

# Contentious connections: infrastructure, dignity, and collective life in Accra, Ghana

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Infrastructural systems have emerged as productive ethnographic sites for analysing political subjectivities and rationalities. Through the case of shared electricity and prepaid meters in the compound housing system of Accra, Ghana, I suggest that infrastructures' political potential lies in their imaginative and hermeneutic abilities to foster desires for dignity, sustain well-being, and question moral ideals of collective life. In contrast to recent anthropological work that has emphasized the material basis of infrastructures as 'techno-political' devices materializing certain logics of rule and governance, I reclaim a poetics of sociality whereby infrastructures mobilize a politics of (unwanted) collective life. Through the 'electricity stories' circulated by tenants, I chart how the moral economy of infrastructure in a context of collective precarity redistributes marginalization and freedom in ways that always exceed political rationales of energy reforms and policies.

## Introduction: Desires and dependencies on the grid

*Kwame had an unusual, but highly entertaining, strategy for exposing neighbours whom he suspected of tampering with his electricity meter for their own use. Here is what he would do: in the evenings, when people had retreated to their room to watch the latest telenovela (at the time of fieldwork, 'Simply Maria' or the Indian drama 'Kumkum Bhagya', Fig. 1), he would wait for that crucial moment – say, when Alejandro runs away after Maria has announced her pregnancy. Then, with a flick of the switch, he would cut off the power. The result, Kwame laughed, was radical: culprit neighbours, wrapped up in the suspense, would come out in protest to the courtyard, thereby attesting to their crime in a dramatic fashion.*

Stories like Kwame's are revealing of the role that electricity plays in the domestic politics of collective living in Accra, Ghana. As the current that powers technologies of entertainment, pleasure, and productivity, electricity inspires deep passions and frenzy. In the housing system of Accra known as compound housing, where several people or households share infrastructural facilities like electricity meters, infrastructure does more than supply vital goods: it creates an urban network of dependency that exposes

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Figure 1. *Kumkum Bhagya* on TV in an electronics shop. (Photo by the author.)

the vulnerabilities of living through the demands and struggles of others. This makes electricity a highly contentious public good, prone to widespread suspicions and resentments. As tenants depend on their neighbours' ability to pay for the increasingly elevated cost of electricity bills, they find themselves in a situation of precarity that is caused not so much by perennial difficulties of access or reliability, but by the socioeconomic relations of dependence and obligation generated by the shared electricity meter. While this is quite a unique feature of the electricity network in Accra, in part caused by the particularity and prevalence of compound housing, I want to suggest that it also reveals a more general aspect of infrastructure as the systems of connection undergirding and mediating collective life.

Since 2008, Ghana has experienced prolonged periods of power outages (commonly known as *dumsor*, Twi for off-on) as the national electricity company has struggled to reconcile a growing demand for electricity with heavy financial debt, high technical losses, and decreased generation at the country's main hydroelectric dam in Akosombo due to droughts and lowering water levels (Eshun & Amoako-Tuffour 2016; Kumi 2017). In contrast to some of its neighbours, Ghana boasts one of the highest electrification rates on the continent, reaching an average 85 per cent nationally (IEA 2018). The electrification of the country through the construction of the Akosombo Dam in the wake of Independence in 1957 figured high in the Pan-African vision for African industrialization put forth by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first Prime Minister and President (Miescher 2014). In this historical context, *dumsor* as the manifestation of a failing grid became a national crisis, indexing both a moment of infrastructural breakdown and a wider symptom of political and social fracture,

encapsulating mixed feelings of frustration and nostalgia for the ruined imaginaries of postcolonial modernity (Yarrow 2017).

In the midst of crisis, the government turned to emergency power solutions in the form of foreign-contracted Independent Power Producers (IPPs) and embarked on the privatization of the national electricity distribution company, Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG), as part of a \$500 million power sector reform package from the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC).<sup>1</sup> Aimed at improving energy access, reliability, and revenue collection, the reforms reintroduced prepaid meters that had since the 1990s been gradually deployed in lower-income urban neighbourhoods as a means of recuperating lost revenues and ‘waging wars’ against illegal connections that, the company insisted, were the prime culprits of its heavy financial losses (ECG 1991).

In this article, I follow the introduction of these prepaid meters in the compound houses of a low-income neighbourhood in Accra. I argue that the meter materialized not only a calculative logic of rule or economic regime (von Schnitzler 2013), but also a poetics of sociality, eliciting desires for dignity, peace, and freedom. In response to recent scholarship that tends to over-emphasize the material basis and aspects of infrastructural engagements, I foreground a poetics of sociality to interrogate the connective and collective aspects of infrastructure, asking how infrastructure intervenes in, and delimits, a particular politics of collective life.

### **Infrastructure and collective life**

In recent years, there has been a flurry of interest around infrastructures such as roads, energy systems, water pipes, and communication channels as productive analytical sites for engaging with the political and ecological relations between human and nonhuman agents and institutions (Anand 2017; Anand, Gupta & Appel 2018; Degani 2017; Jensen & Morita 2017; Knox & Harvey 2015; von Schnitzler 2016). As the networks of circulation and ‘relational worlds’ (Harvey, Jensen & Morita 2017: 2) that enable the delivery of vital matter and services (Larkin 2013), infrastructures offer new possibilities for rethinking a politics of collective life (Collier, Mizes & von Schnitzler 2016) in a context of increasingly precarious urban livelihoods and ‘splintered’ modes of governance (Graham & Marvin 2001).

But while the material qualities of infrastructures and their political potential have (rightly) gathered much attention and debate (Knox 2017; Mitchell 2011; Venkatesan *et al.* 2017), the complexity and forms of ‘collective life’ that they enable have been neglected or relegated to a by-product of material processes. Since Susan Star’s (1999) seminal manifesto for an ethnography of infrastructure, the ‘relational’ nature of infrastructure has been ceaselessly asserted whilst remaining largely unspecified. In what ways are infrastructures relational or ‘always already social’ (Boyer 2015)? What kind of ‘social work’ do they perform? What conditions of and limits to ‘relationality’ do they enable? To what extent do they also create unviable relations, aporetic or asocial systems of connection?

