“The Strange Familiar”: Structure, Infrastructure, and Adichie’s Americanah

Caroline Levine

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 61, Number 4, Winter 2015, pp. 587-605
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2015.0051

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/605502
"THE STRANGE FAMILIAR": STRUCTURE, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH

Caroline Levine

I am relying on the smooth workings of multiple infrastructures to write this essay. I have sent my children on safe buses along good roads to public schools. I trust that if something happens to one of them, someone will contact emergency services immediately by phone. The hours the children are out of the house allow me to work in an air-conditioned room on a computer that operates reliably on a steady stream of electricity and internet connectivity. As lunchtime nears and I get hungry, I can walk safely along well-kept sidewalks to a nearby restaurant that is compelled by my government to maintain excellent standards of hygiene. After I eat, I pay for my meal with a card transaction that guarantees the safe passage of my money to the business in question. I trust that when this essay is finished, it will be formatted, disseminated, and archived, made accessible to a future audience that is equipped with the skills to read and respond to it. I depend on all of these infrastructures in an unthinking way most of the time, and when one fails, as each occasionally does, I am shaken.

It is of course a grave political and economic mistake to take infrastructures for granted, since it is substantial public investment as well as wealth and privilege that allow me safe and reliable access to these facilities. But it is no accident that I do not always keep infrastructures in mind. All conventional infrastructures are networks—roads, railroads, bridges, canals, water pipelines, sew-
age treatment systems, emergency services, mass transit systems, telephone systems, and electrical grids. They are ways of connecting and conducting people, objects, information, and energy. It is precisely their work to afford smooth passage and therefore to draw little attention to themselves. They are typically not like bodies or buildings, bounded forms with relatively clear contours and visible markings; they are the enablers of movements between buildings and bodies, which is why we are likely to notice them only when they disintegrate or fail.

Yet given how crucial infrastructures are to the workings of the social, it seems urgent for us to learn to notice them even when they are working well. Critics have spent a great deal of time exposing the structuring of social relations, including economic domination and institutional racism, which are so often overlooked by those who benefit from these structures. Infrastructures have drawn less attention, and this is why the work of Bruce Robbins and Michael Rubenstein is valuable; they ask us to notice how literature represents the invisible infrastructures that readers are otherwise inclined to overlook.1

How, then, should we understand the relations between structures such as racial hierarchies and infrastructures such as electrical grids? Should we use the same methods of analysis to grasp both structures and infrastructures? My own argument here is twofold: first, the specific defamiliarizing strategies of realist fiction work well to unsettle the privileged obliviousness that prevents some readers from noticing the crucial work of both structures and infrastructures in everyday life, and second, realist description can also help us, as critics, think through the work of structures and infrastructures and the relations between them. In this essay I focus on Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2013 novel Americanah, which draws on longstanding realist traditions of description to defamiliarize both racism and electricity—a structure and an infrastructure readily misperceived by those who benefit most from them.

Realism, Description, and Defamiliarization

Like critical theory, literature itself—at least since the Romantics—has often aimed to unsettle entrenched perceptions so that we can see the world more clearly. "It was my object," Percy Shelley writes, "to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend" (120). The Russian formalists coined the term defamiliarization to describe art’s capacity to show us anew those parts of our lives that we have too easily taken for granted. Victor Shklovsky writes that literature at its best works against "habitualization," which otherwise "devours works, clothes,
furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (12). Art interrupts lapses into routinized perception: "The purpose of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult." Shklovsky places particular emphasis on the elongation of descriptive passages narrated from the perspective of an outsider—Natasha at the opera in War and Peace or Tolstoy's horse-narrator in Strider—which, in dwelling on the strangeness of ordinary experience, deliberately interrupt narrative flow; they "increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (12).

Critics have often celebrated deliberately unfamiliar, experimental literary styles and forms as the best ways to defamiliarize habits of perception. Rita Felski writes, "Modernism especially, with its roughened verbal textures and often startling juxtapositions, can inject a sense of strangeness and surprise into its portrayal of the most commonplace phenomena. It makes the familiar seem newly uncanny, jolting us out of atrophied perceptions and ready-to-hand formulae" (608). Realist fiction, by contrast, has been taken to task for naturalizing and thereby reaffirming and conserving social structures, as Franco Moretti argues most recently in The Bourgeois. The effect of realist description, he writes, "was to inscribe the present so deeply in the past that alternatives became simply unimaginable" (93).

