

Infrastructure, Extraction and Urban Public Life in Ghana

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I am presently in the midst of two new projects. Building on my earlier research on maritime frontiers and security infrastructure, my newest project explores the manifold regimes of risk management surrounding off-shore oil rigs and operations. Drawing on a pilot study conducted in Ghana (the hub of this new oil front) with UF PhD students in 2012, I focus on deep water hydrocarbon prospecting and extraction in the western Gulf of Guinea. In addition to presenting preliminary research findings, I am now preparing grant applications for what I envision to be a multi-disciplinary study involving a number of West African and European collaborators.

The second project, which I am using my current sabbatical year to write-up in book and article form, addresses infrastructure and urban politics in Ghana. I began this work in 2009 and continued in 2010 and 2011. As the places and processes of interest to me continue to unfold, I returned for follow-up research during the summers of 2012 and 2013. Bringing me back to grass-roots ethnography, this research reveals the centrality of infrastructure to the political life of Ghana's urban underclass at a time when state capacity for public provisioning is largely disabled by international interventions and a push for administrative decentralization. In the informal and partially planned settlements of urban Ghana of interest to me, the result is a host of private, primarily community-based and profit-driven authorities that both replace and recreate the state in the production and capitalization of public goods. Relevant to understanding urban trends elsewhere in the world, my understanding of these phenomena is informed by Lefebvre's notion of the 'right to the city,' Arendt's discussion of the public realm, and Latour's conception of 'thing-politics.' An article drawn from this study appears in the February 2014 issue of the journal *American Ethnologist*. Like my earlier



work on tropical commodities, bureaucracy, and security, it attests to the value of exploring and theorizing global processes from the vantage point of the so-called periphery.

I build my case around the range of variation found across the multiple quarters of the city of Tema. Planned and constructed at the cusp of independence at the behest of nationalist leader and political visionary Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Tema is an artifact of modernist internationalism. While most high-modernist mega-projects in the tropics are considered failures, Tema is noted for its relative success. My research reveals the city's very existence and on-going functioning to be predicated on a series of carefully orchestrated exclusions and displacements. These include the removal of Tema's original inhabitants, the rerouting of shorelines and waterways, and the creation of informal satellite settlements and populations poised to service the city but rarely receiving comparable services or supports in return. Like Tema's electrical grids, drainage channels, and sewer networks, these persons, locations and environmental modifications provide the backbone of the city's operability yet are treated as an implicit and thus largely unexamined feature of the wider urban setting.

Revealing the functional underpinnings of the modernist city upon which its production and reproduction is based, my research brings the politics of these invisibilized yet vital spaces, and modes of social life to the fore. At the crux of my analysis are the social and technical infrastructures of waste production and waste management deployed at the city's margins. These include public toilets and bath houses, sewage and septic systems, garbage dumps, waste-transfer sites, and bio-waste power generators. Though devised in the face of exclusion and the failure of state-based public services, as a form of 'infrastructural politics from below' these solutions instantiate new modalities of public life and public provisioning, refiguring the urban public sphere and its political underpinnings and potentials.

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