbs.
But the controversy around *Work No 227* points to more serious considerations: it makes visible the privileges invested in the workings of infrastructure, the differentials of power that their breakdown brings out, and the dramatic value (both economic and aesthetic) of humour and satire around its banal, yet always crisis-prone ordinariness. The outcry of Creed’s “Dumsor” artwork might well resonate, cynically, with the imagination of power invested in the experience of lights going on and off in Accra, and the suspicion of the state responsible for the outages, which is believed to yield, like Creed’s work, undeserved, immense, and unaccountable riches at the expense of those under its influence, who must watch powerless the work of power unfolding in the rhythms of an unstable switch. If Creed’s work attempted to express the postmodernist aesthetics of the infrastructural sublime, the rigged visual landscape created by Dumsor came to be increasingly seen as the signs and sites of political interference.

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When Dumsor isn’t striking the grid, the streetscape of Accra is dotted with large white electric lightbulbs; at night, their raw light takes on a blinding, blaring force. Expensive shops sparkle with rows of these huge lightbulbs hung closely together; their large glass windows are closed off to the street to preserve the cool air conditioning or the multiple fans blowing on the stiff mannequins dressed in suits, shirts and ties. I often walked past them with my friend Freddy Beach. Upon passing the lights, Freddy would say: “Ghanaians have money, Paulina I’m telling you! They have money. But they don’t show it. They like to hide it.” The blinding lights were a screaming contrast to the modesty required of wealth, the balance of prestige and secrecy, pretending, showing off and concealing, involved in the manipulation of appearances (described in the next chapter). The bright lights, Freddy said, showed that these shops were “boutique”, primers of fashion. They enounced a particular economy of power, sustaining modes of display and revelations of wealth.
In his book *In Praise of Shadows* (2001[1977]), from which this chapter’s title takes its inspiration, Jun’ichiro Tanizaki describes the Japanese valuation of shadows, and aversion for excessive, “tasteless” illumination, shine and glitter, and portrays the aesthetic transformations that occurred with the introduction of modern infrastructure. Electric lighting, he argues, has waged a quiet revolution in the domestic aesthetics of a visual world built upon candlelight and the soft flames of oil lamps; lacquerware, whose beauty depended on darkness and the play of shadows upon its reflective surface, has now turned into a vulgar and tacky utensil under the crude light of the electric bulb (which explains, he argues, the predominant use of ceramics in Japanese cooking) (21-24). Japanese aesthetics of shadows and darkness expresses a reverence for a kind of elegance found in the patina of use, in the “pensive luster” rather than the “shallow brilliance”, in shadowed lighting and the “glow of grime” that can only come from the repetition of touch (20).

The aesthetics of lighting in Ghana couldn’t be more different. In Ghana, brightness is sought after as a technology of attraction; brightness “brings happiness to the home”, and is immensely valued, as “it is good for attractions” and the production of various types of appearances. My friend Amet called this preference for raw, bright light the “boom” light; “Ghanaians”, he explains, like “the light that is ‘BOOM’, as they want to see even the tiniest dust on the floor!”.¹⁸ Foreigners, by contrast, like “dim lights” – a fact that was seen as puzzling. Echoing Amet, Kwame added: “We don’t understand lampshades! Ghanaians, we like bright light. If you have light, why would you ever want to cover it? Does it make any sense to you?” He paused, his smile quizzical, and explained (Martin Creed, take heed!): “If you cover it then you are diminishing the brightness, so you will have to add some to it!” He laughed as he recalled that his mom once bought a lampshade, but as she realised that she couldn’t read with it, she “had to add another light to it!”. If Westerners, as Jun’ichiro Tanizaki argues, “[betray] a failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows” (2001:29), they may also fail to appropriately appreciate the mystery of brightness in Ghanaian aesthetics. This chapter is an attempt to go some step into delving in these powers of brightness and their political effects during the energy crisis.

¹⁸ The preference for the “Boom light” is reminiscent of the “boom speech” associated with former military ruler and President J.J. Rawlings, referring to their incendiary tone and punching performance, their promise of no-nonsense (Oduro-Frimpong 2013:150, n12): a nostalgic feel for an action-focused power many mourn in the age of political duplicity and incompetence.
Lights, as Bille and Sorensen have argued (2007), have agency: they play an active social role in fostering intimacies, shaping moral spaces, creating lightscapes of modernity and comfort, and geographies of surveillance and inequality (Edensor 2017). Lights, they argue, are also sensorial, experienced beyond their visual primacy, demanding an ethnographic attention attuned to intersensoriality (Pink 2010): they create affective atmospheres and different thermic environments (for instance, the preference for the blue light described at the end of this chapter is not simply an aesthetic consideration, but a thermic one as well: on the Kelvin scale of thermodynamic temperature, blue provides the ‘coolest’ form of electric illumination). Bille has argued (2017) that light in Bedouin homes of southern Jordan is central to creating atmospheres of hospitality by drawing the “ecstasy” of things (cf. Böhme 1993:120-22) – allowing things to transcend their tangible borders and affect presences, creating particular moods and cultural expectations. Yet recognizing the ‘agency’ of light threatens to isolate the object from the wider infrastructure of which it is only a small, temporary part – if only more visible and accessible. Recent studies of light and illumination (e.g. Bille and Sorensen 2007; Edensor 2017; Kumar 2015), while recognising the cultural and political effects of light, still fail to connect those to the infrastructural economy within which they are made to work (but see Nye 1990, Schivelbusch 1995 and, to a certain extent, Thompson 2015). Lights are not simply visual effects or material objects unfolding in the phenomenological lightscape: they are nodes in an infrastructural system of circulation and generation, which is deeply tied to historical forms of relating to the political economy, influencing ways of seeing, imagining and relating to power.

David Sneath (2009), for instance, traces the genealogy of a “cult of light” in Mongolia, dating back to Zoroastrian influence and culminating in Lenin’s association of mass electrification with Communism; this, he argues, has created a particular interpretive grid in public consciousness similar to scapulimancy, as electric light constitutes a “metonymic field” (79) for everyday readings and interpretations of information. He describes a wonderful anecdote from a theatre play by Mongolian playwright Lamjavyn Vangin, in which a herder named Serenen, upon the sight of bright lightbulbs in Moscow in the 1920s, spends a fortune to buy 100 of them to bring back for his house, only to find out to his utter disappointment that they do not light up by themselves in the absence
of an electric circuit. The tale, Sneath argues, brings out the socialist, collectivist transformation of societal relations and networks that electricity was promoted to achieve. But it also satirises the discrepancy between political visions of infrastructural collectivities and the individual lives left out in the gaps of technopolitical utopias.

In a similar vein, the desire for bright lights in Accra cannot be satisfactorily explained away as a “cultural practice” or “aesthetic preference” (Kumar 2015; Bille and Sorensen 2007), but must be theorised as a difficult, uncertain, and expensive achievement conditioned by a particular political economy and political history involving complex decision-making and attitudes to infrastructure. Bright lights are expensive: the ability to power them is tied to the complicated economy of the meter readers, which as described in chapter 4 is inscribed in the state’s changing regimes of governance and revenue collection, and creates ties of social obligations and precarious dependencies. Infrastructures that regularly break down manifest more acutely the temporal economy in which they work: Ghanaians during Dumsor were intensely aware that “lights” could not be seen as stable visual realities that “are”, and are only thought of (if at all) at the monthly moment of payment; lights had become difficult and costly achievements that must be continually paid (and prayed) for in order to “happen”. Lights, like any infrastructure, do not simply “exist” or act, they must also “occur” (Graham and McFarlane 2015:12), and this temporal work of sustaining connections orients a particular economy of value and political address.

The temporality of lights and uncertainty of their effects draws attention to their unreliability. In this age of Dumsor, one can no longer take for granted the connections promised by the national grid; the inability to sustain bright lights become a source of anxiety and speculation, manifesting the uncertainty of political power itself, of its vacillating and shady nature. If lights have ‘agency’ (Bille and Sorensen 2007), they are also the primary signs of failure, of crisis, the sites at which infrastructural narratives about political power and its shortcomings emerge. As Chris Otter has argued (2008) in his political history of light and vision in Victorian Britain, electrical light has an infrastructural, technological history beyond the conventional paradigms of “discipline and spectacle” that it made possible. The history of light in Europe, he argues, has been

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19 Serenen gets the delayed acclaim he was hoping for 30 years later, as electrification has finally arrived in the village in the form of an electric generator, and Serenen provides, to the bemusement of all, boxes containing 100 vintage lightbulbs.
reduced to a Foucauldian disciplinary apparatus of transparency and illumination as subjection, developed in response to societal fears of darkness; or, it has been celebrated as part of the spectacular display of modernity and capital, entrapping people into the dazzling, anaesthetizing experience of modern cities. Instead, Otter wants to draw attention to the technological failure, fragility and deficiencies of electrical infrastructures that often failed to realise these dreams and desires for illumination (which, he also notes, also bred much contestation, fears of intrusion of privacy, aesthetic dislike for these gaudy, tacky new lights), routinely breaking down, leaking, lacking public funds and adequate repairing (2008:8). In her ethnography of electrification in a Zanzibari village, Tanja Winther (2008:132-144) describes the immense social, political, and religious transformations wrought by electric lighting, heightening particular visions of religious and political power such as the Mosque and a politician’s house, powered by colourful lights during the night (132-3). Electricity in her account was not simply a sign of “modernity” and development, but became a marker of power differentials and authority, reconfiguring gender roles through new standards of prestige and status (142). Electricity also transformed, materially, existing domestic infrastructures: to prevent water leakages onto electric equipment, thatched roofs made of palm leaves had to be replaced with corrugated iron; unable to keep out the heat, these roofs led to a dramatic increase in consumption of fans for ventilation (143). As lights are dependent on a wider network of relations and connections, they themselves are technologies that allow other practices, effects, and events to take place; they are crucial to the production of appearances and visual technologies that oversee everything from the exchange of goods, the economies of entertainment and communication, the strategies of “dressing for success” and evaluations of a person’s sartorial and moral credibility (described in the last chapter).

The Wonders of Brightness

The desire for bright, ‘boom’ lights and their relation to political power and the uncertain promises of infrastructure strikes a contrast to the predominant role of the ‘invisible’ afforded in the anthropological literature on urban Africa. The “praise of brightness” I describe in this chapter complements, and in part stems from, the emphasis on the “invisible” in the literature on Africa, in which the “powers of darkness” (Meyer 1995), the “invisible” (de Boeck and Plissart 2004) and the “underneath” (Ferme 2001) have
been studied as a paramount domain for the economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) and urban “spectral politics” (de Boeck 2011) of contemporary African cities. Neoliberal forces, it is argued, generate growing anxiety about the origins and uses of wealth, as sites of production and labour are no longer visible as the prime generators of value. This leads to rising markets and practices of speculation, to future-oriented ventures that attempt to tap into uncertain and inscrutable sources of wealth, and to fascinations with the “enigma of wealth” and the mysterious, opaque forms that it takes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; 2001).

The invisible, immaterial infrastructures (de Boeck and Plissart 2004) and “occult economies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) that proliferate in African cities are seen as sites that bring out the consequences of the austerity of neoliberal reforms, sites that play out the fantasies, anxieties and failures of modernity (de Boeck 2015; Meyer 1995; Piot 2010). These occult economies (419 scams, Sakawa boys, ritual murders) are waged in Faustian pacts, in which impossible riches are generated in return for devilish acts of social and self-destruction. Misty Bastian (2003), for instance, describes the “ritual murders” in Nigeria during the Abacha regime as narratives and forms of evidence that confirm and attempt to make sense of the violent and hidden nature of wealth, and of the cruel means of its acquisition by an immoral and criminal elite. In Ghana, Birgit Meyer has described the “omnipresence” and proliferation of an iconography of evil (1995), in a popular Pentecostal cultural complex (237) that emphasises the demonisation of “traditional religion”, drawing confessions and stories of “satanic riches” – pacts with the Devil that often include sacrifices in return for money. These stories, she argues, provide a “glimpse into the realm of the ‘powers of darkness’ from a safe distance” (1995:243), satiating a fascination with morality and its transgression and exploring the contradictions and collective fantasies for goods and money (Meyer 2003).