Some critics have argued, however, that descriptive realism has the potential to do precisely the opposite. Cynthia Wall makes the case that description took on a new importance in Europe in the late eighteenth century when readers multiplied and diversified. Writers could not assume a common knowledge and so needed to orient readers to an unfamiliar represented world: "What is no longer shared is no longer familiar, assumed, a priori visible. The world is differently mapped out, and the differences need new mapping" (39). Filled with exotic new kinds of things and spaces, the novel begins not only to tell readers in detail about their appearances and their functions but also provides maps or guides to their relations. Far from reaffirming the necessity of an unchangeable social world, description in this account offers guides to encountering strangeness.

Does description confirm the old or introduce the new? At its best, I will argue, it does both: it asks us to perceive anew what we thought we already knew but did not perceive well enough. It defamiliarizes. Let me make the case by describing description. Description is never neutral or total: a selective form, it chooses which spaces, bodies, and objects to mention; it offers them in a specific order; and it decides which aspects of them are worth noting. Description necessarily distributes our attention—inverting a focus on the unmade bed, for example, but not on the color of the carpet, or by dwelling
lovingly on the beauty of a city's skyline without ever mentioning its sewers. This selectivity is what draws Susan Stewart's critique of realism. She makes the case that description in the realist novel structures experience in ways that necessarily confirm preexisting social categories: "Realistic genres do not mirror everyday life; they mirror its hierarchization of information" (26). It is certainly true that we may not notice the selectivity of realist description when it remarks the most conventional details. However, when Stewart invokes hierarchy what really seems to concern her is entrenched social inequality. The fact that only some things are worth describing in the novel reinforces "statements of membership and class" (36). But is it true that the hierarchy of information is the same as social hierarchy? This claim may actually mystify the differences between the unequal distribution of attention in description and the unequal distribution of resources to social groups. Stewart herself clearly ranks two styles: she places a high value on modernist digressive difficulty and a low value on what she sees as the structured consolations of realist description. That is, she embraces a hierarchy to launch her critique of hierarchy. By her own logic, in other words, not all hierarchies are equally troubling, and that is not surprising. It is my own contention that critics can hardly avoid some kind of gradation of values, nor should we; distinguishing which methods, texts, gestures, moments, and forms matter more than others is what gives our work purpose and meaning.

In response to Stewart, then, I want to suggest that the major political challenge for description is not hierarchy but habit. To be lulled into acquiescence to the status quo, one must learn routines of acceptance: trusting authority, following norms, and accepting the unequal distribution of resources as natural or necessary. And these routines must be reproduced day after day. Habit appears to William James as society's "precious conservative agent": "It alone is what . . . saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor" (121). Particularly troubling to James's contemporary Shklovsky is perceptual habit, our ongoing failure to apprehend the world in alert and attentive ways. To accept the status quo requires a dampening of perception. Novelistic description, if it is going to disrupt rather than conserve, must unsettle those habits of dulled acquiescence.

But how is it possible to freshen or sharpen one's perception of ordinary life? If Moretti and Stewart are right, describing the social can merely re-entrench it. Is it possible to describe the world in ways that are at once recognizable and disconcerting? I want to suggest that the realist novel takes up this defamiliarizing challenge and shows us how much more difficult this is than Shklovsky imagines. I will begin with a brief look at two canonical nineteenth-century novels and
use these to frame my reading of *Americanah*. Rather than simply aiming to interrupt deadening habits of perception that prevent us from seeing the realities of the world, the realist novel in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tries to find ways of interrupting our tendency to be too interested in exceptional experience—that is, our habits of being attracted to the exciting and the extraordinary. The novel takes up the challenge of conveying experience as not exciting or exceptional, but frustratingly routine. Shklovsky’s point is that we have dulled our habits of perception, but the realist novel suggests that our worst habit is that we ignore the habitual character of experience. It asks how we might estrange our routine of ignoring routine.