In this article, I interrogate the relationality of infrastructure through the case of shared electricity network in a low-income neighbourhood in Accra. In a context of precarious urban living compounded by the ongoing privatization of public services, I argue that infrastructure creates contentious connections, social binds that are both vital and unviable, necessary yet compromising. Beyond providing a basic necessity of life, electricity reveals a complex moral landscape through which people voice visions and critiques of their current social order, political subjectivities, personal aspirations

for a dignified existence, and collective visions of peace and conviviality (Abram, Winthereik & Yarrow 2019). By examining the dependencies and desires that arise from living with and through others infrastructurally, I foreground the moral work involved in sustaining peaceful and dignified (if materially fraught) conditions of collective life. Far from simply operating as a technical system of service delivery, infrastructure constitutes a poetics of sociality that interprets and identifies ways of living through what Lauren Berlant has called ‘the inconvenience of other people’ (2016: 393; in press), mobilizing a politics of (unwanted) collective life.

While I make clear that this move away from the material emphasis in infrastructure studies is not intended to devalue materiality or indeed reify unhelpful and arbitrary distinctions between matter and meaning (Larkin 2013), I nonetheless reclaim an analytic space for the social and moral complexity of infrastructural encounters in a politics of collective life. Whilst much of the literature on infrastructure and politics has tended to adopt a ‘techno-political’ approach, focusing on questions of citizenship, rights, entitlements, and governance, I suggest that infrastructure as a moral and interpretative register (Coleman 2014) allows us to think about infrastructural politics through, for instance, people’s quests for dignity and freedom, conflicts between personal and collective aspirations, and conflicting visions of an ideal collective life, peace, conviviality, and (a)-sociality. In other words, far from simply indexing and materializing a relationship to the state, infrastructures also elicit affective states of being. In compound housing, where shared electricity ignites constant suspicion and conflict, infrastructure becomes a deeply affective zone (Knox 2017), exposing the fragile and consuming efforts of relating to and detaching oneself from others. These affective leaks starkly defy the logic of rule and governance supposedly embedded in infrastructures as ‘techno-political’ devices intended to materialize a particular political order. This shifts the delimitation of politics away from large-scale processes of economic and political rationality, to the domestic micro-politics of social interactions and ordinary coexistence, or what I describe as a politics of collective life. This contributes to theorizing the politics and publics of infrastructures by interrogating the conditions under which their collective and connective potential are realized, sustained, or indeed rendered unviable. Through the popular tales about electricity told by tenants living in compound housing (their ‘electricity stories’), I consider infrastructures’ political potential not in their techno-political or geopolitical capacity to govern human life (Barry 2013; Chalfin 2014; von Schnitzler 2016), but in their imaginative and aspirational abilities to foster desires for dignity, sustain well-being, and espouse moral ideals of collective life.

Based on material drawn from seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2019 in Accra, including participant observation at ECG, semi-structured interviews with compound housing residents and energy stakeholders, and archival research at the National Archives in Accra and ECG Archives in Tema, I explore the ways in which electricity weaves moral templates for communal living. I start by telling the electricity stories of compound housing through three main scenarios of conflict. In binding tenants into one another’s monetary flows, electricity operates as a desired yet divisive connection that makes people long for infrastructural freedom. I then describe how this freedom found expression in the adoption of individual meters, known as ‘one-one meters’, deployed as part of the ongoing privatization reforms of the electricity company. In redefining the relations of dependence and obligation that previously shaped compound housing politics, the meters offered tenants a kind of

‘prepaid dignity’ as they enabled a withdrawal from the humiliating and unsustainable dependencies of the shared meter. At the same time, the meters’ requisite of prepayment created new conditions of marginality under the guise of revenue control and self-management. By tracking the changing forms of dependency and dignity alongside the implementation of energy reforms, I attempt to describe ‘electricity’s dialectical relationship to social infrastructures and political institutions’ (Gupta 2015: 563) or the processes by which the complexity of social relations and domesticity weave into the ordinary seams of the political.

### **Electricity stories: the moral economy of infrastructure**

In the opening of this article, Kwame’s story is narrated as a ‘scenario’ unfolding in the conditional, in a way that neither incriminates nor identifies. This mode of storytelling was indicative of a particular discursive register when talking about matters of collective life, shame, and dignity. As I was making sense of my data, it struck me that my interlocutors were reluctant to disclose personal accounts of their experience. After some insistence, they would mention a few details: the bill amount, the time of year, the outcome of the conflict, the type of meter acquired. *Scenarios* about compound house living, however, generated enthusiastic comments and prolific debates between my interlocutors, sometimes adding a variation to the plots, sometimes questioning the implications and interpretations of their outcomes.

Through a set of established scenarios that eschew individual identification and blame, these narratives distil the particularity of personal experience into familiar plots. Testing individual desires against the social expectations and political implications of state energy policy, infrastructure orders a moral economy that strikes at the very core of sociality: how to live (apart) together, how to reconcile individual desires with collective expectations, how to carve for oneself a dignified existence that tolerates the intrusions of unchosen others. By deflecting individual responsibility, scenarios offered an indirect way of voicing suspicions and humiliations arising from shared electricity consumption, articulating personal concerns through the collective voice of infrastructure. Closer to moral tales than idiosyncratic stories, they enounce a set of general patterns and possibilities that guide tenants on the most appropriate ways of negotiating the difficulties of living with others. They also attempt to make sense of the inadequacies of the state’s strategy for energy distribution, at a time of power sector reforms aimed at maximizing revenues and eradicating sources of financial loss by evicting ‘unattractive consumers’ from the grid (Wamukonya 2003). Infrastructure in this case appears not just as a ‘terrain of political negotiation’ or a ‘site of entitlements’ (McFarlane & Desai 2015) essential to the formation of political subjectivities and experience of citizenship (Anand 2017; von Schnitzler 2016); it also works as a mode of social and political critique.