Yet the contours of darkness and its imagination are bounded and defined by the elastic limits of the visible, in which people also attempt to live and succeed, and whose shifting boundaries they attempt to maintain. While urban visual worlds in Ghana do engage with the fascinations of im/morality by peering into the seductive abyss of darkness, in

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20 See “BRAKIN” research project at Jan van Eyck Academie Maastricht, and their book Brazzaville-Kinshasa: visualizing the visible in direct response to Filip de Boeck and Françoise Plissard’s Kinshasa: Tales of the invisible city.
a “spirit of discernment” that attempts to see spiritual reality behind material appearances (Marshall 2014), they also commit daily practices and efforts to remain in the moral exigencies of brightness and to interpret the “mysteries of exterior appearance” (Wendl 1999:154). Just as committing to a sense of heightened presentism during the crisis described in chapter 1 entails enormous investment and creative practice in navigating and stretching the present, here I am interested in the ways in which people manage to contend with the limits of the visible, in their attempts to hyper-visualise their own self, to access prosperity by other means.

In her incredible book *Shine: the visual economy of light in African diasporic aesthetic practice* (2015), Krista Thompson looks at vernacular visual practices in the Afro-diasporic world, and the aesthetics of bling, shine and glow as ways to recast the racial premises of light in the histories of slavery and capitalism. She describes the importance of standing in the blinding light in Jamaican dancehalls, and the expenses people incur to stay in the flashing light of the photographer, waiting for his arrival to start dancing, sometimes spending as much as 200$ to stay in the light for a song (127). Light and its brightness represent expensive achievements, as visibility literally creates economies of prestige and success. Light, she argues, can bring “geographic transcendence and social ascendance” (6), imparting fame, fortune and social influence by achieving a status of hypervisibility through the circulation of dancehall videos. But the light and its momentary flash also has a destructive logic: in its excessive visibility – what Ghanaians would call its “boom power” – things and people are no longer visible but at the same time hyper-visible and invisible, made visible under erasure (14). The flashing light produces a “blinding, painful effect” (14) – creating an afterimage, an optical illusion that lingers on the retina long after the flash is gone. Thompson highlights photography (and other technologies of illumination) as a medium that “induces blindness”, that “exceeds the visual” (20), in which “occupying vision” (14) becomes a radical work of racial memory, working over and against the possibilities of disappearance or forgetting (20). The flash blinds and saturates, in a way that recasts the history of figuring black subjects in the cadaverizing gaze of the camera (20). Light becomes a political medium, operating in “rights to be seen” (10), leaving somatic traces of the violence incurred in these projects of visibility. As Anne Cheng has argued (2011) in her discussion of glamour and shine in Josephine Baker’s performances, the “lure of shine” and brightness is also *deflective*, it refuses vision, deflecting eyes from its opaque surface, and allows
alternative political projects to emerge through the visibilities it refuses. Krista Thompson’s ethnography offers an alternative reading to the neoliberal present, one in which technologies of visibility comment on the hypervisible nature of capitalism and expose the violence wrought in the very surfaces of the visible. There is, then, another side to the current neoliberal present and its invisibilities, enounced in the increasing demands for transparency (Sanders and West 2003), in obsessions with veracity and truth, and in the institutions and practices dedicated to making things, people, and capital flows visible. Indeed, the ritual murder described by Misty Bastian (2003) did not simply involve the dark underside of the capitalist economy envisioned in the hidden transactions and actions of its rich elite, but importantly revealed a “desire to see, capture, and, therefore, know the spectacular ‘truth’ of conspiracy” (67; emphasis mine). The term “Doing Otokoto”, taken from the name of the hotel where the human remains and the suspected murderer were found, means both criminal behaviour or money magic, and “uncovering a hidden truth, making plain what everybody suspects, but no one dares to see or say” (85). Occult economies, then, are also attempts at making visible the workings of power, and of attempting to live with their visible consequences.

In the economy of attention of digital media, the “hyper-visual” is increasingly important in shifting currents of attraction and capital. The founding of Transparency International in 1993, of the IMF’s measures of ‘financial transparency’ and surveillance, and of discourses of ‘accountability’ obtained through transparency have all deeply permeated local urban political culture in Accra. Of course, these keywords and practices are often met with profound suspicions that challenge their applicability and intellectual, historical remits (not least in their association with Enlightenment ideas of reason and scientific discovery of truth – Sanders and West 2003:7), asserting the ambivalence of power that is not amenable to such utopic visions (Sanders and West 2003:12). Transparency, then, goes hand in hand with conspiracy, which is its “raison d’être” (ibid); claims to transparency are always subverted (and generated from) the opacity, ambiguity, and invisibility of power (16). Yet in Ghana, I would argue, these discourses of transparency do not operate in a vacuum; they are not necessarily imposed from without, as Western impositions insensitive to deciphering the opaque workings of power in an urban African locale. They also resonate, profoundly, with Ghanaian aesthetic and political frameworks of visibility, veracity, and accountability. In his study of “The System” and people’s relations to political power in Angola, Jon Schubert
argues that transparency and accountability are not just abstract concepts, but create “repertoires” that can be “reappropriated locally” or “deployed situationally” (2017:14). They expose the ambiguity of power and give new blood to local projects that attempt to make sense of the uncertain visibilities of power. Further, I would argue, they not only attempt to ‘see through’ power in order to expose its underlying, concealed truths, but also indicate the importance of the visible in setting limits and possibilities for urban living, and of the uncertainty and fragility of the visible itself, and its prolific interpretive and imaginative realm. The notion that the invisible is “of infinite possibility” because it is “by nature unspecific” (Graeber in Comaroff 2003:288) problematically prevents from an engagement with the ambiguity and complexity of the visible world – and indeed reifies its ordinariness and stability. Importantly, it also obscures the violences that take place in practices of visibility – the violences that are hidden in plain sight – in those demands and expectations of transparency and brightness. As I argue here, making visible is a daily challenge and a political stance, in a place that many feel attempts to shut them down and foreclose their possibilities of connections and global visibility (Burrell 2012b).

As I described in the previous chapter, darkness did not only indicate the absence of light, but encompassed a wider range of associations, including heat and airflows. The question of ‘darkness’ as the absence of visible light during Dumsor was a fairly straightforward matter – one that didn’t seem to require as much elaboration as the difficulties of brightness did. Of course, darkness was associated with a range of negative, powerful and dangerous entities and threats – from criminality to spiritual influence. But more important, was the experiences of Dumsor as a difficulty of achieving compromised visibilities in their everyday. Interlocutors talked about the way the light was able (or not) to “brighten” oneself and things to attract attention and stand out; the way ironed clothes could give one respectability and neatness in a moral world where one’s appearances were constantly judged and evaluated, and a crumpled dress could literally shatter one’s dreams of success (as will be explored in the next chapter); the way the deceptive figures on an electricity bill spoke more widely about popular distrust with the state’s provisioning of public utilities, mismanagement of public goods, and the arbitrary nature of calculating systems of power flows (chapter 2). Visibilities and the difficulty of their connections were framed as a political, aesthetic, moral and infrastructural concern. Making sense of changing visibilities, of power’s visible guises
in a context in which there are strong cultural, moral incentives against the conspicuous display of wealth demands creative approaches to the visible. “Brightening”, I argue below, is one such way.

In Ghana, the power of brightness enounces a renewed concern with the socio-political powers of visible appearances, seen in the racialised privileging of “bleached” visibilities (described below), the advocacy for “transparency” in civil demands for political accountability, especially with regards to infrastructural developments that are often seen as archetypal projects of hypervisibility and monumental modernity, and the complexity of navigating desires and frustrations in an increasingly visually segregated city. In a city dotted with construction sites advertising multimillion-dollar vision billboards of impending affluence, promising luxury residences and shopping mall complexes, side by side with gigantic Pentecostal churches, their ceilings drooping under bright shining lightbulbs and swirling fans, promising salvation and miraculous fortune, the power of light and brightness convokes and attempts to make sense of these new, proliferating visibilities at a time when the basic provision of artificial light, of electricity, is defaulting. Indeed, the complexity of the visual field in Accra indicates that it is the visible, and its limits, that today might need most elaboration – in a situation in which the invisible, the concealed, the hidden, has become more easily explainable and readily acceptable to Ghanaians’ daily lives and confrontations with the city’s infrastructural deficiencies. This is not to reify an arbitrary distinction between invisible and visible realms, but rather to question the properties and social activities usually associated with each of these domains, and to argue that the “visible” itself makes possible strategies of deception, persuasion, desire and deceit typically associated with the “invisible”. The discussion of brightness is aimed as a gesture to redress the “invisibility bias” in West African scholarship, the privileging of the invisible as a paramount site of political and spiritual encounters, recognising the ways in which (hyper)visibilities are profoundly inscribed in the racial, political, religious and social history of the urban sites of power and privilege in Accra. I want to reclaim here “the wonders of brightness”, intended in two senses: 1) as a technique of success and prosperity in the visual (and, as I describe below, racial) economy of attractions (Thompson 2015), but also 2) as the puzzling and suspicious terrain of the visible and its relation to wealth and political power.
“Obaa korkor”

During Dumsor, a popular joke ran around the city: men would do well to get an *Obroni* girlfriend, because at least, in this Dumsor, “you would see her in the dark!” – a joke that resonates with the local expression *obaa korkor die, esumu kora, a wobe hu nu*, meaning “even in the dark, you will see a fair-skinned woman” (Fokuo 2009:130).

Before he married his wife Aminah, Freddy Beach, a neighbour and musician, once had a girlfriend called Aisha, who had come with her family from Timbuktu. He described her arrival in the community, her beauty, the way she turned everybody’s eyes when she walked in the street, but above all her “fairness”, the lightness of her skin, the competition with the local boys to speak to her, his conquest through his “gentle” yet “stubborn” manners, his ability to make her laugh, and his skilful tricking of Aisha’s brothers into thinking he was wealthy, through his dress and demeanour. He explained:

“That time, Paulina, when I’m going to the market I used to pass their place, they see me, very neat! At that time, I was working with the foreign people, so every day, I wear nice dress, shoes, sunglasses! So they see this guy they think eyy I’m a rich man! (laughs).”

As her brothers soon realized he wasn’t as wealthy as he looked, they tried to break off the union. Aisha implored Freddy Beach to make her pregnant, to force on their union, but no baby came. She then suggested they run away, but he objected. She was eventually married off to a rich man. According to Freddy Beach, Aisha gave him her husband’s money for him to travel, make his fortune and come back to marry her. That was when Freddy Beach left for Libya in search of work, only to meet more disappointments along the way, returning to Ghana, and married his current wife Aminah. Freddy Beach keeps insisting on Aisha’s beauty, recalling the way Aisha used to glow in the dark: “That girl”, he said, “if we are in the room and I off the light, I see her! I see her very well! Sometimes even if she’s sleeping, I see her I say Waow! And my friend also told me, if you have *obaa korkor* (literally ‘red’, light-skinned) wife and you are sleeping, if you wake up you will her waow, very different”, he laughed.

The humour these stories elicit also attest to the historical confluence of whiteness as a visual category with a system of power and global hegemony, demanding an analytic attention that does not overracialise these realities and relations, but does not depoliticise them either.
Striving to “marry white” was a common refrain in the neighbourhood. Men, especially, complained of their difficulties in marriage or in finding love, and spoke of their yearning for “true love”. Kweku, a teacher and single 37-year old man, complains: “Ah, Paulina is not easy. In Accra these days, if you don’t get money you don’t get a wife.”

With the crippling energy crisis, he said, “there is no money to marry; no money to give your girl to go to the salon; no money to go and dance.” Love in Accra is not an easy thing; “You know what they say these days”, admonishes my relationship expert Auntie Barbara, a 50-year old civil servant, business woman, wife, and mother of two, sitting high on her chair, a mirror in her hands, the bright glossy lipstick on the tip of her fingers: they say “odo kakra sika kakra – a little bit of love, a little bit of money.” She claps her palms together: “You can’t live without money! You can’t!” She adds, carefully: “Now: I like money but I don’t love it. That’s it”, she concludes with a wise clack of the tongue.

My 29-year-old friend Lydia, in search of a job after multiple failed attempts and elongated civil service, complains that her current relationships break down: in Accra today, she says, you are either cheating on or cheated on; you either get your man snatched or you are snatching someone else’s (most often unbeknownst to either). These days in Accra, she said, no one is really single, but no one is engaged either. The men she met turned out to be scammers, cheaters. And yet, she said, she was very successful with men, her light skin inherited from her Liberian mother turning gazes and eliciting appreciative comments. She dreamed, she said, of marrying a white man; once, when we went to a spiritual healing session to deliver her from failing relationships, she said the healer had seen her “white mentality”, and advised her against it, saying it would only bring her misfortunes; she would find, she was told, a nice Ghanaian man with whom she would build an empire.