Let me offer one example from Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*. Jo the crossing-sweeper is dying in part from poverty and neglect, and the narrator meditates not only on how ordinary this tragedy is but also on how its very ordinariness contributes to Jo’s fate:

He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth, Jo, in uncompromising colours! From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee. (564)

Dickens presents a vicious cycle of inattentiveness: passersby ignore poor children like Jo because they are too familiar for people to take any interest. But the commonness of Jo’s fate is, in fact, precisely what should be most shocking. Readers are in the habit of noticing only the exceptional. The crucial challenge for Dickens here is not just to make the ordinary feel shocking but also to make shocking the fact that it feels ordinary. Formally, the passage does not imagine that we readers would leave habit altogether behind. The narrator repeats the words "common" and "homely" as if introducing a new insistent routine, explicitly repeating what has been overlooked because it has been repeated too much. Dickens insistently repeats the language of ordinariness instead of allowing us to fall back into our too-ordinary attraction to what is not ordinary.
Middlemarch follows a similar logic. Eliot highlights the ordinary, for instance, in her description of Dorothea sobbing on her honeymoon:

Not that this inward amazement of Dorothea's was anything very exceptional: many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among incongruities and left to "find their feet" among them, while their elders go about their business. Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (124)

Dorothea is surprised, but her surprise, paradoxically, is all too ordinary. Her unhappiness is actually of a very routine kind, so frequent that it is overlooked by elders who simply go about their ordinary routines—"their business." Meanwhile, we readers too are so "well wadded" by our perceptual routines that we cannot see a common kind of unhappiness as tragic. Maybe in time, the narrator suggests, we might develop new habits of perception. In the meanwhile, the realist novelist has to develop aesthetic strategies that convey ordinary suffering as interesting enough to draw our attention.

The formal descriptive strategies Eliot uses here are different from Dickens's. Instead of pounding readers over the head with words like "common" and "homely" she indulges in elaborate syntactical formations and heaping negatives, such as "we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual." While Dickens uses repetition to draw us into new habits, Eliot forecasts the undoing of our current habits in sentences that are difficult to follow in requiring us to delay and double back to make sense of exactly what she is unmaking in the course of her sentences. And this makes sense. By Eliot's logic, our progress toward the future will depend on negating our negations—unlearning our habit of ignoring the common pain that is all around us. We will have to cancel out our canceling out.

In both of these passages, Eliot and Dickens struggle to develop aesthetic strategies that convey the frequency of ordinary experi-
ence while distancing readers from it so that we may experience at least a little astonishment. Ian Baucom has argued that *Americanah* belongs squarely in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, with its attention to "finely observed, psychologically arresting scenes of the everyday." I want to add to this argument by suggesting that Adichie comes especially close to Dickens and Eliot when it comes to the problems of perceptual habit. *Americanah* goes to great lengths to show that grasping the everyday means being surprised into recognizing precisely those entrenched habits of perception that mystify or occlude ordinary experience. For Adichie as for the nineteenth-century realists, to perceive the routines of our world, we must be startled out of our routines of perception.

*Americanah*’s interest in plots of bildung and migration is ideal for defamiliarization, since the child and the immigrant struggle to make sense of the habits that dominate the alien worlds they enter. In fact, what most closely unites the Nigerian-born characters Ifemulu and Obinze, the pair whose love looms throughout the narrative as the most desirable end for both wanderers, is their unwillingness to accept habitual falsehoods—the routines of hypocrisy and posturing that organize social relations. From earliest childhood, Ifemulu shocks people who are used to deception and self-deception with her plain speaking. She is frustrated with those adults, like her mother, "who denied that things were as they were" (63). The problem grows only more acute when she moves to the United States, where Ifemulu repeatedly disputes not only the descriptions of white friends and acquaintances who misperceive racism but also those Nigerian immigrants who stubbornly nurse misleading "mythologies of home" (143–44). Two of the major turning points in the novel are moments when Ifemulu rejects her own habits of phoniness: when she decides not to fake an American accent any longer and when she chooses to let her hair grow naturally without relaxers or weaves. Obinze, meanwhile, is fascinated and troubled by the lies told by Nigerians in Britain, like his old friend Emenike, who has married a white British woman and "completely absorbed his own disguise" (333), leaving out his rage when he tells stories about race relations to keep his white listeners comfortable and adapting the very tone of his voice to please them.

The novel makes especially good use of defamiliarizing techniques when it comes to the habitual deceptions necessary to the ongoing work of racism. When Ifemulu arrives in the United States, she becomes fascinated by the ways that Americans obviously dissemble about race. In one early example, a white store clerk refuses to distinguish two women by their skin color. "Why didn't she just ask, 'Was it the black girl or the white girl?'" Ifemulu asks. Her friend Ginika
laughs: "Because this is America. You're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things" (155). In a context in which pretending about race is an entrenched habit, Ifemulu's bluntness about the ordinariness of race and racism repeatedly startles white Americans out of their usual responses. At one point, a wealthy employer refers to all black women as beautiful. "Isn't she just stunning?" Kimberley asks, pointing to an image in a magazine. "'No, she isn't.' Ifemulu responds unequivocally. "You know, you can just say "black." Not every black person is beautiful" (181). Kimberley is "taken aback," but this is also a moment that marks the promise of intimacy, since Ifemulu looks back on this as the instant when the two women "became, truly, friends." To interrupt habits of pretending about race is to usher in new possibilities of relationship and community.