The popularity<sup>2</sup> of these scenarios is partly due to the prevalence of the compound housing system in Ghana: according to the latest government census (Ghana Statistical Service 2014), 67 per cent of all dwellings in Ghana consist of compound houses, making it the predominant form of housing (Afram & Korboe 2009).<sup>3</sup> A typical compound usually comprises several rooms organized around a common courtyard, where various domestic and social activities take place, including food preparation, childcare, laundry, and sometimes celebrations and meetings (Fig. 2). In the congested and highly inequitable housing market of Accra, they provide cheap accommodation for residents unable to afford separate houses (Grant 2009: 67).



**Figure 2.** Auntie Habibah's compound house. In the background of the picture, we can see the individual meters affixed to the walls of individual entrances. (Photo by the author.)

In what follows, I collect these electricity stories into three main scenarios: (1) *The Landlord Cheat*, and tenants' efforts to acquire their own meters through backdoor routes; (2) *The AC Hideaway*, or suspicions about tenants' use of high-consuming electrical items in their room, and the elaborate 'gadget-points system' devised by tenants to share the bill fairly; and, finally, (3) *No Money, Pay By Force*, the most dreadful of scenarios, in which tenants are unable to contribute to the shared bill and risk humiliation or debts.

*Scenario 1: The Landlord Cheat (and the backdoor meter)*

Auntie Habibah<sup>4</sup> was 'fresh' (new) to the compound when she moved in with her youngest daughter and husband. As a newcomer, she had agreed to pay the landlord a share of the electricity bill. After a few months, however, she realized that she was subsidizing the landlord's elevated electricity consumption, while he failed to provide bills or disclose the amount of his own contributions. Today, she says proudly, she enjoys her own meter, placed outside the entrance to her self-contained room. Landlords, my interlocutors explained, often tried to make money from meters, setting up what someone humorously called 'mini-ECGs'. They would request money with no proof of purchase and enjoy power on the back of tenants; their malpractices would eventually be discovered through the visit of an ECG disconnecting team, revealing unpaid bills with debts contracted over months, sometimes years. Landlords, as an interlocutor put it, were not only short-changing tenants, they were 'cheating the state', pocketing a national asset for personal – and often disreputable – ventures. For this reason, most tenants sharing a meter with their landlord eventually acquired their own. But because ECG

required tenants to bring the meter owner's identification card – that is, the landlord's – they were often forced to turn to backdoor routes to procure the meter.<sup>5</sup>

Mr Mensah, who lives with his landlord and six other tenants, turned to one such backdoor route when the situation with his landlord became unbearable. He decided to hire the services of a middleman, but the price was high: it took him three months to save enough money, during which he was cut off from electricity, having to study for an exam (he was then pursuing an HR qualification) by lantern light. The 'sacrifice', as he described it, was worth it: at the time, getting an individual meter to avoid conflict ranked highest in his priorities. Many of my interlocutors, who had acquired meters through such backdoor routes – which often involved ECG agents themselves – spoke of this economic sacrifice as a moral deed for the good of the compound and one's own well-being: in order to preserve 'peace' (*asomdwia*), it was necessary to cut those bonds, to 'free' oneself and receive 'peace of mind'. As I describe later, preserving peace was a way of avoiding disgrace unleashed by anger – the most shameful of responses. The individual meters appeared, in this scenario, as costly investments for self-preservation and the restoration of a liveable social order.

*Scenario 2: The AC Hideaway (and the gadget-points system)*

This week, it was Mr Adjei's turn to go to buy credit for the meter he shared with six other households. After queuing at the local vending station to recharge the compound's common account, he tapped the card onto the meter to load the credits and went to bed. A few hours later, he was awakened by the screams of angry neighbours who accused him of having cheated them: the credits had already been used up ('finished'), leaving the compound without light and fans. Fortunately for him, he had kept the receipt from the vending booth. A quarrel ensued and, he recalled, were it not for that receipt, it would have come to blows. Once Mr Adjei's innocence was established, suspicions turned to another actor: the air-conditioning (AC) box. How could credit run out so fast? Some people must be secretly using expensive appliances in the privacy of their room – perhaps a concealed AC unit or a standing cooler. The problem with shared electricity, people explained, was that you could never be sure to split it fairly, because people's energy consumption (and access to expensive electronics) was never 'equal'. In this scenario, the protagonist always solemnly professes to using electricity sparingly, while a co-tenant secretly and unashamedly sucks all the compound's current to indulge in the wonders of high-powered flat-screen TVs, cool AC, and bright lights.

Daddy Yaw mimicked this extravagant behaviour to me: while he is out of the house all day, he complained, 'working hard', what happens in his compound? He twerked his body left to right, singing to Shatta Wale's dancehall beats: "BOOM – BOOM – BOOM, Adwoaaa, eh, I want you to be my babe!": they will be blasting music, watching TV all day!' Because of this, Daddy Yaw decided to get his own meter, refusing to pay for others' enjoyment in his absence. Like Mr Mensah above, he contracted the services of an ECG electrician, entrusting him with 'a nice envelope' to receive his meter promptly.