Reasons for desiring to ‘marry white’ were numerous and always subject to interpretation and complex motives. They included “transforming your family destiny” by having lightened descendants, in which whiteness was understood as linked to privilege, higher social and economic positions; aesthetic preferences for lighter skin, reflecting the transnational, hegemonic influence of whiteness (Pierre 2013:103-4); the

21 A grieving that recalls the popular « No Business No Wife » aphorism seen on former passenger lorries – “mammy trucks” - now replaced by the trotros (Quayson 2007:252).
capacity to travel and “move beyond one’s world” (Burrell and Anderson 2008),
whiteness being associated with foreign countries and migration to better prospects. I
would also be told that one wanted to “marry white” as a desire for difference, for
learning new things, new ways: but when I expressed this possibility to my friend B.
(the woman who had grown up hearing she should “marry a white man”), she chuckled
and exclaimed: “Ah, but of course – that’s what they will all say!”.

“Brighti”

Yet often it is not ‘whiteness’ per se but the brightening qualities of whiteness, and its
transformatory capacities, that are desired. Interlocutors described this as ‘brighting’.
‘Brighting’ as a verb, – eg. ‘wé brighti, wo bë brighti – it will ‘bright’, you will ‘bright’,
was commonly used to describe the contrasting, “boom” effect of light against dark,
bringing out shine and making one ‘stand out’ through opposition. My friend Sammy
described this contrasting, ‘brighting’ effect of fair skin against dark as a kind of
“negative offsetting”: as he explained, “everything is a balance of positives and
negatives. So if you have white skin the dark colours will look nicer. But if you have
dark skin the colours don’t show, and so you must “bright them up”. This was also seen
as a detrimental system of gendered opposites: “If the man likes a fair girl, it will look
good on him – that’s positive; it will bring positive things to him. But the girl, she will
use bleaching cream, so that’s the negative for her. So everything, if its brings positive
to him, it is negative for her.”.

There was a general consensus that white skin could bear any colour (cf. Pierre 2008:20),
that white skin would “bright” clothes particularly well: “Light skin makes the clothes
look nice. White skin makes the colour looks more bright; if you wear black, if you wear
white, it will bright. But if you have black skin, the colours will be dum (off)”. KD, a
taxi driver friend, described a system that forced women to bleach in order to ‘make it’
in a gendered economy dominated by the violent influence of whiteness: “Nowadays it
is very hard for women to find a husband if you are dark. If you are not “Black Beauty”,
very shiny dark skin, and you are not Obaa Korkor, it will be very hard for you”. The
proverb korkor kata otan so, “red/fair skin hides ugliness”, was commented on by my
friend Lydia, laughing: “No matter how ugly you are, if you are fair at least you look
better! So they say, if a fair one is not nice, imagine if she was dark!”.
Brighting was actively sought for, as a long-term transformation technique of success, ensuring a good marriage, job, and the future prosperity of the wider family. Brightness was seen as transformative of people and their prospects, having the ability to “change the family”, as Freddy put it.

The widespread practice of skin bleaching was also considered to feed into that logic of attraction: bleached skin makes everything around ‘bright’. Lydia explained that men would often harass her because of her fair skin, and referred to skin bleaching as a practice of “brighting” men and thereby attracting them: “Many men nowadays, they say they need obronis to bright them. They like how it makes them look next to them. So that’s why many girls bleach; so that they can bright the man”. What Lydia’s comment also brings out, is the trend of bleaching, as a recurring historical moment, which has of late, in popular imaginaries, become more prominent – rather than as a linear, historically coherent practice. According to J. Konadu Fokuo (2009:129), skin bleaching originated in Ghana after the Second World War, initially among ashawo (sex workers) as a way of attracting European customers. By the 1970s, unions between Ghanaian women and Caucasian or Lebanese men increased (130), and biracial complexion was highly sought after. Skin bleaching became part of the popular culture of the 1980s, which now included all sectors of the population – from teachers to nurses, civil servants, and politicians (ibid). In 1978, Kojo Ginaye Kyei (1978), in his long poem – what he calls his “statement of conviction and plea” – to Ghanaian cultural revival and decolonisation of the mind, writes of bleaching as a fashion:

They tell me
Black is beautiful
But as I see it
On the face of my own mother
And on other soft faces and necks
Of dear Ghana
Sweet lasses peel off
The rich midnight sheen
Of the African skin
With atra, neco, asepso, ambi, skintona, dorot... 
Rip off your pride completely

22 Statistics from the Ghana Health Service reports suggest that 50% to 60% of adult Ghanaian women currently use or have used bleaching products (Adu-Gyamfi and Gyasi 2017).
23 All names or brands of lightening creams and medicines.
To a sickly kwata\textsuperscript{24} complexion
They term, in a jargon,
“using yourself”,
a brazen stupidity
they call vogue,
fashion
(Kyei 1978:42-3).

Auntie P, the owner of a popular beauty shop aptly named “First Image” (figure 55, next chapter), disagreed with the practice of skin bleaching; she bemoaned the large number of customers who come to buy bleaching products, and advised them to accept their natural skin colour. Bleaching products, she explained, makes your skin burn and smell like garlic. The health risks of bleaching creams, which contain hydroquinone (and sometimes mercury) and prevent the production of melanin in the skin, are well-known in Ghana; in 2016, the Food and Drug Authority (FDA) issued a ban on skin-whitening products that include a high content of hydroquinone, but the social benefits they are thought to provide clearly still outweigh, for many women (and men), the enormous medical risks that skin-bleaching entails (Eguegu 2016).\textsuperscript{25} More recently, local movements (intersecting with wider transnational advocacy campaigns) that emphasise the beauty of black skin and the power of melanin have attempted to challenge popular opinions about light skin and to disseminate more positive messages of pride, dignity, and beauty.\textsuperscript{26} Contradictory attitudes to skin bleaching and whiteness were frequently expressed in people’s discussions – shifting from the privilege of lightness and its uneasy association with global hegemonic whiteness and supremacy, to feelings of pride and urgent admonitions to embrace blackness (cf. Pierre 2008:23). As Jemima Pierre has argued (2013), Africa stands in a paradoxical situation to studies of race: as the site of racial otherness, yet ironically left out from ethnographic and African diaspora studies of race, as if race and racism no longer existed in Africa (xiv). In contrast, Pierre argues that this apparent invisibility of race in a place like Ghana should be recognized as a “trained blindness” (4), an epistemic blindspot in the scholarship on Africa; race remains crucial to discourses around power and morality in Ghana (Shipley 2013:51). Racialized

\textsuperscript{24} Leprosy.
\textsuperscript{25} Helen Cooper reports that the ban sparked hilarity in Accra as one of the official representatives of the FDA reportedly had bleached skin herself (Cooper 2016). Earlier this year, Ghana’s Immigration Service (GIS) introduced a ban on skin bleaching as part of its recruitment policy, as bleached skin and stretch marks would apparently make the candidates vulnerable to the strenuous training exercises (BBC 2018).
\textsuperscript{26} See, for instance, Ghanaian actress Ama K. Abebrese’s “I love my natural skin” campaign; Afia Amoaa Oppong-Kwakye’s poem “Melanin Queen”; Kaywuu’s “Melanin” video.
practices in Ghana today, and tensions about racialized notions of beauty, bodies, and identity take place through a contradictory field of legacies, that include colonial histories of indirect rule; the Pan-African ideologies of black independence and African pride; and the ‘international’, white hegemonic structures of global capital and political influence. As such, Jemima Pierre argues, Ghana stands as a “metaphor” for postcolonial Africa, jarringly situated at the historical crossroads of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the seat of Pan-Africanism (2013:6).

Whiteness, Pierre argues, acts as a “metaphor, a trope, a metonym for a wide range of structures and relationships” (2013:74). Pierre’s broadening of the category of whiteness beyond a simple visual, somatic criteria is welcome; yet as I describe here, brightness is not a direct equivalent of whiteness, it articulates a wider project that is not only defined by race. As Pierre herself notes, the materiality of whiteness in skin-bleaching practices is actually about becoming “less black” rather than becoming white (2013:104). Rather, the historical confluence of whiteness with brightness is what creates political, racial tensions, but it does not derive, directly, from people’s aspirations to brightness; their desires, even in skin bleaching practices, cannot be seen only as racialised forms of attractions, but also as particular visual and political effects to achieve success by “standing out”. As Krista Thompson has argued (2015:138-40), the widespread practice of skin bleaching in Jamaica, reflected in popular desires to “become a Browning”, a status associated with upper-classes and mixed-race Jamaicans, cannot be simply seen as a symptom of a “colonial mentality”, but must also be assessed as a material technique for achieving success in an economy dominated by particular norms of visibility and brightness (see also Yaba Blay’s apt critique (2011) of the “colonial mentality” perspective). The creation of a bleached surface is a way of attracting the light of the camera, an effort to make oneself more visible, in a way that comments on the racial proclivities and erasures of technologies of light (like photography and videography) historically deployed according to particular standards of illumination (Dyer 1997). Thompson thus situates the phenomenon of bleaching in a wider political and visual culture of effects, in which particular practices’ influences, motivations, and rationales cannot be so easily identified.

The racial qualities of brightness and light constitute a visual grid in Ghana: slight variations in skin tone have implications for one’s social status and life trajectory (Fokuo
When friends used to tell me that they wanted to marry “obaa korkor” (fair-skinned woman), they described that it would “transform” their wider family, change their family destiny, their own life chances and increase their employability. As Freddy’s story with Aisha illustrates, the visual economy of fair skin suggests a “racial infrastructure” in affective geographies of success, envy, prestige, and romance. Thus, Freddy explained further, people in the North spend fortunes to marry fair-skinned girls in an attempt to “transform their family”, because white skin is considered an advantage in life, especially for getting higher job positions. As my friend KD explained: “If you are fair here, everything is more easy. Say, if we both want the same job, and we both give our application, you will get it, and they will not even look at mine. Because everybody knows that, if you see obroni sitting there in the office, it means the place is very serious, the work is done well-well.” Race in Ghana, as seen in the previous chapter on the role of AC in modern offices, is deeply ingrained with understandings of wealth and expertise, and reflects the “polarized, ambiguous moral position” of white people as both exploiters and saviors (Shipley 2013:62).

Visibilities and brightness, as late dancehall artiste Ebony put it in her song “Turn on the Light”, engage racialised visions of bodies and desires, but also alternative practices of illumination and pleasure. In her music video, the light goes on and off as she dances across the lit skyline of Accra:

Figure 53. Ebony: turn on the light.
(Light on light on… 90’s Bad Gal Trend)
My name is Ebony
Black Skin Bibini
Hardcore Mahogany
You badder dan Stephanie
(…)
Turn on the light
Coz mi body nuh fake (light on!)
Turn on the light
And see good body shape
Turn on the light
Oh boy before we start the game
Turn on the light, oh yio
I say Turn on the light, oh yio
Blue is the Colour of Love

The electrical landscape of Accra also describes an alternative atmosphere of romance to the striving for “brighting” described earlier on. Blue Light, the preferred mode of lighting after dark, makes darkness shimmer and softly glow. Against the brightness of the Boom Light, Ghana’s nights bathe in the sweetness and softness of the Blue Light. Blue light, its cool, blue and green hues, visualises a black aesthetics of love and romance one can see lighting up as the sun goes down, enveloping the bedrooms and bars of the city, turning iron containers and midnight trotros into blue capsules of dreams, space pods under the silent skies. Blue, Michael Taussig writes (2009), was the currency of slavery: in the French colonies of Saint-Domingue, it was indigo, not sugar, that was the chief export (144). Blue was then turned into the colour of work and authority – the colour of uniforms, but also of casual wear – the ubiquitous blue jeans. Blue, he argues, has a “diabolic penetrative power”: it “seeps into things and bodies” (151), giving history a particular hue. But in Ghana, blue, they say, is the colour of love: “Blue light is for the bedroom. It’s cool, you know, it’s down; When the blue light is there, it shines, it makes things look beautiful. It makes things better.” In the crisis of
darkness, the dusty sweat of the heat, the Blue Light provides electric solace. There is beauty in the crisis, a necrotic sweetness of being, an electric cooling of the soul. They say: “Blue is attraction; blue is romance; blue is beauty; in Ghana, blue is the colour of love.”