Ifemulu's life takes on purpose as she becomes a "race blogger" (376), deliberately defamiliarizing American habits of responding to race, describing each as strange and artificial. She first decides to write about race when her wealthy white boyfriend Curt criticizes the magazine *Essence* for being "racially skewed" because "only black women [are] featured" (366). Ifemulu realizes that he has never perceived how "racially skewed" mainstream women's magazines are, so she educates him, inviting him to count the numbers of black women pictured in a pile of women's magazines. He finds only three light-skinned black women in thousands of pages. Ifemulu reveals the preference for whiteness as a habit—that is, a practice so often repeated that it seems like second nature.

In two cultural contexts where falsehoods are the norm—Nigeria under military government and the racist United States—Adichie repeatedly values the plainness and straightforwardness of descriptive prose as politically effective. She incorporates a number of Ifemulu's blog postings into the novel, set off in a sans serif font—a plainer font than the rest of the text. When the protagonist starts a second blog in Nigeria, she is self-conscious about this, deliberately opting for "a stark, readable font" (514). A struggle over the value of plain description also divides the blogger protagonist from her American academic lover. He looks down his nose at her taste in novels that "don't push the boundaries" (387), feels contempt for her friend "who says ordinary things" (420), and urges her to add details of "government policy and redistricting" (386) to her blog posts about urban black poverty. Ifemulu remains adamant: "I don't want to explain, I want to observe" (386). Similarly, Obinze, who by the end of the novel is rich, keeps a careful distance from his own privilege through an emphatic plainness of style. He condemns other rich Nigerians for enjoying "all this exaggerated politeness, exaggerated praise, even exaggerated respect that you haven't earned at all, and it's so fake and so garish, it's like a bad overcolored painting" (532).
But why is plainness of observation and description so important? Adichie suggests at one point that aesthetic values of nuanced complexity and difficulty prevent us from grasping race as a structure. When Shan, a young black writer, tries to describe a racist encounter in a memoir, her editor objects that it is not "subtle" enough (416). He pushes her to "transcend" race (415) and "complicate it, so it's not race alone. And I say, but it was race" (416). She continues:

"Nuance" means keep people comfortable and everyone is free to think of themselves as *individuals* and everyone got where they are because of their *achievement*. . . . So if you're going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't even know it's about race. You know, a Proustian meditation, all watery and fuzzy, that at the end just leaves you feeling watery and fuzzy. (417)

Proustian style here is what conserves structures, and it does so by permitting a misapprehension of race as fluid or indistinct. Far from watery or fuzzy, race in the United States should be understood as imposing a painful order, what Ifemulu describes in her blog as "a ladder of racial hierarchy" (227). Settled and predictable, there is nothing subtle or ambiguous about this hierarchy: "White is always on top . . . and American Black is always on the bottom."

While I certainly think that modernist techniques can often be thrilling and politically effective, I want to follow Adichie's lead in suggesting that the deliberately destabilizing and challenging kinds of writing associated with modernism are not always and necessarily the best means of defamiliarizing social structures. Like Adichie, I am especially interested in the challenge of apprehending ordinary hierarchies and other forms of everyday social organization in contexts where we are accustomed to misperceiving, denying, or taking these for granted. If we struggle to recognize and reject habitual falsehoods in order to understand how bodies, energies, and objects are ordered and arranged, then aesthetic indistinctness, complexity, and ambiguity may actually cloud our apprehension, making principles of social organization seem more "watery and fuzzy" than they are. Specifically, to grasp the work of structures and infrastructures, I suggest that there is a lesson for critics here: we can draw inspiration from Adichie and the realist tradition by seeking to describe as sharply as possible the specific kind of order that each structure and infrastructure imposes on everyday life.
Structure and Infrastructure

Following Adichie, then, I seek to defamiliarize structures and infrastructures by describing their principles of organization. Both are too easily ignored or denied in daily life, as Adichie suggests, but I also want to show that the terms themselves have the potential to obfuscate as much as they reveal and so may easily lead to critical habits of misperceiving them. This section of the essay therefore takes up the task of understanding structures and infrastructures and the relations between them. I also want to use this analysis—eccentrically perhaps—to acknowledge my own debts to realism. Part of the routine work of cultural and literary criticism is to defamiliarize deceptive and misleading habits of perception, and in order to do this work we habitually employ practices of painstaking description. Indeed, even Felski, Stewart, and Moretti—some of the most powerful and convincing critics of realist description—offer their own critiques in carefully crafted descriptive prose.