Differentials of wealth and access to prized but power-hungry electronics were the subject of countless disputes between tenants who pondered the morality of energy consumption and the incommensurability of shared electrical current. Tenants had developed an elaborate strategy for a fairer bill division based on one's electrical possessions and consumption. According to a 'gadget-points system', each tenant contributed a proportion of the bill through a system of points allocated to various electrical appliances. A standard self-contained room, for instance, would count





still forced to pay – or to get someone to cover one’s share, forcing one into debt. Abena, an orange seller living in the compound next door, explained that with the shared meters, ‘if you don’t have money, it’s “*by force*”: it’s “*by force*” that you have to pay’. It was at challenging times like these that tenants realized the full liabilities incurred in being part, unwillingly, of this network of connectivity: dependencies came with obligations, and obligations were met with increasing difficulty – and reluctance. People’s dependence on one another ensured a continuous electricity supply, but it also forced them to consume a current they could not always afford. This led to humiliating situations, because one’s financial situation would be revealed at those points of struggle. Mr Mensah described the humiliation that could befall a man unable to pay for his household’s share: ‘When you go out to work in the morning’, he said, ‘they will be teasing your wife at home: they will be disgracing you, teasing her that you don’t have money and you are leaving her like this, living in darkness’. According to him, this was one of the main reasons driving people to seek their own meter: ‘to avoid the disgrace; to enjoy freedom and peace of mind’. ‘If you are on your own meter’, he said, ‘you can plead with your wife to understand your difficulties; but you can’t expect similar understandings from tenants – they will be mocking her and shaming your household’. Here, dependencies turn into disgrace, as payments for utilities work within a ‘political economy of recognition’ that ascribes status and worth through ‘profiles of achievement and self-realization’ (Guyer 2004: 147).

### **Vulnerability beyond breakdown**

The three scenarios above describe, in different ways, the dependencies and desires for dignity that arise from living with and through others infrastructurally. These dependencies are bolstered by different political and material factors: the administrative legislations and property regime that organize relations between landlords and tenants at the advantage of the former (scenario 1); the unknowability of electrical value and resulting suspicions around fairness and inequalities (scenario 2); and the forced economic demands made upon tenants to participate in a network they cannot afford as a result of new power sector reforms pricing out those unable to pay a premium for a basic good (scenario 3).

As such, the shared meter creates situations of vulnerability that are not just evidenced by the uncertain delivery of or access to electricity but also brought about by the interference and dependencies of others, as people find themselves reliant on one another’s ability to participate in this network to go on with their daily lives and, indeed, with ‘life itself’. Belying their ideal of progress and smooth connectivity, infrastructures are ‘fragile achievements’, prone to breakdown and failure, in need of constant repair and maintenance (Graham & Thrift 2007; Jackson 2014). Studies of infrastructure have emphasized this fragility – in the form of breakdown, disruption, leakage, intermittency, or disrepair (Anand 2015; Chu 2014; Graham 2010; McFarlane 2013; Nye 2010) – as productive of new social orders and political relations. Yet focusing solely on material signs of failure or fragility misses forms of infrastructural violence (Rodgers & O’Neill 2012) that may be – and perhaps always are – lodged in the social connectivity and associational life that they enable. Foregrounding a poetics of sociality enables us to consider forms of marginality, vulnerability, and precarity along faultlines that lie outside of infrastructures’ own political and material logics of exclusion and delivery. As the scenarios above demonstrate, infrastructural vulnerabilities are not only conditioned by material ‘affordances’ or configurations of access and distribution, but

constantly redrawn – often with surprising consequences – by the messiness of people's aspirations, priorities, and concerns (Enslev, Mirsal & Winthereik 2018).

As my interlocutors clearly maintain, electricity can be experienced as inefficient, marginalizing, and degrading in its very conditions of delivery. It does not need to be lacking or failing to impart feelings of discrimination. While electricity in Accra is notoriously unreliable, expensive, and subject to regular and mysterious 'faults', here I want to emphasize that for many urban residents, electricity distribution is also fraught with a vulnerability generated by the social dependencies inherent in infrastructures as systems of connections undergirding collective life – demanding more than a technical fix. One may object that much of this vulnerability is indeed conditioned by the policies and structural inequalities inherent in the privatization of public services and neoliberalization of the economy at large, of which unaffordable and differential access to electricity is only one symptom. But I would argue that this would be mistaking poverty for the explanation, rather than the starting point, of infrastructural politics. By insisting on infrastructure as a matter of morality and personal dignity, residents reclaimed the terms by which ordinary and collective life unfolds – including those by which vulnerability is felt and dignity longed for. Whilst economic precarity was a situation shared by all tenants to various degrees, ways of conceptualizing, enduring, and responding to hardship draw on an elaborate moral register that lies outside of – or at least is not exhausted by – state logic and material structures of governance. Foregrounding a poetics of sociality at the heart of infrastructural politics thus recognizes people's singularity of experience amidst collective spaces, rather than simply as subjects of state administration (cf. Han 2018: 333). To illustrate this point further, I now turn to a discussion of relationality in compound housing.

### **Detachment and rupture: surviving others**

The current rental form of the compound house in urban areas like Accra derives from the family compound in Ashanti housing, which accommodated the extended family and served as a social safety net, providing free housing for less affluent members of the lineage (Danso-Wiredu 2018: 666). In Accra, however, this safety net turns into a social trap, as infrastructural dependencies make co-tenants' relationships socially, morally, and economically unviable for the large number of urban residents who cannot afford to rent or own a private home. In fact, even my interlocutors who lived with family members decided to acquire individual meters for their respective rooms. Mr Dadzie, who was initially sharing his meter with his father, brother, and his cousin's son, purchased his own when he realized that his brother was 'subletting' the meter to other tenants through a bypass connection.

Compounds in urban Africa have been surprisingly under-theorized in the anthropological and Africanist literature.<sup>7</sup> In her extensive study of Sabon Zongo (a stranger or migrant quarter) in Accra, Deborah Pellow (2008) describes the compound house as a site of belonging characterized by long genealogies of migration, kinship ties, and property inheritance, deeply marked by the affiliative identities of Islam and Hausa ethnicity. In Pellow's analysis, compound residents mostly consist of related family members who describe their relation to one another as *duka kudundune* (literally, 'everyone is crumpled up/intertwined'). This 'crumpling' of relational selves into a sense of religious and ethnic community couldn't be more different to the situation in the rental form of the compound that this article is concerned with, where unrelated individuals/households cohabit in close (and often unwanted) proximity. As Pellow

acknowledges, today even family-based compounds in Sabon Zongo are dominated by unrelated, renting tenants 'living apart from family in the midst of strangers' (2008: 216).