Accra’s night lights distribute wealth and power in the differential valuations of brightness and shadows, in the nuanced appreciation of the concealing, enhancing, entrancing, transformative possibilities of light as technologies of desire. Electricity summons power in thermo-tonal diffusions of shine and glow, speed and depth: raw white lightbulbs because “brightness is happiness”, spinning pink and green flashes for Ghallywood\textsuperscript{27} movies, heated kerosene flames to indicate street food – kelewele and fried fish. Blue light, like the shadows of Japanese aesthetics, turns dirt into beauty, love into romance. “With God all things are possible”. In the midst of an energy crisis, Blue Light is a chimeric technology of the sacred that fashions a magical reality in an ordinary city.

\textsuperscript{27} Ghanaian Hollywood
He says: “Look at him. He looks so real… as if the blue light made him so real, like a human being, you know…”
CHAPTER 7. “YOUR LIMIT IS YOUR DRESS”

Praise the Lord.
Let the Spirit of the Holy Ghost descend upon you!
Are you expectant?
I say – are you expectant?

You will not leave this place as you came in, you will be transformed, because tonight, is a different night, tonight, is a different night, and we are expectant! Be ready for the miracles. I sense tonight the presence of the Holy Ghost; let the Holy Ghost descend upon you and fill you with the Holy Spirit – Be ready for the miracles!”

You will leave this place transformed.
Now repeat after me.
There are some miracles in this room and it’s got my name on-it!
It’s got my name on-it!

You will leave this place transformed.
Are you expectant?¹

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The visual and aural landscape of Accra is saturated with promises of miracles, proclamations of impending prosperity, and exhortations to believe, have faith, and surrender to the power of The Lord. As has been well-documented (e.g. Gifford 2004; Meyer 2004), the incredible popularity of Pentecostal Churches and their doctrine of prosperity is a sight and a social reality that no visitor to Accra can miss. Pentecostal and Christian imagery, sounds, and aphorisms permeate the public sphere, creating a “pentecostalite cultural style” (Meyer 2004) and “urban ambience” (Engelke 2012; see also de Witte 2008) that goes beyond religious conviction. Pentecostal doctrines of miraculous prosperity draw a visionary realm of salvation and success upon the derelict infrastructures of the city. They provide constant confirmation of the importance of hope and faith in summoning better tomorrows into the immediate present, persuading believers that fortunes are subject to change and reversal, that transformations are not only possible but imminent, to those “expectant” enough to “claim” their due. In this final chapter, I take inspiration from the literature on Pentecostalism and its doctrines of prosperity to discuss a moral and visual economy of appearances that contextualises some of the effects of electrical power discussed in the latter part of this thesis.

¹ Sermon from Winners’ Chapel Accra, on a Friday all-night prayer session, 21/10/2016.
As a Christian, not going to Church in Accra is not only morally reprehensible, but also irrational: as a friend explained, atheism “is a very strange concept” to most Ghanaians, because it seems to indicate a lack of will, or inability, to belong to a social community.\(^2\) In this context, perhaps one of the most surprising effects of Dumsor was the conspicuous, repeated occurrences of faithful Christians missing Church services. Similarly, hardworking citizens recounted avoiding their workplace during Dumsor. This was not because the absence of electricity prevented them from doing work on equipment that required electricity (computers, phones, photo-copiers), but rather because, they explained, they had not been able to iron their clothes. Presenting oneself to Church or the office with a crumpled shirt or dress, it emerged, was worse than not showing up at all. The inability to iron one’s clothes and the ‘crumpledness’ of appearances were a frequent concern during the crisis, prompting fears of repercussions and negative judgments upon one’s professional, religious and personal ethics. This was seen of particular importance in Churches and the office, the two main institutions where fate and faith, power and success meet.

In the two previous chapters, I described the visual and sensorial effects, through AC and types of illumination, that electricity makes possible, and the ways that these resonate with cultural and historical frameworks of power and privilege. In this chapter, I discuss and contextualise the importance of appearances in navigating spaces of power in Accra, through the example of changing ironing practices during Dumsor. I explore the injunctive, transformative possibilities of appearances by analysing people’s “ironing stories”, which I started collecting when it was made clear to me that ironing had been one of the most important aspects of the energy crisis. The unavailability and unpredictability of electrical power necessary for lighting and ironing created a moral sphere of deliberation about the power of appearances and their expectations, intentions and deceptions. I describe these debates and anecdotes ethnographically and situate them theoretically in the literature on Pentecostal visual culture, prosperity gospel and sartorial agency in West Africa. These literatures provide a compelling frame to understand the micro-effects of the domestic practices I am concerned with here, whose

\(^2\) Of course, this does not mean that religiosity is accepted with blind faith, and critiques of some Churches or pastors’ extortive practices abound (Shipley 2009). Some creatives and artists in Accra also speak out about the abuses of some Churches, and some profess alternative forms of spirituality. Pentecostal Churches, as Charles Piot aptly put it (2010:60), also express forms of the “necropolitical” (Mbembe 2003), creating forms of violence and oppression.
daily relevance in people’s encounters and navigation of the city perhaps provides a kind of ‘infrastructure’ that underlies more “sensational” (Meyer 2015a) manifestations of the power of appearances. I describe the particular infrastructural effects of creases and folds as performing a moral ethics of professionalism and disposition for success, particularly in the spaces associated with the prospects of prosperity and better outcomes, such as the modern office and churches.

Folds of Power

Welbek, a 23-year old graduate, at the time working in a civil service placement, explained his strong reticence of going to work wearing a crumpled shirt:

“Maybe it’s the way I’ve been raised. I can’t go outside with creases. No; I would rather not go to work. If I don’t have electricity and I’ve not been able to iron my shirt, I won’t go. I would rather not go than not look respectable. Maybe if I’m not going far and I don’t need to be so formal then I’ll just go running there and hope no one sees me, but otherwise, naah, I will not go to work. First appearances are very important. I don’t like to look like, crumpled. Even if some of the shirts you can’t iron it all properly but at least it will show on the sides the marks that you have ironed it – that you have tried”.

In Welbek’s narrative, achieving “respectability” through the neatness of one’s dress was considered of paramount importance to one’s professional success and ethical conduct, to the point that not going to work on the grounds of a crumpled shirt was easily justifiable, acceptable and, indeed, commendable. During Dumsor, however, this led to widespread suspicion that workers and Church-goers were taking advantage of Dumsor as an excuse for laziness, and many expressed the dilemma they faced between avoiding scorn in showing up all ‘crumpled’, or facing suspicions of professional misconduct. Another interlocutor described to me missing a Church service – an unthinkable deed for most Ghanaian Christians – during a Dumsor episode in which the power was cut on Saturday evening through to the Sunday evening, so he wasn’t able to iron his clothes and attend the service, because “how can you go to Church if you haven’t ironed”? While he readily acknowledged that it was “bad” of him not to go, and aware that this could bring him some disrepute, he found this preferable to the scorn and laughter his crumpled appearance would provoke at Church, and expressed the belief that “God would understand”.

229
Auntie Barbara described to me this public mockery of “crumpledness” on one occasion, in which she had to rush from a funeral to Church; she had planned to iron her Church dress at her mother’s place, close to her church (and very far from her own house). But on arriving at her mother’s house, the light was off, so she couldn’t iron it; instead, she wore a long jeans skirt she was wearing at the time, and a blue cotton blouse she happened to have in her bag. On their way home from Church, her mother was laughing at her, saying: “Ah! Where did you get that blouse?” She replied, “Oh, I brought it from home”. Her mother said, “Ah, but at Church, didn’t you notice everyone was laughing at you? Looking all crumpled!”. Auntie Barbara chuckled as she recounted this to me, clapping her palms: “What could I do? The light was off, I couldn’t iron… But still!”.

Crumpled appearances were also commonly, and jokingly associated with foreigners and especially white people, who could be easily sighted walking around the city with dirty backpacks, water bottles, crumpled shirts and even “slippers” [sandals] (Pierre 2013:90). My friend Kwame recalled with hilarity renting out a room to an American who “only stayed indoors and never ironed his clothes”: “He hand-washed them, but he doesn’t know how to hand-wash! He just puts soap and water and mix it together and then hangs it. Then it comes out all crimpled and he just puts it on!” He concluded, laughing: “How can you do that – go out with crimpled shirts, like a mad person?”

Dumsor, as a collective backdrop to those sartorial predicaments, cast moral doubt and accusations over people’s appearances and absences: was this worker’s absence from work because of “a crumpled shirt” a sign of utmost moral righteousness, a testament to his self-respect and commitment to work ethics and highly stringent professional standards, or was it pure laziness? Was this woman at Church a lazy Christian to be laughed at, and despised for failing to present herself properly at Church, or was she speaking the truth in declaring that Dumsor had prevented her to iron her dress? A public sphere of moral debate emerged around ironing practices and the way Dumsor had changed sartorial expectations and norms, calling for a reconsideration of the importance of appearances, respectability and neatness for ethical, moral conduct in places of work and worship. As I once found myself joking about Dumsor with a civil servant, and described the comments I had received about ironing, he categorically denied that Dumsor had justified absences from work and Church, arguing that people had grown used to crumpled appearances: “Oh no, because of Dumsor, people now are not so regarding, it’s changed their attitude to that. That used to be in the olden days. Now,
they understand. But”, he said, in a revealing comment that proved the sustained importance of ironing, “but just that of course, you need to go to your Boss and explain why your dress is not ironed!” In other words, what “attitude” had changed was the level of tolerance of “crumpledness” in Dumsor times, but not the social importance of ironed appearances – if anything, Dumsor had brought these out in the open. As Amet answered when I asked him if Dumsor had made crumpled dress more acceptable: “No, it doesn’t even make it acceptable. But what can you reply? You will say ‘yes, it’s lights off!’ Otherwise, why else did you not iron your shirt?”.

“Appearance is Number 1”

Kofi, a 37-year-old journalist, teacher and aspiring motivational speaker, described the power of appearance in these terms:

“Appearance works. As for appearance here, Appearance is Number 1. Then you also have to look at your environment: society favours you if you are fair. If you are fair they don’t care about your dress. But as for tumtum de [us black ones]), your limit is your dress!” (laughs).

What are the politics and stakes of sartorial precarity to those for whom “dress is the limit”? Kofi’s comment is revealing of the racial intricacies of appearances, in a way that resonates with the material discussed in the previous chapter, and of the importance of “dressing for success” for those who don’t have access to certain privileges based on race, class, age or status. In Accra, appearances can grant or deflect favours, incite or inhibit trust. They are paramount to professional and interpersonal encounters, and can be seen, as I suggest below, as a mundane sartorial form of “prosperity gospel”. In a city choked by economic struggles and beset by an energy crisis, working on one’s appearance offers a way of surviving, competing, and transcending one’s socio-economic limitations. To demonstrate the performative efficacy of appearances and sartorial discriminations in the visual economy of Accra, Kofi shared a personal story of a recent visit to the immigration office:

“One day, I needed to renew my passport. So I asked a friend, how I could get it done fast? And he said Chale, I swear to you, you will get it in 30 minutes. Here is what you have to do: you put on a jacket (suit), you put on a white shirt, then you put on a tie. When you arrive, you go straight to the Director. And lo and

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3 “My friend”
Kofi’s story illustrates the ways in which sartorial techniques of success are circulated and shared in Accra, creating a sort of sartorial “prosperity gospel”, in which visibilities and performance are seen as convincing acts, summoning positive outcomes and preferential treatments. Kofi’s story confirms a belief in the transformative possibilities of appearances. As Mr. Nartey, a retired banker, explained: “Dressing can make a lot of difference for people in Ghana.” He described a recent experience; as he wanted to bring some documents to the office of a Senior Minister, his wife advised him to change his clothes and put on a nice, crisp white jumper. When he arrived, he said, “it worked! The man opened the door for me, he was saluting me, the way I was dressed, the way I was walking, he gestured for me to sit down. As for dressing, it matters.” The way this worked, he explained, is that people well-dressed would appear to the civil servants as “VIPs”, and treated as such. As a retired banker, he described that ironing was part of the “Assessment Tests” administered by the bank manager: “When you come to work, the supervisors will be looking at you: what shirt you are wearing; how clean your shirt is; if your manager saw you with an unironed shirt, they will call you: ‘you are not well-dressed. Go and change”. One’s appearance would then score a particular “mark” on their assessment sheet. Similarly, customers coming to the Electricity Company would often “prepare themselves” for a better outcome, throwing on a suit, a tie to impress upon the staff. In a situation of uncertainty about one’s bills and the “unfathomability” of electrical power flows (chapter 2), a well-pleated skirt or trousers could make the difference between a “correct” bill and a “correction”, allow one to jump the queue, and be treated as “a VIP”. As Paul Nugent has described (1995:3), sartorial style is one way to reach the “big man” status, as individuals constantly cultivate, as social skills, the art of crafting and deciphering the appearances of power.