In literary and cultural studies we draw from the social sciences to refer to social organizing principles like racism and heteronormativity as structures. Structure is a useful rhetorical figure for interrupting the pervasive public habit of understanding inequality as a product of individual practices and beliefs—seeing racism, for instance, as a set of attitudes belonging to particular people rather than the "patterns, procedures, practices, and policies" that "consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit" nonwhite people (Better 19). But might the term structure produce its own mystifications and misleading habits of perception for criticism?

Structure implies an organized interrelation of parts in a whole, as in a building. Some critics have actively cultivated this image, as David Theo Goldberg does in The Racial State, where he argues that the "one drop rule was taken as the cement" in the "edifice of social structure" (183–84). If this metaphor helpfully resists a cultural tendency to focus on individuals, the image of the edifice can also muddy the analytical waters, since, as Judith Butler and others have argued, the kinds of oppression we typically call structural actually operate as pervasive citational norms or modes of regulation. Heteronormativity, for example, far from being located in any single place or organized into any interrelated whole, operates as a set of repeated rules that guide practice across the domains of social life: it is "a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege" (Berlant and Warner 194). The heterosexual family itself takes a particular shape, requiring the union of two bodies, one masculine and one feminine, in a single household. But it then imposes other kinds of order on other forms; it normalizes time by repeatedly
imagine the normal lifespan around the tempos of reproduction, and it normalizes public space by sanitizing streets and parks for the benefit of heterosexual couples and families. Heteronormativity is not a single structure, in other words, but a variety of related organizing principles that repeatedly impose their differing kinds of order on bodies, relationships, times, and spaces, and across a whole array of institutions, including education, urban planning, law, medicine, and media. I trust that my own children travel safely to school in part because our streets, public spaces, and school buses are arranged and regulated to protect certain standardized models of the family.

This is not only the case for sexuality. Racism takes at least two major organizing forms: a graddted hierarchy of skin color that ranks white at the top with darker and darker gradations of brown indicating lower and lower status, and a stark hierarchical binary of white and black, an either-or that separates drinking fountains for "whites only" from those for "colored" people. Racism, like heteronormativity, also shapes the organizing work of other forms: segregating spaces, limiting upward mobility, and excluding dark-skinned bodies from labor unions and other networks. What we call structural power, then, takes multiple forms, requires dispersal across sites, and must be repeated over time. Pervasively structuring multiple forms, it never comes to rest in a single structure.

The prefix infra- means below or beneath and suggests that infrastructures are more basic than the structures they subtend, but should we take this relationship for granted? If we describe the organizing principles of infrastructures in good realist fashion, we reach a very different conclusion. While social structures organize experience in multiple ways across domains, conventional infrastructures, as I suggested earlier, are best described as networks. Networks are not repetitive but connective forms; they link separable nodes, including bodies, spaces, machines, and objects. The specific ways that they connect can vary considerably. Chain networks, for example, are the simplest: one node connects to the next in a clear sequential, linear order. Centralized or star networks connect all nodes through a main hub, as in many hierarchical organizations, while multi-hub networks, such as passenger airlines, have more than one center. All-channel networks link every node to every other node, as in a group of close friends. In distributed networks, like the internet, any point can connect to any other point without needing to go through any single site or in any fixed order.

Providing channels for the movement of bodies, energy, information, and waste, infrastructures enable connections across significant distances. They tend to be politically challenging for modern states, since they typically demand substantial expense from the
public purse for both their construction and their upkeep. The private sector, however, is a major beneficiary. Studies cite poor electricity infrastructure as a serious hindrance to economic development in Nigeria, for example. One study found that frequent power outages and exceptionally high prices have led businesspeople in Nigeria to perceive electricity as the single largest obstacle to growth.