In these cosmopolitan compounds of 'strangers', tenants aspired to cultivate cordial but distanced relationships. The best tenants, I was repeatedly reminded, are those who 'mind their own business' and restrict their interactions to polite greetings. Auntie Habibah, whom we encountered in 'The Landlord Cheat' scenario, was keen to emphasize that 'neighbours are not your friends'. To navigate the 'throwtogetherness' (Massey 2005) of the compound, she instructed, 'don't make friends, mind your own business, don't ask questions. Just greetings: good morning, good evening'. Otherwise, she warned me, 'you will die in this place'. Compound sociality, she advised, can only be 'survived' by finding ways to keep apart together. In statements that starkly defy the long-standing tradition of scholarship praising the importance of kinship and collectivism in African lives, interlocutors would proudly declare that they have 'very few friends', emphasizing the need to 'cut' relations and exercise restriction in one's chosen circle of friendships and acquaintances. This emphasis on cutting echoes metaphors and practices of rupture that figure prominently in Pentecostal discourses praising the self-sufficiency of the nuclear household and the need to repudiate traditional kinship models (Engelke 2010). This mode of selective sociality also concurs with the art of association described by Jane Guyer (2004), who, based on the southern Ghanaian household budget survey conducted by Polly Hill (1957), argues that young Ghanaians selectively invest in relations of co-operative interests, aspiration, and trustworthiness – rather than ethnic or kin ties of obligations (see also Clark 1994: 142).

Yet I suspect that the ethics of detachment proffered by my interlocutors were at least partly prompted by an inability to meet the obligations and expectations that come with extensive networks in a city where many already struggle to meet their own needs. As Tom Neumark (2017) perceptively remarks in his work on neighbourly relations in Nairobi, where 'a good neighbour is not one that gives', detachment does not index an *absence* of relationship but an ethical orientation to the other that often works to *preserve* relationships in contexts of economic hardship. The interlocutors he worked with not only accepted but praised an ethics of detachment between neighbours as a valued mode of relationality. In contexts where obligations might precipitate people into dependencies they cannot afford to take part in (cf. Neumark 2017: 758), detachment may indeed index a collective ethos of care – rather than rejection. Detachment, then, is not a 'state of non-connection', or the opposite of engagement (Candea, Yarrow, Trundle & Cook 2015), but a moral perspective on collective life, a way of surviving (rather than suffering) others.

### From dependency to dignity

How do we survive others? How do we craft a dignified existence through the dependencies that precondition 'life itself'? One such way was the individual prepaid meter, known as the 'one-one' meter ('one-household-one-meter' or 'one-person-one-meter') (Fig. 4). In their readiness to avoid the entanglements of debt, suspicion, accusations, and humiliation, tenants turned to the lengthy (and often, as in Mr Mensah's case, expensive) process of acquiring their own 'private' meter.

These individual meters were being deployed by ECG as part of a series of reforms aimed at improving revenue collection, mitigating losses, and monitoring customer



Figure 4. 'One-one' meters. (Photo by the author.)

data digitally. Their implementation had initially been strongly opposed by residents as rumours circulated about 'cheating meters' and their 'vanishing credits'.<sup>8</sup> Credits, people lamented, were now disappearing in a matter of days, leading some to characterize the meters as 'running faster than Usain Bolt'. Despite these initial suspicions, and the fact that the meters now featured prepayment as a condition of use, tenants came to embrace them as a way of regaining 'freedom', obtaining 'peace of mind', and preserving the 'peace' of compound living. A form of dignity found shape in the individualizing of infrastructure as people were no longer subject to one another's monetary flows and their attendant suspicions and accusations. Here, I use dignity rather than freedom to draw attention away from a dialectic of control, foregrounding instead the moral aspect of infrastructural matters. As Mr Mensah's story of the humiliated husband suggests, the prepaid meter allowed tenants to avoid situations of disgrace. Yet it would be reductive to see this quest for single meters as simply motivated by a desire for individuality and 'self-management'. Rather, the initiatives co-tenants took to seek out their own meters and opt out of the dependencies of compound sociality were seen as virtuous decisions and even as 'sacrifices', as Mr Mensah put it, to the common peace. Electricity was seen as a compromising force, as the activities that it provoked – gossiping, surveying each other, fighting over bills and usage – were considered deeply shameful to oneself and harmful to the integrity of the wider compound. In popular discourse and in everyday interactions, tenants emphasized the importance of peace and the disgrace brought upon oneself through eruptions of anger. Disengaging from this network of obligation and dependency was not only desired by tenants, but also praised by their neighbours as a sign of moral virtue undertaken for the common good of the compound.

'Dignity' as a right to infrastructure is often framed through the concept of basic needs assessed by indexes of access, reliability, availability, and affordability (Tully 2006). But as the anthropological scholarship makes clear, dignity is not simply a question of access or practical means. In her work on service delivery protests in post-apartheid South Africa, Antina von Schnitzler (2014) positions dignity as a material, legal, and moral construct deployed to reclaim entitlements of citizenship and belonging. Assessing dignity in relation to the delivery of vital goods implies an ambiguous commensuration between quantitative measures and the qualitative values that inform it – including historical legacies of differentiated access and deprivation. In their work on sanitation in Cape Town, Peter Redfield and Steven Robins (2016) describe dignity as a question of design: in service delivery protests, open toilets were seen as undignifying because they recalled patterns of inequality and differentiated access to the signs and standards of modernity. Dignity here was not confined to the presence of, or access to, sanitation, but emerged as a desire for a specific form – the 'flush toilet' – informed by demands for historical redress. Rather than taking dignity as an abstract 'human right' or self-legitimizing moral imperative, an ethnographic attention to dignity reveals the historical, political, and cultural specificities that frame claims to and perceptions of dignified living, expressing considerations of a 'good', 'decent', or 'proper' life (Morreira 2015), whilst critically appraising at what costs dignity may be obtained.