**Sartorial Prosperity Gospel**

“Appearances work”, I heard time and time again. Appearances can “really do something for people”, was often added. Appearances, as a complex of careful sartorial taste, comportment, attitude, and disposition, created temporary materialisations of the self that worked as a kind of “prosperity gospel” in the city, particularly in its spaces of...
power and influence. Through the work of appearances, people attempted to bend wills and obtain favours, and this performative practice was seen as a particularly efficacious technique of navigating the uncertain economic and political hurdles of the city. Those micro-acts of conviction reformulate, and resituate, ideas about prosperity and success usually associated with the religious domain of Pentecostal doctrines, within the everyday navigation of civil and domestic spaces of the city. The prosperity gospel of Pentecostalist Christian Churches in Ghana preaches a doctrine of success through the power of prayer, promising divine blessing as a return for faith.\(^4\) Pentecostal churches have become incredibly popular places where people come to seek solace and success through healing crusades, deliverance from demons, and a prosperity gospel that promises – and delivers – miracles and prophecies. Paul Gifford identifies four main types of Pentecostal Churches based on their focus of aspiration, and the socio-economic classes that they attract (a ranking he draws “based on things like the kind of cars in the parking lots, the hairstyles and haircoverings of the women, the number of men in formal traditional clothes, the use of English, and the obtrusiveness of mobile phones” (2005:85) – a remarkable methodology that aptly mobilises and attests to the importance of appearances as evaluation and discrimination criteria: 1) faith, health-and-wealth, and prosperity churches, focused on financial success and spiritual warfare, such as ACI and Winner’s Chapel (where the opening sermon of this chapter took place); 2) teaching and education, which mostly attract higher economic classes, such as Otabil’s ICGC; 3) Leadership, such as Lighthouse chapel; 4) Miracle healing and prophetic churches, which offer healing crusades and exorcize demons, and mostly attract lower economic classes (Gifford 2005:85). Despite their differences, all these churches emphasize success and offer means to achieve it.\(^5\) In particular, the gospel emphasises financial success and consumption as a sign of divine blessing (Meyer 2002), and wages war against poverty, seen as the work of Satan. Prosperity is usually equated to a sense of financial success, whose emblems are luxury commodities and hyper-modern signs, such as skyscrapers, Mercedes Benz, nouveau-riche palaces, expensive suits and jewellery.

\(^4\) “All the believer has to do to receive his ‘blessing’ is to ‘name it and claim it’” (Marshall 2010:206), according to a “seed faith” principle (giving in order to receive) (Gifford 2005:88).

\(^5\) See Gifford (2005:85) for a full lexicon of this “success emphasis”, including things like “progress, prosperity, breakthrough, blessing, excellence, abundance, fulfilment, power, exams, visas, travel”, as well as the negative aspects of their life they hope to leave behind – poverty, joblessness, darkness, suffering, misfortune, etc.
Less attention, however, has been paid to what prosperity might mean as a socio-material and political project, through which “moral and political subjects are produced” (Coleman 2015:33). Naomi Haynes pertinently argues (2012:125) that the prosperity gospel of Pentecostalism is not simply “a spectral parallel of the market” that attempts to reconcile with the “discontents” and “disenchantments” of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), “but “a site of action” that, in the case of Zambia, creates both social cohesion and differentiation. Indeed, as Coleman has summarized (2015), Pentecostalism should not only be seen as a “reaction” to the rise of neoliberalism and the globalisation of the economy, but as a “regime of practice” that produces those forces, as much as it partly emerges from them (see also Meyer 2014). In recent years, it seems that Pentecostal teachings and notions of prosperity have moved beyond a sole emphasis on material riches (Daswani 2015:109) to focus on social achievements and particular lifestyles, including marriage, children, good health, a successful career, the ability to travel, social influence, and education. Consequently, prosperity is not simply assessed through the materialisation of riches, but qualitatively evaluated, through an ethics of virtue and humility (Daswani 2015) and, I would add, modesty.

Girish Daswani, in his work on prophets in Accra (2015), draws a distinction between the categories of the “wealthy” and the “rich”, arguing that while the rich merely denotes people with money, the wealthy evokes a moral personae of virtuous character and an ethics of distribution and care. Real wealth and prosperity is “discerned through the quality of one’s acts” (109), emphasizing the importance of humility, social obligation, and the understanding of the self as a hardworking economic agent (Coleman 2015:36). This is very different to the doctrines of the 1990s Pentecostalist churches that preached an economic individualism as a means of achieving and protecting one’s impending prosperity, emphasising the importance of rupture with social ties and activities associated with the “traditional” past (Engelke 2010; Meyer 1998). Of course, in a way this emphasis on humility and modesty is not new; anxieties about consumption and the invisible production of wealth has always been – at least in Ghana – a significant aspect of Pentecostal practices and emphasis on consumption (Meyer 1998a; 1998b). In 1990s, the mass influx of commodities following the return to democratization and the liberalisation of the economy led to a certain suspicion and anxiety about the dangers of commodities, their potential to “possess” their owners and demand unspeakable sacrifices (Meyer 1998a:768). Pentecostal preachings, then, at the same time as they
encouraged success geared towards increased purchasing power and economic individualism, also provided warnings and moral teachings about the dangers of wealth and the need to find appropriate ways to channel things’ and desires’ propensity for vice and immoral actions.

It is in this historical context that we can come to appreciate the importance placed on subtle, nuanced forms of taste, value, and display such as the aesthetics of creases I describe below. Today, Accra’s political economy is dominated by widespread scepticism not only of the origin of wealth, but of the increasingly limited possibilities of its re-distribution, and of the effects of this non-redistribution, as the everyday is saturated with stories of corruption, unmet promises, and unfulfilled prophecies. Political disillusionment is expressed by the slang expression “Tweeaa”, meaning “nonsense”, “bullshit”, expressing sarcastic scepticism. Words, in Ghanaian politics, have lost their potency. Politicians’ proclamations of impending national prosperity through the discovery of oil in 2007 are today met with scorn, as the signs of “impending wealth” take on ever-deferred guises. In this context, I would argue, there has been a renewed interest in virtuous behaviour (Daswani 2015:109), and in the visible signs of good conduct. Modesty in particular has regained importance, and character (suban) has become a way of assessing and accessing salvation. In this chapter, I argue that “character” is predominantly assessed in Accra through visual inferences, and produced through particular technologies of self-presentation and care, such as ironing. The visual effect of an ironed dress, for instance, is seen as indicative of its wearer’s intentionalities – an indication of care, taste, professionalism, and self-respect. This does not mean that people uncritically “accept” what they see as irrevocably “true” disclosures of a person’s moral disposition. Rather, visual effects are taken as potentials that may create favourable connections, as paths that may be followed to potential success, resources in waiting. Appearances reveal intentions: in that sense, they can be seen as potential ‘markets’ – assessments of future returns, of trust and reliability, of efficacy and preparedness, of an ethics of commitment and professionalism. As I heard repeatedly, appearances “do things” for people. They facilitate demands, open up new possibilities, and legitimate and affirm a person’s sartorial moral and common sense. During Dumsor, the prolonged unreliability of the electricity system led to a new shift in moral assessments of appearances, that increasingly focused on the temporality of ironing
practices; in that sense, having an ironed shirt *during Dumsor* attested to utmost wonder, it indicated a person’s rigorous planning and forethought.

In a context in which the majority of the population has seen rising inequalities and differentiation materialise in the visual landscape of Accra, despite continuous reassurance of their own impending breakthrough, “appearances” provide a more accessible, if less “sensational”, technology of success. If consumption was once seen to believers as an ‘equaliser’, a technique available to a range of socio-economic classes, this prospect, in the context of growing equalities, has been deferred to more mundane techniques of display. While all may not have access to particular types of clothing and sartorial goods, success is guaranteed to all via techniques of self-care that are believed to visually channel the moral integrity of one’s character, yielding favourable effects and privileges. In the same way as the prosperity gospel preached by Pentecostal Churches allows their congregants to transcend their socio-economic limitations through the power of their faith, the realm of appearances cultivated through self-care, an ethics of modesty and controlled coolness offers people a way of accessing favours and privileges they would not otherwise be granted based on their socio-economic status, class, or age. These tales of micro-success confirm the very “real” possibilities of grander Pentecostal narratives of riches and divine “showers of blessing”. They attest to the possibility of moving beyond one’s world, of achieving social recognition despite one’s perceived or inherited limitations.

**The “Banal Miraculous”: Modesty and Neatness**

Far from unique, extraordinary occasions, the prosperity gospel of appearances I describe here foregrounds the everydayness of charismatic agency and the miraculous. The banality of success stories like Tony’s sees the miraculous as a ‘flash’ of luck, the ability to momentarily stand out; it reveals the elasticity of prosperity (Piot 2010:71) that manifests in the “micro-encounters of the everyday” (66), in the “intensification” of the quotidian (Goldstone 2011:85), that legitimate and confirm the miraculous promises of Pentecostal doctrines. Thus, we can see processes of prosperity and success-making as “aesthetic formations” (Meyer 2009) and formulations that permeate the everyday and encourage techniques of self-care and self-promotion that are no longer (if ever they were) limited to Church encounters, rhetoric and emphasis. In fact, Pentecostalism’s
“aesthetics of persuasion” (2010), which confirm the “truth effects” (756) of belief and faith, is partly deployed through the hermeneutics of appearance, deriving its own logics of efficacy from sartorial performance and style. In everyday understandings of charismatic potency, the miraculous is expertly woven through the folds and creased nuances of Ghanaian sartorial morale, in the valuation of modesty and distaste for show-offs and conspicuous displays. As Birgit Meyer has compellingly argued (1998a), consumption and its display arouse envy, and spark debates and scandals over illegal and occult or immoral sources of wealth accumulation. Consumption is therefore not simply a practice of “identity-formation” (Miller 1987, 1998; Friedman 1994a), but potentially a way of losing oneself (Meyer 1998a:772) and, I would add, others: the dark potentials of consumption are communicative and contagious, “bad money” (sika fi or sika boni) can “spoil” one’s business or livelihood through “spiritual siphoning” (Oduro-Frimpong 2014:136). Modesty, I argue, offers immunity against such accusations and temptations; ironing produces a sartorial world that is revealed in nuances and creases, expressing the subtleties of neatness and modesty stressed by my interlocutors. Modesty, in this case, also constitutes a critique of the excess that characterizes political power, and of the importance of smaller acts of fortune-making in bringing about a “miraculous”, yet respectable life.

The importance of dress and fashion in (West) Africa have long been a privileged site of study for anthropologists concerned with social processes of consumption, identity, representation and materiality. In Accra, the skill of “fine-tuning” one’s appearance through a careful attention to avoid, or at least tone down, flamboyance, is distinct to other West- and central African sartorial traditions. As Freddy Beach once said, “Ghanaians have money, but they don’t show it”. This attitude stands as quite distinct to the flaunting display and “economy of elegance” of the Sapeurs in the DRC (Friedman 1994b; Gondola 1999), Nigerian conspicuous display of wedding aso-ebi (Nwafor 2012), or to the mass “spoiling” and faking of Ivoirian “bluffeurs” (Newell 2012). In a recent sermon, Archbishop Duncan-Williams, founder of Action Chapel International (ACI), expressed this distinction, lamenting that while “Nigerians celebrate wealth, Ghanaians hide and destroy it” and “do not have the courage to flaunt their wealth” for fear of being antagonised and victimised:

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6 This was often how Nigerians were stereotyped as morally reprehensible, in which their taste for conspicuous displays of wealth and luxury were often conflated with their alleged “introduction” of crime and illegal wealth acquisition scams like 419 in Ghana.
“Ghanaians, we are a very different people because even when you are giving testimony, they think you are bluffing, “wo kyere wu ho dodo”, “who does he think he is?” Nigerians celebrate good things, Nigerians celebrate success, Ghanaians we don’t, Ghanaians we like good things but we are afraid to celebrate it” (Ayamga 2018).