Infrastructural networks also typically support and reinforce one another. Many modern states first built national networks of wide roads for military purposes—to transport armies, consolidate political control, and protect borders—but these roads then enabled commerce and communications, including national postal services, which then led to increasing investment in road infrastructures (Guldi 14–15). One infrastructural network can also operate as an obstacle to another. The German government recently sought to invest in sewage treatment infrastructure in the Palestinian West Bank, but they soon gave up, complaining that they could not move workers and materials where they were needed because of the restrictions on movement along roads imposed by the Israeli military (Tagar, Keinan, and Bromberg 420). Those who design power grids try to prevent cascading failures, where one node, overloaded by an unusual demand for power, pushes its demand onto neighboring nodes that are in turn overloaded. A single surge has the potential to interrupt other connectors. The world’s largest ever blackout, which left 670 million people without power in India in July 2012, had ripple effects on other infrastructures, as subways and railways shut down, miners were trapped underground, and many lost access to water. In short, infrastructures are typically both interlinked and overlaid—power lines and sewer pipes often follow roads, which connect to railway hubs and ports.

Describing the work of structures such as racism and infrastructures such as electricity raises the question of how to describe the relations between structures and infrastructures. One might readily assume, given the prefix infra-, that infrastructures are the more basic forms and that turning to them in literary studies provides access to the most fundamental material stratum of social life. But I have been suggesting that the words structure and infrastructure are somewhat misleading: structures imply organized wholes built on situated foundations rather than dispersed and repeated regulations of multiple forms, while most infrastructures are far from situated foundations. Instead they are connective pathways that are often dependent on other networks. Rather than assuming that infrastructures are more fundamental than structures, then, I want to suggest that racism, class hierarchy, and heteronormativity are exceptionally powerful structuring principles precisely because of their flexibility in moving
across institutions and organizing a variety of other forms—including the pathways of infrastructural networks. If we understand all of these to be imposing order on social relations, then racism and other structural factors emerge as more infrastructural than what we typically define as infrastructures.

Take redlining, for example, the twentieth-century US practice of defining certain neighborhoods as too risky for financial investment. In its first decades, the Federal Housing Administration made race an explicit criterion for redlining, guaranteeing loans only in neighborhoods occupied by "the race for which they are intended" and where local schools "should not be attended in large numbers by inharmonious racial groups" (pt. 2, sec. 9). Fueling the building of white neighborhoods in the suburbs, redlining then shaped specific investments in infrastructure such as the construction of mass transit systems and highways that linked downtowns to white suburbs while bypassing minority neighborhoods. Sewage treatment plants often ran to high-income subdivisions but offered no access for the urban poor—what Anne Mellyn Cassebaum calls "septic racism" (86–87). Lack of access to infrastructure in turn deepens poverty for black city dwellers, as Detroit NAACP director Heaster Wheeler explains:

One out of three Detroit households don't own cars and they rely very heavily on public transportation. Unfortunately, our current transportation system does not take you anywhere. You cannot get to the airport, you cannot get to the megamalls on the outskirts of the region . . . in areas that currently enjoy significant job growth. . . . Because of auto insurance redlining, the cost of owning and insuring an automobile for the working poor and working class is cost prohibitive. Many times, the cost for insurance is more than the average automobile payment, thus exacerbating the need for transit that will take you somewhere. You can literally be a convicted drunk driver living in the suburbs and pay less for auto insurance than a perfect driver living in the city. (qtd. in Bullard 40)

Similarly, racial hierarchy was a force in the massive water shut-offs that denied Detroit residents access to clean water in 2014 ("NAACP"). In short, racism seems at least as fundamental as the networks it encounters, having the power to shape the infrastructures of roads, mass transit, and clean water, which then reinforce and entrench racialized segregation and poverty. As with heteronormativity, racism can be understood as successfully organizing and regulating numerous other forms: it counts bodies in spaces, ensuring no more than a small proportion of "inharmonious racial groups" in suburban
neighborhoods; it draws boundaries around spaces, as in the borders defining redlined zones; and it directs the connective routes taken by multiple infrastructural networks. Racism is in this sense as much or more infrastructural than the electric grid or water supply.

My point here is not really to decide, once and for all, which is the most basic or primary of all shaping forces, but to argue that we are constantly being organized by multiple social forms—hierarchies, bounded spaces, tallies, and connective networks—which shape and reshape one another, and that a crucial analytic approach to understanding these relations is a descriptive and defamiliarizing alertness to these specific arrangements and patterns and the ways they overlap and intersect. Elsewhere, I have argued that literary critics in the formalist tradition are well-equipped for this kind of alertness; having developed excellent tools and rich vocabularies for tracking the dense overlap of multiple forms in texts, we can build on our experience tracking caesuras and free indirect speech, the patterns of sonnets and the paths of narrative unfolding, to offer precise descriptions of the ways that material conditions impose their differing orders on social experience (Levine 23). Here, I want to suggest that what a strong formalist analysis of the social world demands are techniques of description drawn, at least in part, from the realist novel.