In the case of shared electricity in Accra, individual prepaid meters became a pathway to dignity in the ability to opt out of a precaritizing system of collective infrastructure. Dignity appeared not so much as a question of entitlement or access, but as a right to withdrawal from the humiliations, dependencies, and obligations of compounds – as well as from the painful disconnection visits of ECG. But the dignity regained through individual meters was neither permanent nor unconditional: as I describe in the following sections, it was obtained at the cost of a 'merit' system of delivery – prepayment – and heightened public visibility as those meters were placed directly onto the poles in the street. As such, dignity appeared as a partial reversal of the vulnerability experienced under shared infrastructure, while crafting its own forms of marginality and discrimination.

### **'Neighbours are like CNN': living apart together**

Aside from obviously supporting the network of transmission cables, electricity poles in the city had long functioned as local broadcasters and advertising structures, announcing the latest religious crusades, political figures, Mallam (traditional doctor) treatments, and solutions for concerns as varied as marital problems, stomach ulcers, obesity, diarrhoea, exam tests, or visas to *abrokyire* (abroad) (Fig. 5). Ubiquitous and highly visible, the poles document, like their own street archive (Quayson 2010), the ills, ailments and aspirations of urban dwellers.

At the time of my fieldwork, the one-one meters that were being deployed had a special attribute. Apart from their legendary running and cheating ability, these new meters were positioned *outside* people's houses and shops, on the street, at eye-level for all to see. Key to ECG's restructuring programme was a focus on illegal connections, which it attributed to 'unpatriotic citizens' preying on its grid. Invoking a scandalous and morally titillating sense of criminality (Fig. 6), the company enjoined citizens to turn in suspects of this 'criminal offence' and act as vigilantes in their neighbourhoods, even offering rewards against denunciations – impervious to the sociality, morality, and



Figure 5. 'Pole' prepaid meters and election campaign. (Photo by the author.)

difficult decisions involved in 'contracting' an illegal connection (Degani 2017: 302), and to the frequent complicity of ECG staff themselves.

In the neighbourhood of western Accra where I conducted research, this shift was evident: on the right side of the main road that runs through it, prepaid meters were implemented during John Kufuor's time (around 2004) and installed within people's own premises. On the left side of the road, however, individual prepaid meters have since 2016 been attached directly onto the electricity poles in the street. Poles became loaded with rows of meters, visually displaying the increasingly fragmented nature of collective living (Fig. 7). As we walked past them one day, my friend Freddy B. indignantly commented: 'They say they are educated, but they give us meters like these? These meters are *jimmy-jimmy* [stupid, unruly]! Stubborn meters!'

The hypervisible and public nature of the meters was justified by ECG on the grounds of 'non-access' occasionally encountered by their staff – a situation in which meter readers are unable to take readings because the meters are locked away or hidden. The presence of these pole meters was deeply humiliating to residents, because they already



**Figure 6.** Placard warning customers against illegal connections, outside ECG's central office. (Photo by the author.)

presupposed, and publicly indicated, the perceived untrustworthiness and immorality of particular users. As Freddy B. revealingly explained:

Our leaders, they always want to make us look *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* is a pejorative term that comes from 'colonial' and expresses backwardness and a sense of technological obsolescence. The meters, as everyday techniques of revenue collection, linked a routine feature of state governance and monitoring to wider narratives of modernity and class distinctions. Freddy B.'s comments reveal the acute awareness of being discriminated against by a technical device that marks certain consumers out as always potentially 'undeserving'. If one-one meters provided a partial relief from the undignified situation of sharing electricity with neighbours, they came at the cost of the public sight of one's newly acquired private consumption device – a tension at the heart of power sector reforms informed by a neoliberal ideology that turns public goods into private (and profitable) consumables (Graham & Marvin 2001; Wamukonya 2003).

People's transactions with their meters were now open for all to see; one could monitor and comment on the frequency of top-ups, speculating on a person's financial situation, electricity consumption, and access to expensive household appliances. Cognizant of residents' abhorrence of *kokonsa* (gossiping), ECG's reforms turned poles into the new 'eyes of the street'<sup>9</sup> – a better deterrent to illegal connections than any feat of technical sophistication! Fighting illegal connections, people perceptively explained, could never work through 'machines' alone; as Freddy B. had personally experimented, any type of meter could eventually be broken into and worked into



Figure 7. Living one-one together, through meters. (Photo by the author.)

bypass routes. Rather, the nosiness of neighbours – motivated by envy, curiosity, or indeed malevolence – provided a most effective deterrent to any resident concerned with their own self-respect. ‘Neighbours are like CNN’, a friend joked: ‘They come to your house with their mouth, see what’s happening, and broadcast it everywhere!’ ECG was well aware of these local ‘broadcasters’, and rightly envisioned that public meters would provide an effective social surveillance system, to which the technical features of the meters appeared secondary, if not redundant.

In reaction to the state’s campaign against illegal connections, people formed their own counter-discourse and imagination about the acts of immorality encouraged by the pole meter. The meters, tenants said, were unacceptable because they incurred significant risks to personal safety: scenarios abounded about armed robbers and thieves ambushing tenants recharging credit by the pole at night. Tenants even acted out these scenarios for me, pointing to the dark corners where the thieves would hide and slip into their rooms to steal their belongings.