He imputed this “fear” of flaunting to the risk of being tagged as “corrupt”. Ghanaians, he exhorted, must “eschew the idea that everybody who is rich made his wealth through dubious means”. They should rather celebrate their successes: “we must create an atmosphere for Ghanaians to flourish, and not just foreigners”; we should focus on “how we can encourage people to make it”. “Let’s begin”, he enjoined, “to have a mentality that creates wealth”. Summoning in oneself the “courage” to flaunt wealth becomes a national endeavour, a cultural change that attests to the endurance of feelings of anxiety and suspicion around consumption. As I argue here, however, the avoidance of flaunting and the aversion to conspicuous display reveals an aesthetics of modesty and neatness, cultivated in the creases and folds that exude moral worth, professional confidence, and respectability. In this case, modesty denotes a “tasteful” capacity to produce a certain effect and distinction from within the recognition of the humility and constraints demanded by the excessive, and dangerous visibilities of wealth. How to “make oneself seen” without succumbing to a morally-dubious ostentation and flamboyance, and risking the charges of revealing a suspicious prosperity? In Ghana, such a capacity to shine without flamboyance is known as the concept of “First Appearance”.
“First Appearance”

The tales of sartorial success discussed in this chapter were enabled by what Ghanaians refer to as the concept of “First Appearance”. When asked about the importance of dressing well, of ironing one’s clothes, of paying close attention to details, my interlocutors would invariably invoke the principle of “First Appearance”, or the lasting influence and impression of one’s first sight in an official encounter, acting as a kind of ‘cover résumé’ for one’s abilities, character and moral worth. In fact, Kofi described “First appearance” as a business strategy:

“Appearance throws more light on personality. Is that person a customer? An investor? You don’t know! So at least by looking at the appearance, it is ‘physical evidence’, as they say in marketing. Like a marketing strategy. Appearance paves way. That is true everywhere – but in Ghana it’s too much.”

As Kofi describes, the “prosperity gospel” of appearances is particularly marked in Ghana, as a salient yet less explicit feature of the path to success and inclusion in a city visually marked by growing economic disparities. “First Appearance” retains the temporal modality of the idea of miraculous success as an aesthetics of brevity, a temporary ‘flash’ sight of a kind of ‘cover success’. Impressing through “First
Appearances”, like “brighting” described in the previous chapter, by “seducing” or convincing persons of influence, becomes a way of crafting one’s own “miraculous life” (Goldstone 2011). Prosperity, in other words, requires hard work, of which cultivating, through material practice, a proper persona is key. In that case, the “flash” of a “First Appearance” also connotes a certain notion of the sublime or the “wow”, as Birgit Meyer has put it (2015b), the ability to make it through miraculous instantiations of divine power. In this chapter, I argue that technologies of self-care such as ironing can be seen as technologies that craft a sense of the “banal miraculous” for people’s everyday life.

Appearances are directly related to emotional and moral states: wearing a crumpled dress makes one shy – and often shy and ashamed are used interchangeably. If you are wearing something well-ironed and nice, a friend described, “you go and you are calm; you walk calmly, and people will like you because you are calm.” By being “calm”, people will be “attracted to you, they will want to associate with you, hoping that they will learn something new from you”, because your attractive dress implies similar interests, common perspectives and expectations. On the other hand, wearing a crumpled shirt will make you stand out, it will make you look “different” in the midst of everyone. Wearing a crumpled shirt could be seen as the direct antithesis of “brighting”, described in the next chapter: it makes one de-tone forth from a harmonious crowd of sharp lines and smoothed fabrics, it brings *akwakwa* (crumpled) dissonance, *basa-basa* (unkempt, disorderly) noise to the controlled calmness of neatly ironed pleats.

Appearances impress: they produce material effects, summon forces outside of people’s control. I was often told, for instance, that particular people (light-skinned and well-dressed) would always get priority of treatment if, for instance, standing in a queue. My friend Mame K., owner of a small provision shop, herself described that she had no power over appearances. If somebody well-dressed comes into her shop, she said, she would not have a choice: she would have to serve them first. It was not her own choice, she said, but “appearances” that made her do this. Appearances, she said, “speak”: they have *injunctive force* (Austin 1962). They “impress” particular actions onto people, in a way that strongly recalls Alfred Gell’s theory of “captivation” in relation to the Trobriand canoe-prowboards. Appearances have “agency” and “captivate”, not because of a kind of “cognitive indecipherability” of the mastery of craft, but because of the
recognition of a moral labour, and prospective market, invested in the creation and recognition of one’s appearance.

In June 2016, I was invited to participate in a roundtable of discussion with cartoonists who had been commissioned to create a series of cartoons promoting peaceful elections, which would be broadcast on television adverts and in the newspapers. As we discussed a proposed cartoon depicting an interaction between a worker at the Electoral Commission (EC) and voters, a cartoonist, T., immediately commented on the incredible appearance of the EC worker and exclaimed: “You have to dress him properly! You have to make him properly dressed to make him credible”, alluding to the man’s lack of clear uniform. The room buzzed with comments and replies: M.S., a representative of the government, who was present to ensure the cartoons remained “politically neutral”, asked: “Are you saying that if I’m not properly dressed, I’m not credible”? T.: “I’m saying, at least dress him properly, because you can tell the character from it. This person is from EC! How can he be from EC dressed like that?” Looking around, T. smiled: “We all know, obisi obefra wo entuma, tse ne din / hwe nu hu. If somebody promises you nice clothes, listen to the person’s voice or look at the person’s body”. He later explained to me: “If the person is wearing shabby clothes, that means he’s telling lies!” I pressed him on his earlier comment: “Do you mean that from appearances you know the character?” “Exactly!” he replied, “To have trust you must be properly dressed. Our character speaks louder than wealth. When somebody promises you something, watch the person very carefully.” Thus appearances are crucial to crafting the moral fabric of the city; moral judgments come in “flashes”: “First Appearances”, as an instantaneous, indelible image, imprints itself at the moment of seeing, sparking irresistible effects.

The importance of appearances to impress upon people in order to “trick” them into revelations or bend them to one’s wills was also revealed to me in a memorable instance with my research assistant and friend S., whom I recruited to help me conduct some interviews in the neighbourhood about peoples’ electricity bills and meter-sharing practices. As I arrived at his house, we discussed how to go about this. S. had a plan. “Today”, he said, “we don’t worry; we just have to make sure that we have the ‘right appearance’ and that we are very serious about what we do, then it will show on our face and they will trust us”. What kind of appearance did that require, I asked? “As long as
they respect our appearance, they will talk! Today we have to dress official. Maybe, we will have to wear, like ECG clothes. So that when they see you, they will think that you are here to change ECG, you know they have all heard about the privatisation, so they will think that you are part of them; they will ask you plenty plenty questions, they will want to know everything! So we can also ask them. If we say that we are doing interviews, they will talk! It’s not a problem.” From the back of the house, his sister gave us an amused glance, and mumbled something about his briefcase being empty; he brushed her off roughly: “Even if it’s empty inside, I should carry something.” And turning to me: “You have to carry something, isn’t it, Paulina?” I was mesmerized by his suggestion that literally embodying the figure of state enforcement and, in my case, of privatisation would create trust in a context so fraught by the distrust of state actors as well as the “profit men” of foreign companies. But in this anecdote transpires this belief in the power of appearances to achieve desired results through a kind of tricksterish sartorial intelligence.

Amet, a young graduate and painter, explained: “You have to look neat, comfortable. You have to look your best at all times because ‘First Appearance’. You don’t know who you are going to meet that day. People are so judgmental. All the time, they will look and say: o kyeeere ne hu, o kyeere ne hu, you are tunu”, which translates roughly as “you are bluffing, you are broffing, you are too-known”. What Amet describes, is an urban moral world of visibilities in which people are constantly evaluating one another on the basis of their external appearance – through their sartorial choices, their demeanor, their performed character. Walkers-by can be said to be in a constant teasing, looking and assessing, viewing and claiming, prospecting and inferring: “This one, look at the way that o kyeeere ne hu”, my neighbour Auntie Mary would say when she wanted to point out to a friend that she was acting above her means, behaving as a “tunu”, an elite, a “pampered” and “pompous” person, walking down the street with poise. This was described as “bluffing” or “broffing” someone – and the meaning of “bluff” is here quite different to the English one. “Bluffing” or “Broffing” roughly translates as “sacking”, ignoring someone, as well as pretending and deceiving someone through one’s appearances, especially through making oneself appear more important than one really is – and “wo kyere wo hu” is a humorous mockery to the “tunu” intended

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7 See also Shipley (2015) for a comparative analysis of “trickery” and fakery in Pentecostal pastors and comedians, which also explicitly links entertainment traditions with Pentecostal morality and performativity.
to bring him/her back to his/her humble self. The quality of being *Azza*, for instance, “duping”, “trickish”, characteristic of politicians, reveals this moral ambivalence: being smart is often associated with being trickerish, but also with being fake, or deceiving people for one’s own gains. Both ambivalence and modesty are highly cultivated social skills, tools of trickery and survival in a highly unpredictable, economically strained city.

**Sartorial Dumsotactics**

Various strategies for navigating this dilemma of creases emerged. Wearing “local dress”, such as African wax print or a *batakari* (Ghanaian smock) were advised, as they did not require as much ironing, and reinvigorated debate about the Africanization of office dress and the colonial legacies of Western clothing and its unsuitability for hot climates, especially in the context of non-functioning air-conditioning during Dumsor. On the other hand, as local dress was increasingly considered too costly (requiring at least 4 yards of cloth, plus the cost of tailoring, which rose with ‘Dumsor prices’ that forced many tailors to purchase generators), many turned to buying cheap “Wash-and-Wear” clothes, polos and Lacoste shirts, which do not require much ironing (figure 56). At the time, I interviewed groups of seamstresses in various locations in the city (Makola market, Osu, and individual tailor shops). They all agreed that they had stopped ironing as much; one of them, Charlotte, said that she explained to her customers that “now, because of the on and off, they have to go iron it themselves”. Showing me how she spread the fabric on the table neatly, she explained that she had now become very careful in not moving the fabric when she was sewing so that her customers would not even notice that she hadn’t ironed. She also owned a box iron but didn’t use it much because it could stain the cloth with particles of fire and ash. Generally, most people had taken to iron “in bulk” once a week, when they had light, to get ready for the week. Over the course of Dumsor, a new temporal trajectory of morality developed in relation to ironing, in which one’s ironed folds or creases could assess a person’s careful planning skills, indicating that one had ironed clothes well in advance (typically a week in advance) of

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8 Extending Ghana’s “National Friday Wear” programme, launched in November 2004 by the Ministry of Trade & industry, to encourage civil servants and office workers to wear local fabrics in an attempt to celebrate Ghanaian traditional dress and to revive the local textile industry.

9 Second-hand items purchased at “Bendan” shops in Kantamanto market (‘bend-down’ shops or heaps of second-hand clothes in a central market).
the event, work day, or Church. This fed directly into a changing discourse of temporality in Accra, where professional, moral attitudes to work were increasingly encouraged. Other die-hard advocates of ironing resorted to using the “box-iron”, a flatiron holding hot coal. In fact, as described briefly in chapter 1, renewed demand for this household appliance, which had long been replaced by the electric iron, peaked during Dumsor; for the first time in decades, box irons in Makola were selling out again. In the process, box irons were re-named “Sankofa”, for the Adinkra philosophical symbol of “Go back to your past and retrieve it; don’t hate it”. This was generally understood to refer to the obsolescence of box irons that Dumsor confronted, and meant as an ironic comment on the temporality of Dumsor that was perceived as a setback to “progress” (figure 57). Amet, the painter we met above, painted a Sankofa box iron during Dumsor. The project, he said, had been with him for a while. He explained: “Our things are fading. All these things, box iron, lantern, it’s been there for a while. So that is why, by calling it Sankofa, we have to go back to earlier forms. I revisited Sankofa, meaning I’ve gone back to my past. It was a coincidence that the light at that time was not there. It’s like, my painting and Dumsor, they’ve collided.” Here, the ironic renaming of “Sankofa” can be seen to make a ‘jump’ to the past in repurposing box irons into a new Dumsor trend that critiques the perceived backward linear trajectory of the crisis.

Figure 56. Sartorial Dumsotactics.

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There was even a humorous video that circulated of a woman ironing her dress with a flat pan, dubbed the “latest local invention” in response to Dumsor-Dumsor.
Figure 57. Box iron #Throwback.

Figure 58. Sankofa bird gold weight. Credit: Brooklyn Museum.