Privilege, Habit, and Infrastructure

Structures and infrastructures demand analysis because they are all too readily overlooked, especially when they are working smoothly, organizing life in ways that feel given, and easy to naturalize or take for granted to those who are benefiting from them. Both structures and infrastructures, in this sense, need to be read. Yet, it is not their richness or their complexity but the often straightforward shapes that they take that are misperceived. I want to close by turning back to Adichie’s Americanah, which shows how the development of perceptual habits prevent the privileged specifically from apprehending both structures and infrastructures—not only racism and class privilege, that is, but also the electrical grid.

Over and over, as characters become accustomed to wealth, they lose their capacity to perceive both structures of inequality and the infrastructures of ordinary life. Early in the narrative, Ifemulu's Aunty Uju's life is transformed when she becomes the mistress of a powerful and wealthy general. "Do you know I've forgotten what it feels like to be in a bus?" she asks Ifemulu (94). "It's so easy to get used to all this." Ifemulu's friend Ranyinudo becomes accustomed to receiving gifts from a string of wealthy lovers, "A life in which she waved a hand and things fell from the sky, things that she quite
simply expected should fall from the sky" (481). Emenike, similarly, grows comfortable in his marriage to a white lawyer and seems at home with a whole set of bourgeois English pretensions that feel alien to Obinze.

The two protagonists, unlike the people around them, work hard to refuse this kind of habituation. Ifemulu leaves Curt in part because he has given her "the gift of contentment and ease" (246), which is seductive yet ultimately troubling. With Curt she fights "the urge to create rough edges" (355), and she regrets her smooth adaptation to comfort: "How quickly she had become used to their life" (246). Obinze, similarly, refuses the deference from others that wealth allows. His friends remark on his humility, surprised that he will not take advantage of his status to be inconsiderate and boastful to those of lower status. He wishes that they would see instead "that to call him humble was to make rudeness normal" (40).

In short, the novel makes the case that privilege has two effects on perception: wealth and ease too quickly and smoothly come to feel habitual and in the process they promote a dishonest narrowing of understanding. Adichie thus struggles, like Dickens and Eliot, to shock readers into recognizing this habituation as itself shocking. This is an especially difficult task when it comes to representing infrastructures, which are intended to be precisely imperceptible, making smooth connections along a network without drawing attention to themselves.

In order to make readers aware of infrastructures, Adichie uses a time-honored defamiliarizing strategy: the perspective of the outsider. She offers us the changing perspectives of her two migrant protagonists who move between countries and climb and fall in personal wealth. As they move, the narrative tracks changes in particular in their awareness of electricity. It is electric light that most strongly underscores Ifemulu's remoteness from her family after she moves to the United States: "When her mother said there had been no light for two weeks, it seemed suddenly foreign to her, and home itself a distant place" (196). Later, when Ifemulu first returns to Lagos, she is struck by "the loud, discordant drone of generators, too many generators" (478). Electricity here is impossible to ignore because the absence of a smoothly running infrastructure literally makes a lot of noise. When Ifemulu visits a wealthy home, her friend Ranyinudo asks her if she noticed its huge and "completely noiseless" generator (485). The fact that she has not observed the source of the electricity in the house because it does not draw attention to itself Startles Ifemulu into the uncomfortable recognition that she has become too Americanized. She no longer perceives what she has become accustomed to ignore and what does not demand attention: "This was
what a true Lagosian should have noticed: the generator house, the generator size" (485).

The difference between the flows of electricity in the United States and Nigeria is not only a matter of wealth; after all, rich Nigerians can and do pay to provide their own electricity. What the noisy Lagosian generators indicate is the absence of public investment in a networked electricity infrastructure. Or to put this another way, a smoothly working national electrical grid leads, perhaps even necessarily, to a dangerous deadening of perception on the part of those who benefit from it. Habituated to the quiet flow of electricity, most Americans can afford to treat it as uninteresting. Thus Adichie's turn to a plot organized around mobility across national borders sharpens US readers' attention to our own habits of taking public investment for granted. Her plain description alerts us to precisely that infrastructure we habitually treat as too ordinary to notice. Given that public faith in government spending has waned considerably in the past few decades in the US and that many national infrastructures are now crumbling for lack of care and reinvestment (Thompson), Adichie's defamiliarizing realist strategies have the potential to perform crucial political work.