This emphasis on (imagined) risks to personal safety allowed residents to appropriate the state’s language of legality and (im)morality to contest the legitimacy of the meters in the neighbourhood, and to veil a critique of their public visibility. If co-tenants were no longer so intimately implicated in one another’s lives through the economic



dependencies of the shared meter, 'private' electricity usage found new witnesses in the public visibility of the meters. In effect, the one-one meters displaced the 'public privacy' characteristic of compounds by individualizing infrastructural relations publicly onto the street.

### **'Earn as you pay': the meritocracy of infrastructure**

With prepaid meters, Auntie Habibah told me, 'you don't have a contract with ECG. When your credit is finished, ECG staff will not come to threaten you and cut off your light'. For this reason, many residents found the prepaid meters' technocratic enforcement more acceptable than the shameful disconnection visits of ECG staff. Prepaid meters inscribe a differentiated relation to authority and service delivery: while postpaid meters operate through a 'contractual relationship' between customers and revenue collectors, based on trust and creditability, in prepaid meters moral behaviour is 'delegated' to the 'competences' of a technical device (Akrich 1992; von Schnitzler 2013; 2016). As one of the senior officials at ECG explicitly told me, postpaid meters only work for the 'enlightened people', those who can be trusted with paying their bills. ECG, she explained, was deploying prepaid meters to those neighbourhoods where people were notoriously less 'inclined' to pay their bills.<sup>10</sup> The prepaid meters pre-categorized residents as unlikely to afford their connections to power, already discarding them from an infrastructural network they were deemed unworthy of in the first place. As Mr Mensah beautifully put it, the meters work through a system of 'earn as you pay' (his interpretation of 'pay as you go', which indeed is a far more realistic portrayal of the 'meritocratic' discrimination involved in prepayment). In the 'earn as you pay' meters, one becomes *deserving* of electricity only after proving oneself financially viable as a customer.

Prepayment for utilities, Antina von Schnitzler notes (2013), can be traced back to nineteenth-century Victorian England, which saw the invention of the prepaid meter as a means of providing the working class with access to gas lighting, fuelled by rising concerns about public hygiene and the immoral behaviours conditioned by darkness in public spaces. Prepayment thus emerged as a specific 'payment culture' (Ruiters 2007) of the urban poor, placing differentiated demands and assumptions on those who could not be trusted with credit. Since the 1990s, prepaid meters have been widely deployed in utilities' reforms throughout the Global South (including Ghana), aimed at improving revenue collection, encouraging energy efficiency, improving customer data management, and shifting the responsibility of delivery from the state onto self-governing subjects in control of their own consumption (Kambule, Yessoufou & Nwulu 2018).

As an ECG worker put it, 'There's no *talk talk talk*, when it's finished it's finished!' Because prepaid meters disconnect without negotiation, they sanitize infrastructural politics by repressing – and removing from public view – possibilities for dissent and protest, effectively concealing the effects of social austerity (Ruiters 2007: 499). Yet the elimination of this human element was not necessarily an unwelcome development for residents, who had long suffered from the questionable practices of ECG staff. Prepaid meters 'made them free': when they didn't have money, they could be left in peace without worrying about the shameful visits of ECG's disconnection team – or the humiliating remarks of co-tenants. They could turn to relatives or friends living nearby to get access to power, establishing forms of collaboration of their own choosing (Silver 2014). This marginalizing form of freedom in 'self-disconnection'

(Ruiters 2007) reveals that prepayment already pre-figures a form of exclusion, making electricity an unaffordable luxury to be earned, as Mr Mensah put it, by proving oneself worthy of its services. That is, the meter's mandate of revenue collection and recuperation, in practice, works as a logic of discrimination and exclusion by shutting out those customers whose revenues are not deemed substantive or reliable enough to be worthy of inclusion. In the darkness, when the meters' voracious credits have finished, their flashing light conveys this ambivalence: a signal that things are still putatively connected, even as they can no longer afford to be.

### **Conclusion: Articulating (a)sociality**

In the domestic politics of compound housing, electricity meters act not only as technological systems that configure calculative practices and ethical models of citizenship (Anand 2017; von Schnitzler 2016), but also as interpretative and imaginative devices that reinvent the material and moral terms of living (apart) together. Who consumes power, for what, how, and how much, are constant sources of discussion in Accra's compounds, tied to suspicions and valuations of wealth, status, and fairness. These narratives demand that we treat infrastructures not simply as material vectors of political rationality, but also as moral and interpretative devices through which people articulate conflicting visions of collective life. By looking at the ways in which urban residents in Accra narrate the political and moral contours of their 'infrastructural lives', I have foregrounded the experiential aspect of infrastructure (Graham & McFarlane 2015); but these narratives also move beyond experience to include a speculative and imaginative register through which infrastructure enters the realm of the political.

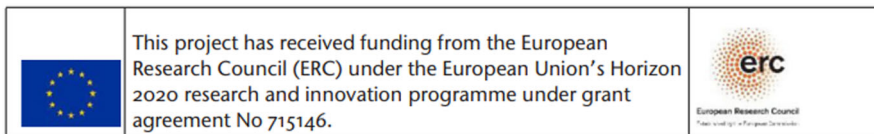
As I have shown through the case study of compound housing, the politics of electricity, of 'life itself', are not only about entitlements, obligations, and duties but also about the dynamics of care and detachment that allow us to live through the precarities and vulnerabilities of the self and others. As Lauren Berlant has argued, the politics of infrastructure are as much about the distribution and delivery of a common good as they are about redistributing insecurity and precarity (2016: 395). 'Life itself' is not simply about access to vital matter: it is also a poetics of relationality, made of contradictory desires and marginalizing decisions. As my ethnography shows, the moral economy of the compound is not a homogeneous space of consensual norms, reciprocated obligations, and unproblematic transactions: it is fraught with interference, constantly reconfigured by the unintended intersections of people's aspirations and political interventions. This was particularly evident in the case of one-one meters adopted to opt out of shared electricity consumption. Prepaid meters, while ostensibly marginalizing certain consumers, also allowed a certain sense of dignity (albeit one charged with other kinds of exclusion) in the possibility of withdrawing from the bonds of unmanageable obligations. As Freddy B.'s comments on their *jimmy-jimmy-ness* and *colo-ness* imply, macro-economic ideologies of profit are not simply translated into economic transactions, but narrated as, alternatively, forms of freedom, humiliation, dignity, or discrimination. As Mr Mensah's 'earn as you pay' system suggests, the prepayment doctrine of the new meters also works as a 'meritocratic' system of recognition, eliminating 'undeserving' consumers unworthy of the grid's services. But if the denunciation of neoliberal techniques of power sector reform has become uncomfortably predictable and homogenizing (Ferguson 2010), this ethnography suggests, in turn, that we should not romanticize the sociality of collective living. Ultimately, it has argued that problematizing the complexity of people's own