Figure 59. Box iron
Conclusion: Infrastructures of Intimacy

Around the same time as I was thinking about Dumsor, the Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro proposed a ban on hair-drying as part of a rationing exercise during a period of prolonged electricity shortages, and encouraged women to embrace their “natural hair”. Commentators decried that this latest news proved the Venezuelan crisis had reached the lowest point, as political leaders were now concerned with matters of hair-drying. These reactions are interesting because they expose the assumed roles that infrastructure and politics are often thought to play: politics, in this view, should stay concerned with the more ‘serious’ sectors of finance and security; and infrastructure is often seen as a technical matter of complex engineering and specialised expertise. In Maduro’s hair-drying ban, infrastructure suddenly becomes very intimate, and intimacy reveals its political contingencies; infrastructure and politics reveal their interconnections, the “intimate webs” that they weave, the tentacular reach of their intersection. As moments of crisis, these are also moments of shock and disbelief at which our own credulity in the sanitised surfaces of infrastructure, in their “humility” (Miller 1987:85-108) and politically-neutral outlook are grasped in their full extent. They reveal a certain efficacy of infrastructures to conceal their intimate and sensorial workings, and to detach themselves from political intervention.

Realising the interconnection of politics and infrastructure suddenly forces us to recognise the extent to which modernity has created networks of vital flows that condition and sustain intimate forms of political power; moments like Maduro’s hair-drying ban, or the sudden inability to iron one’s clothes, betray our assumptions of infrastructural and political work as domains that should remain removed from domestic affairs and intimate practices and values. As systems that condition and enable other material networks to operate, infrastructures glide through scales, often disrupting the neat categories of our cultural values and practices. Infrastructure transports intimacy to the realm of national politics, and in-forms the way that politics, too, come to shape the most intimate aspects of our lives. Proponents of “technopolitics” have shown the ways that particular properties of infrastructure and materials have come to shape (or prevent) forms of political rule and governance (e.g. Mitchell 2011). But infrastructures also initiate a political and poetical intimacy that exceeds technocratic affordance, crossing and diverging the lines between public and private, the collective and the individual, the
state and the non-state. And so, political power and infrastructural matters are indeed, as much about drawing budgets and policies as they are about hair-drying, ironing, and lightbulbs – about the banal and the magnified, the monumental and the trivial.
In mid-November 2016, as Ghanaians were preparing to head to the polls and decide on their next leader in an election that had been overwhelmingly shaped by the energy situation of the country in the past year, President John Dramani Mahama inaugurated a new wonder of the infrastructural sublime (Nye 1994; Larkin 2008): the Kwame Nkrumah Circle Interchange, a 1.2 km long, three-tier flyover that connects the Awudome cemetery in the east of Accra to Ring Road Central in the heart of the city. The flyover’s ribbons of concrete slither through Accra’s congested landscape, its smooth surface promising a speedy high road to a bright future and an efficient, thriving city (Harvey and Knox 2015). The event, transmitted on television, showed crowds of people pressed at the barriers of the elevated roads that seemed to confirm the “gathering capacity” of collective infrastructures to bring particular publics into view and ascertain collective assent – an important capacity during an election year. My friend Mame K.. couldn’t contain her joy: as an NDC supporter, the enthusiasm of the televised gathering was contagious and convincing, and she asserted that something was changing tonight: something about tonight, she said, was “different”. Tonight, she said, showed to the
nation that Mahama would win again. The masses of NPP (opposition) supporters rushing to the Flyover in an apparent reversal of political affiliation seemed to her an ultimate proof of impending victory. Below the Flyover, a victorious statue of Kwame Nkrumah, holding his arm up and forward, presides over a pool of fountains bathing in a dazzling blue light – the light of love, of beauty, of hope, of transformative possibilities. “Tonight”, she said, “Nkrumah will finally sleep! They have greatified him. With all the lights, it is so beautiful!” J.K., A young man I met at a political rally for the NDC posted pictures of his family in front of the fountains, with the caption: “Tonight I am proud to be a Ghanaian” (figure 60)

Figure 60. J.K.’s family visit to the Flyover.
This was the vision that sealed the era of Dumsor; the vision upon which, many NDC supporters hoped, the political fortunes of the city would favourably turn. Unfortunately for J.K. and Mame K., a few days later Mahama was voted out of power in favour of the NPP’s Nana Addo Akuffo-Addo. Auntie Z., whom I visited the day after the election results were announced, succinctly commented: “You see? If Mahama had succeeded, it would have shown that we are fools!” The vision was indeed, as Auntie J. put it, “different”: the Flyover had been in construction for years, yet just a few days before its inauguration the Circle Roundabout still looked as I had known it for the past year – a dusty, grey, buzzing node of movement saturated by narrow lanes of small businesses (mainly jewellery and mobile phone shops) indicated by the sea of umbrellas that shaded them from the sun, its ground surface covered by second-hand wares – bags, clothes, shoes – spread out and piled to line passengers’ walking routes to the main bus station. The Flyover crystallised this impossible contrast, between its magnificent transformation and its ordinary reality; the Flyover was experienced, that night, as a flash of wonder in the midst of the ordinary, a disrupting vision that questioned people’s experience of the ordinary sites of the city and of their daily passage through them. It seemed to materialise the ability of infrastructure to both create the ordinary and stage the magnificent, to transform the banal structures of daily life into momentary sights of wonder. The Flyover was the perfect reversal of Dumsor – an event that had transformed the ordinary into a sudden tragedy; a fitting image to seal forever the memories of disconnection, cuts and disrepair of Dumsor and invest in the new connective imaginaries of a Flyover. Indeed, in a matter of hours, the new Interchange area had carved a new name for itself: it became known as Accra’s very own “Dubai”. In gist, an Auntie who lived in Madina renamed the new bridge around her place “Shanghai”. “Mahama”, people said, “has brought abrokyire (abroad; foreign lands) to Ghana!” As I was boarding a trotro at the Flyover one evening shortly after the inauguration night (I had been hoping to catch the light-show which, unfortunately, was not working), one of the passengers protested the inflated price of the journey to Kaneshie; the mate (trotro money collector) replied with a malicious wink: “Dubai price, now this place is Dubai!” The President did promise that the Flyover would positively impact on the economy, and in a way he was right (depending on your status as a passenger or a trotro driver): the new interchange and its magnificent appearance had quickly been incorporated into the local economy, reforming the informal geography of the city and its socio-economic
imaginaries. Before long, the Interchange’s grounds were once again occupied by the traders and manifold businesses that had been displaced in the last stages of the construction, and a new sense of ordinariness settled in: the Flyover’s smooth tarmac was gnawed by potholes; images of trash piled on its borders once again flooded the news; and the limitations and illusions of infrastructural feats like the Flyover, and of their political terms of operation, were once again visible for all to see, and draw their own conclusions.

Like the capricious electrical infrastructure of the city, the Flyover and its spectacular promises manifested clear signs of political power, but it also had political effects beyond its moment of apparition. Like the electricity network, it held too much hope for what it could practically achieve; it connected the individual and the collective, the ordinary and the spectacular; it acted as a particular site of delivery and yet exposed the contested notions and visions of the public good and the nation. Infrastructure weaves stories of power, they contest the legitimacy of political rule, and reanimate precedents of political history and memory; they recast the collective visions of the contemporary – and futurity. Along this thesis, I have attempted to describe and probe this relationship between infrastructures and political power. As I have attempted to show throughout this thesis, particular infrastructural moments like the energy crisis of 2014-2016 unfold layers of historical connections, allowing us to peer past and forward into political and social histories. In Ghana, infrastructure has played a major role in the development of a postcolonial imaginary and nationalist consciousness through the electricity grid as a political web of sentiments and delivery of the “vital currents” of the city. Electricity and its manifestations in everyday technologies like the electric iron, the lightbulbs, the fans and the AC box are embedded in the “chronopolitics” (Bear 2016) and aesthetics of imagined legacies of colonialism and neoliberalism. I have argued that electricity, and infrastructure more generally partakes in the domain of the “hyperpolitical”, as infrastructure is often seen as central to evaluating the signs of political intentions and power, and claiming particular rights. This, I have argued, does not command a reductive view of politics, the state or infrastructure as embroiled in a form of liberal instrumentalism, but demands that we recognise a particular “elective affinity” between infrastructure and political power. While the story I have told is in some ways specifically Ghanaian – or, “Accra-ian” –, I believe it also says something more general about the relationship between infrastructure and politics.
By way of conclusion, I want to argue that we can see a particular set of elective affinities between infrastructures and political power. I take these “elective affinities” to refer to both a sense of “chemistry” that makes these concepts gravitate towards one another, as in the sense intended by Weber (McKinnon 2010); but also to imply a sense of the optional, the not-yet-defined, the potential and the contested. The “elective affinities” I describe here, then, imply both a relationship of similarity and attraction, yet one that is not predetermined or foreseen, but subject to collective debate and reformulation. I suggest three such affinities. First, infrastructures and political power both share an ability and a tendency to jump scales, they exhibit an extraordinary agility in staging the most magnificent and reappearing in the most banal aspect of the everyday. This ability to jump scales makes them extremely difficult to trace and study, ethnographically, but it also allows us to glimpse new “associations” or entanglements of the social, to interpret events, things, and practices from a wider angle. Secondly, and emerging partly from this ability to jump scales, infrastructures and political power share a similar proclivity towards excess – a tendency to be and do more than their intended designs or mandate – yet often come short of their very terms of existence. The gaps that result, from their shortcomings and potential excess, in turn often take on new life, sustaining and extending their remit. This offers new possibilities of thinking modes of resilience in increasingly fragile material systems. Thirdly, infrastructures and political power both constitute sites of delivery, they promise and entail an ethics of distribution (Ferguson 2015). They gather a particular public, and are themselves a form par excellence of the “public good”, of the contested nature of its remits, and of the accepted modes of its distribution. As “public goods”, they form the base base of a popular politics, mediating between the state and the national public and bringing both into formation.

**Affinity #1: Jumping scales, creating the ordinary**

When Dumsor became a trend, as described in the first chapter of this thesis, it revealed the extent to which infrastructure pervades and sustains both the ordinary and the fantastic. Dumsor was not so much a “breakdown” of reality, as energy shortages are often seen to reveal (Nye 2010); rather, it came to redefine the real as a popular complex or “moment of freedom” (Fabian 1988) that encompassed everything from popular
culture references, social media virality, and election results (Osei 2016). This thesis has attempted to chart some of these insurrections of Dumsor and to trace some of their historical resonances. As the systems that produce the conditions and perceptions of the ordinary, infrastructures constantly shift and reformulate our sense of the real. At the same time, a moment of “crisis” like Dumsor exposes both the wonderful and the abysmal possibilities of the ordinary, contained as latent conditions in infrastructural systems. This capacity of infrastructures to enfold the sublime and the banal, to deploy enchanting and disenchanting effects (Harvey and Knox 2012), to reveal the magnificence of ordinariness and the ordinary quality of the spectacular, is I would argue a capacity they share with political power. Infrastructures, like political power, manage to jump scales and to magically reappear and disappear from private and public sites, intimate and national discourses, individual and collective practices. In this thesis, I have attempted to show how these entanglements of scale play out, by taking different foci: in the first part (chapters 1-4), I took a wider perspective on infrastructure in Ghana’s national history, discussing both the ordinary practices of infrastructure (e.g. paper bills, meter readers), and its more spectacular effects (e.g. the trend and protests it created, the creation of the Akosombo Dam). In the second part of the thesis, (chapters 5-7), I attempted to look at the intimacy of infrastructure, and the way that its deficiencies and possibilities intersected with local desires, love, hopes, and aspirations.

Throughout the thesis, however, I have privileged these intimate politics of electricity over their wider national narrative, because I am particularly interested in the “work of ordinariness” (Das 2007) that infrastructures enable and reveal. As such, I have followed a rather established course of ethnographic study that has long privileged the everyday and the banal, the partial and the eclectic, as revealing sites of sociality, rather than focusing on a more comprehensive but socially elusive portrait of the energy system at large. This stands perhaps as a critique of recent infrastructure studies along the “technopolitics” model which, although they engage thoroughly with the importance of materiality and materials in tracing political histories (Mitchell 2002;2011), sometimes give infrastructures (and materials) too much power in determining (and pre-assuming) their effects, in influencing world historical relations, and too little recognition of their “tentacular” effects on people’s daily lives – and in turn, people’s immaterial and material influences in shaping their uptake. This is also a methodological question: infrastructures, as large technical systems, are notoriously difficult to study. They evade
fixed sites, and their reach extends far beyond the power of one ethnographer. Although teams of ethnographers (and indeed interdisciplinary research centres / projects) would be a marvellous way of providing a multiplicity of perspectives on a particular infrastructural moment, project, or site, this possibility is unfortunately not always a possibility for doctoral and early-career researchers. But the scale of infrastructures is not simply a quantitative issue; I believe it is also a qualitative one. Part of the power of infrastructures derives from their ability to evade tracing, to jump scales and appear as both a taken-for-granted, compliant service and an immensely precious, capricious and fragile system. It is in this puzzling transition, in this “entanglement”, that infrastructural power – and its uncertainty – makes itself felt.