Obinze's story also uses electricity but this time to draw attention to the power that wealth and privilege have to deaden perception. Obinze starts to feel that his own riches are corrupting him, covering him with "layer of pretension after pretension" (533), and he grows nostalgic for a past when he could not take the smooth running of electricity for granted: when the "neighbor downstairs used to shout, 'Praise the Lord!' whenever the light came back and how even for me there was something so beautiful about the light coming back, when it's out of your control because you don't have a generator." Obinze's invocation of beauty here is in keeping with the larger aesthetic aims of this novel. It is a valuing not of splendor or subtlety but of the most ordinary electric light that allows one literally to perceive the ordinariness of one's surroundings but that, in becoming too routine, loses its capacity to move us.

At one intriguing moment Adichie reveals her interest in descriptive plainness as crucial to the project of defamiliarizing infrastructures. We know that Obinze has dreamed his whole life of leaving Nigeria for the United States. He reads American fiction and adopts American speech mannerisms, teasing his mother about her Anglophilia. We discover, along the way, that his desire to leave Nigeria has been shaped by a misreading of an advertisement on Nigerian television in the 1980s. The advertisement, *Andrew Checking Out*, was part of a national campaign against brain drain. The advertisement featured a young man complaining about the failures of infrastructure; as Obinze
remembers it, Andrew says, "No good roads, no light, no water. Man, you can't even get a bottle of soft drink!" (188). The purpose of the campaign was to persuade Nigerians that the government was successfully fixing infrastructural problems, and the ad meant to make clear that Andrew's complaints belonged to the past, not the future, of the nation. But Obinze, like many of his compatriots, identifies with the description of present failures rather than the ad's intended implications. The character's complaints about roads, electricity, and water, far from convincing Obinze to look forward to a better Nigeria, "had given shape to his longings" for America (188). America has already made the public investment: it is a reality rather than a promise. For Obinze, a descriptive list of present infrastructural failures exerts much more power than the ideological message of hope driving the advertisement. Adichie suggests, then, that purposefully plain description carries a defamiliarizing force, especially in dishonest contexts like Nigeria in the early 1980s, where the military government deliberately spread misinformation, or in the United States where "You're supposed to pretend that you don't notice" race.

The union of Ifemulu and Obinze at the end of the novel is the joining of two characters who have cultivated an ongoing distance from the comforts of convention. Neither migrant ever entirely embraces the norms of his or her adoptive country, and both have left Nigeria because they are frustrated with the norms of home. When they come back to Lagos, what both have learned is the habit of refusing habit. Ifemulu, on returning to Nigeria, comes to feel what the narrator calls "the strange familiar" (475), while Obinze continues to experience "a disorienting strangeness" (33) even in the face of his wealth. He finally enjoys a genuine intimacy when he is able to describe the marriage he is ending as a "kind of floating-along contentment" that requires "pretending" (588). Obinze's description captures what I've argued is the central challenge not only for the realist novel but also for criticism: to find ways to convey the ordinariness of public investment and privileged ease. Structures and infrastructures are difficult to defamiliarize not only because it is easy to take them for granted but also because it is so easy to produce misperceptions and pretensions that obscure the work that they do. Adichie suggests that descriptive prose can work against the inevitable perceptual blunting of habit—thereby jolting us into a new alertness to a world we thought we knew.
Notes
1. Robbins's "The Smell of Infrastructure" and Rubenstein's *Public Works* have begun a conversation about how literary texts represent infrastructures.

2. As Berlant and Warner explain, heteronormativity "is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture" (194).

3. For an investigation of how strangely the rigid binary of "white" and "colored" operated for Asian Americans in the segregated south during Jim Crow, see Bow.

4. "Electricity is perceived as the main bottleneck. In Nigeria, power outages result in losses equivalent to 10 percent of total sales. Almost all Nigerian firms (96 percent) experience power outages" (Radwan and Pellegrini 48–50).

5. The cause, according to some commentators, was not a poorly designed network but failed government policy that set regions against one another rather than integrating them into a smooth national system. For a political and historical account of India's electricity infrastructure in the past hundred years, see Kale 177–78.

Works Cited