priorities and demands is integral to understanding the ordinariness of the political; and that infrastructures, far from simply acting as political instruments, reframe and narrate political subjectivities through the ordinary stories they tell.

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### NOTES



<sup>1</sup> The MCC is a US foreign aid agency that finances specific projects (mostly infrastructure and education) to 'reduce poverty through economic growth'. In view of redressing ECG's financial situation, a series of reforms set by the MCC were introduced in 2016, including a revision of tariffs, and the substitution of postpaid meters in certain neighbourhoods with prepaid and smart meters (see details on the privatization here: <http://www.mida.gov.gh/pages/mca-program#fndtn-ghana-power-compact-4>, accessed 2 November 2021). In 2018, a concession agreement was granted to PDS (Power Distribution Services), a consortium led by the Manila Electricity Company. The PDS takeover was short-lived: in July 2019, the concession was suspended amidst allegations of fraud, and terminated in October 2019, leading the United States to withdraw \$190 million from the MCC grant. To date (November 2021), ECG has resumed management of electricity distribution.

<sup>2</sup> Life in compound houses figures abundantly in Ghanaian popular representations and productions, such as the award-winning TV series *Efiewura* ('Landlord') and, staging in particular disputes around the sharing of electricity in compound houses, the movie *LilWin the ECG Agent*.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing (November 2021), the preliminary report of the 2021 Population and Housing Census (to be released in 2022) does not include data on household composition.

<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonymized.

<sup>5</sup> Administrative structures themselves pushed people into unofficial routes. In addition to the owner's identification card, the requirements to qualify for a new meter were cumbersome and costly: they included a minimum consumption of 300–400 units a month; the payment of former debts on the Mother Meter; the visit of an Energy Commission-licensed electrician and payment for a certificate; and, finally, the payment of a GHC 82.25 fee (£15) for the installation. Only if all these conditions were fulfilled, and a meter was available (which was on average half of the time), would the paperwork be processed. It was not unusual, during my fieldwork at ECG, to see customers coming to the office to buy a meter – and to express surprise at the numerous 'Meters are not for sale' signs plastered on the wall. Some had paid as much as GHC 350 (£63, or the equivalent of two to three months' rent) for a meter, bought from landlords, received from politicians, or negotiated with ECG workers themselves.

<sup>6</sup> Compare with Tanja Winther's account of customers in a Zanzibari village who try to hide appliances from the Zanzibar Electricity Corporation (ZECO), fearing that disclosing them will result in higher billing (2008: 110).

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions include theorization of the compound in Southern Africa, which historically referred to the racially segregated housing implemented by the colonial government, and to the organization of mining towns into 'enclaves' or 'compounds' (Crush 1994; Hansen 2005). This is quite different to the compound in West Africa, whose current urban 'cosmopolitan' form derives from the traditional family house and today offers low-cost housing for poorer households or single tenants. To my knowledge, while there is currently an

explosion of literature and research on *zongos*, little has been written about contemporary compound houses in West Africa.

<sup>8</sup> At one such protest, residents used my presence at ECG to threaten staff with their imminent lay-off following the privatization, declaring: 'We have seen this white lady around at the company. She is prospecting to buy it!'

<sup>9</sup> This complements Filip de Boeck's anecdote in Kinshasa that to be 'planted like a pole' means to be seen and heard by all (de Boeck & Plissart 2014: 242).

<sup>10</sup> The implementation of prepaid meters was officially an urban strategy deployed in Ghana's main cities (Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi). While I was there, however, the replacement campaign was framed (both by residents and ECG staff) as a practice targeting particular neighbourhoods. Compare with the prepaid meter strategy in South Africa, which is mostly deployed in rural townships (Kambule *et al.* 2018: 177-8).

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## Connexions controversées : infrastructure, dignité et vie collective à Accra au Ghana

### Résumé

Les systèmes d'infrastructure sont devenus des sites ethnographiques productifs pour l'analyse des subjectivités et des rationalités politiques. À travers le cas de l'électricité partagée et des compteurs prépayés dans le système de logements collectifs d'Accra, au Ghana, l'autrice suggère que le potentiel politique des infrastructures réside dans leurs capacités imaginatives et herméneutiques à encourager les désirs de dignité, à soutenir le bien-être et à remettre en question les idéaux moraux de la vie collective. Contrairement aux travaux anthropologiques récents qui ont mis l'accent sur la base matérielle des infrastructures en tant que dispositifs « techno-politiques » matérialisant certaines logiques de domination et de gouvernance, l'autrice revendique une poétique de la socialité par laquelle les infrastructures mobilisent une politique de la vie collective (non désirée). À travers les « histoires d'électricité » racontées par les locataires, l'autrice montre comment l'économie morale des infrastructures dans un contexte de précarité collective redistribue la marginalisation et la liberté d'une manière qui dépasse toujours les rationalités politiques des réformes et des politiques énergétiques.

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