The daily interruptions of electricity in Ghana were experienced as political interference in the very fabric of domestic, social, and religious lives. As many expressed, Dumsor – associated with the state and with political power – took over time itself: it started to impose its own rhythms onto people’s lives, deciding when they would or wouldn’t eat, sleep, work, watch TV, listen to music, iron clothes, make love. Dumsor enfolded citizens in the intimacies of the state’s inner workings and networks of desire: recall the Control Man turning off and on the neighbourhood’s lights according to his girlfriends’ location – this is infrastructural intimacy and misery at its peak. During Dumsor, then, electricity and its animating power became more than a matter of comfort or functionality: it became a site of evaluation and imagination of political power itself. When dusk had set, a common question upon approaching one’s home was: “Can you see the light? Has Mahama visited you tonight?” – a question that aptly phrases this transition of political power, and of infrastructure, into the very recesses of domestic living. Tracing this transition from the spectacular to the ordinary, the domestic to the institutional, means looking at the dispersed relations of infrastructure to sites of social life. While this provides a necessarily more partial, selective, and eclectic account, I believe the questions and connections such an analysis traces are instructive in themselves – precisely because they replicate the very mode of operating of infrastructures. To me, infrastructure has provided a new analytical angle on political life – a way of grasping such disparate material practices as ironing, paying bills, and protesting government contracts – under an inclusive framework focused on the relation between material forms and political and social effects. The scalability work of infrastructure is precisely what makes it a lively site of anthropological enquiry: it shifts
conditions of analysis and creates new associations to “trace the social” (Latour 2005a), reappearing in unexpected places, and displacing our understandings of previous associations.

This has taken me to conceive of infrastructure and politics as having a much wider appeal than what they are often credited with, or reduced to. In this framework, infrastructures are not only engineered and technical systems of functionality and services, made up of pipes, cables, poles, and processing vital materials and chemical compounds like coal, oil, water, cement, but also sites of imagination, impossibilities, and unforeseen futures enacted in the mundane objects of hairdryers, irons, lightbulbs, air-conditioners. Similarly, political power is not solely defined by the state – though the concept of the state, in this case, is also extended by infrastructure: it appears as a polymorphous and contradictory figure, benevolent, intimate, forceful, imagined; and as a site of “fraught delivery”, as I describe below. Neither is political power simply equated to a form of “antagonism”, but pervasive of relationality itself, of the uncertain effects that it creates and the dependencies upon which it thrives. This takes us to the second affinity between political power and infrastructure: their tendency to be both object and relation, system and effect, “more than” or “both-and”, and yet to come short of either of these terms.

Affinity #2: Excess and Defects: Creativity and Crisis

Studies of material culture and material systems have long pondered the relationship exposed by Marx between what he called the “base” (and has been ambiguously translated in French as “infrastructure”), that is the conditions of production, and the “superstructure”, the cultural practices, values, power structures and rituals that they enable (Williams 1973). Infrastructure studies address precisely this dialectic of depth and surface and the invisibilities and visibilities through which it manifests, paying particular attention to the disjunctures that happen in the initial terms enounced by material systems, and to the uncertainty of their effects; but also problematizing the very distinctions between a “base” and its “effects”. Infrastructure, they argue, is not a fixed, predetermined substrate underlying our modern cities, but a flexible system mutating with social forms and material contingencies. As the connective tissue of society, infrastructures are particularly good media to register its ebbs and flows, its shocks and
tears, its sites of connection and disconnection. This “tissue”, in turn, becomes an important canvas for registering public opinion, political sentiments, and collective representations.

Infrastructures, like political power, are “voracious” systems: they attempt to both encompass conditions of power, as well as their manifestations; they promise to both lay the conditions for other systems to function – a promise of proliferation and generation – while often coming short of their very own terms of existence. Electricity is a particularly good example to see how this “both/and” but “less than” logic works. In Ghana, electricity was touted as a system that would not only industrialize and develop the nation, but also as a connective tissue that would repair its wounds and create a postcolonial publics connected by a new material form of connection to the state. In turn, electricity came to occupy a particular place in popular politics, in contested imaginaries of the nation, and in creating a new visual grid of political power – as the sensorial and visual effects enabled by electricity penetrated local understandings of prestige, modernity, and postcolonial consciousness. As such, when electricity “fails” to deliver these ambitious promises, material fragility takes on political and social relevance: it breeds scepticism about the viability of infrastructure to convey these ideas, about the uncertainty of their effects and intended designs, and about their close affinity to political power. Infrastructures become lessons in dealing with the inevitable uncertainty and disappointments of a networked society, but also of their enduring necessity. Like political rule, they require that we pay attention to people’s attempts to appropriate and conveniently transform this decisive but often defective form of power – this bring us, in a moment, to the politics of “basic needs” of infrastructure.

Ethnographies of infrastructure, then, by focusing on social practices around contested infrastructural encounters like energy crises, road construction, water wars, give rise to new ways of thinking uncertainty, material fragility, dependencies and resilience. Infrastructures and their fragility make evident the dilemmas of our age, with which, as many have argued, humans must now contend, as our desires for goods, appearances, forms of living and signs of success have built increasingly precarious and fragile networks of circulation. Analysing infrastructure means reconciling with this fragility, with the propensity of desires and excess to lay out latent sites of discontent and disconnections, to look at the fractured landscape of global connections (Tsing 2000);
but it also offers new avenues of resilience. Infrastructural failures are exceeded by an “imaginative force that overruns” the notion of “breakdown” (Larkin 2008:250), and partakes in the work performed by infrastructure, staging its own interventions. It is this human effervescence and uncontainability that I think an ethnographic attention to infrastructure, despite its misnaming ‘structural’ qualities, can bring forth. In staging the banal and the spectacular, and in their daily work of remaking the ordinary, infrastructures also create a particular urban poetics that responds to uncertainty and crisis in creative and flexible ways.

This is also where, I would argue, West African urban culture comes in. “Crisis” has become a charged complex in ethnographies and general representations of the African continent (Mbembe and Roitman 1995), and infrastructural failure has figured prominently in apocalyptic accounts of decay and doomed futures (e.g. Davis 2005). In response to this, anthropologists have emphasized the everyday creativity, dynamism, resilience and adaptability of African cities and their residents (Cooper and Pratten 2015; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Goldstone and Obarrio 2004; Weiss 2004). In this thesis, I have been less interested in decrying material precarity over a celebrated creativity, or vice-versa, than in attending to the fact that creativity and crisis become cognates in many urban Africans’ lives, creating the very ground of urban enunciability. The term “Dumsor” itself attests to this indissociability: it denotes both an infrastructural event of breakdown or failure, as well as a popular complex of urban resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness. People’s relations to infrastructure thus points to both their limitations and their endless possibilities, captured by the notion of Dumsor as a “comic tragedy”, or a tragic comedy, as people continue on living in the defective excesses of infrastructure, in the junctures of laughter and desperation, bitter frustration and fervent faith, political disenchantment and vernacular poetics of resilience.

In this thesis, I have looked at creativity-in-crisis as a technology of social and political transformation, an ability to create “booms” from the “busts” (Apter 2005), to turn things, people, and situations into repositories of values and to deploy these accordingly. I have described, for instance, efforts to turn a ‘crisis’ into a ‘trend’, to transform a ‘boring politics’ of load-shedding into a ‘discolight nation’, to transform Accra into Dubai, to critique the state’s shortcomings, to compete and stand out in an interrupted everyday, to create an “achievable present” under limiting conditions and deficiencies.
These practices split the boundaries of appearances into revelations of abundance and ambivalence, expressing the importance of versatility and the illusory borders of reality (Shipley 2015; Wendl 1999). The rich tradition of cosmologies of confusion and figures of uncertainty in African and Afro-diasporic histories, such as the trickster figures of Esu (Gates 1988; Falola 2013) or Ananse (Donkor 2016; Marshall 2007), suggest historical dispositions toward uncertainty and crisis that do not simply attempt to restore “order” or “stability”, but actively navigate disturbance and uncertainty (Vigh 2009). West African urban responses to uncertainty are not limited to a “contained coherence” (Guyer 2015) or a teleological tendency towards re-establishing order; they question both notions of “crisis” (Roitman 2011) and responses to “uncertainty”. They envisage an alternative poetics of urban living in which “certainty” does not appear as the only response to, and originary background to crisis, and in which fragilities, vulnerabilities and volatilities remain central to fashioning the liveable, the ordinary and the spectacular.

**Affinity #3: Delivery and Public Goods**

If infrastructures are prone to failure, what sustains their existence? How and why do their promises endure if these often fail to materialise? If many political scientists have often seen an instrumental relationship between infrastructure and politics, an ethnographic analysis of this relationship would question the persistence of this logic in the face of frequent deceptions and disappointments. This relationship, I have argued, is more complex than it appears during the isolated time of elections and spectacular inaugurations: first, because infrastructures span a longer life-cycle than electoral politics, mediating between the ordinary and the spectacular, the everyday and the exceptional; secondly, because infrastructural fragilities constantly erode our taken-for-granted assumption of the ordinariness and workability of infrastructure, demanding invested practices of resilience, and rendering the signs of infrastructural “success” and “failure” ever more ambiguous; and thirdly, as I want to argue now, because infrastructures are historically-constituted sites of delivery, mediating between the individual and the collective, the public and the private, materialising particular collectives – a nation, a city, a state, a compound housing, a shared prepaid meter – and notions of the “public good”, which gives them legitimacy to act (Harvey and Knox 2015:191).
Infrastructures are not only a mode of political address, shaping particular subjects; they also promise and entail a “politics of distribution” (Ferguson 2015). In turn, these politics of distribution create expectations of material and immaterial possibilities, they inform the unconscious of everyday tasks that take for granted the technical and political work invested in infrastructural operations (Graham and Marvin 2001). As I have discussed in the beginning of this thesis, infrastructures entangle; they create intimacies and trace connections that result in changing forms of the social. These entanglements make it difficult to identify ownership, to locate responsibilities, and to trace causalities. It is in that sense of fraught delivery and messy entanglement that infrastructures appear as “public goods”, not only because they serve the needs of a collective, but because their operations, ownership, and responsibilities become unclear, contested, and dispersed. Entanglements endure because they have no clear point of exit or fracture; and because the dependencies they create sustain other forms of socialities beyond their own existence. As systems that sustain the functioning of other systems, infrastructures create exponential dependence – as seen, for instance, in chapter 2, in which the operating system for the electricity department that regulates and manages the running of the utilities depends on the unreliable internet infrastructure of the city. In turn, this politics of distribution is linked to a politics of recognition; the selective infrastructural investments of the British colonial state in Ghana, for instance, denied the existence of a national electrical citizenry that later led so much credence to Nkrumah’s project of infrastructural independence, as electricity and the visibilities it enabled allowed people to claim new rights to citizenship and postcolonial dignity (Thompson 2015:10,27-31).

These entanglements, then, inform the collective nature of infrastructures, but they also expose the inequalities and aggressions that come from these implicating connections. The notion of the “public good” is part of what legitimates infrastructures as political objects, giving them the veneer of universal respectability and the urgency of indispensability. Electricity and water provisioning, as the “vital flows” of modern cities, take on an indisputable value that sometimes masks their political intentions and local and historical specificities under the appearance of a collective vision and a striving for the common good. In chapters 3 and 4, I discussed the ways in which the emergence of the national grid in Nkrumah’s project of decolonisation and a postcolonial publics also created situations of marginality; the case of shared prepaid meters, for instance,
problematized the precaritising obligations that this situation of national connectivity created and from which it sustained its legitimacy as the purveyor of an unquestionable “common good”. This led me to argue that the deficiencies of energy provisioning in Ghana are not so much experienced in the “abandonment” of the state, or in its inability to provide, but in the very presences of electrical infrastructure and political power – in the inability to pay for high consumption tariffs, in the deliberate impossibilities created by the national grid and the prepaid meters (chapter 4). This questions the notion of “lack”, “failure”, or “scarcity” as symptoms of abandonment, arguing that abandonment occurs, too, in the presence of infrastructure and in its attempts to deliver. Disconnections occur, too, in the very linkages and visibilities of infrastructures. As such, I have attempted to view infrastructures as “entangling webs” that tie people and things, services and events together, and create particular modes of binding – one I have described here through the Ghanaian communication mode known as “flashing”. In turn, I have described the ways in which these entangling webs manage to endure, and often take on new life, in their moments of breakdown, disruptions, and interrupt – “Eii! LIGHT OFF!”
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