Infrastructure between Statehood and Selfhood: The Trans-African Highway

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In his 1977 novel Petals of Blood, the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o condemns the continued exploitation of Kenya’s people and the expropriation of their land after independence from British rule in 1964 (Figure 1).1 Ngũgĩ describes the hypocrisy of many elites and institutions, but the novel’s grandest manifestation of capitalist-driven injustice and dispossession is the construction of a massive transcontinental highway, the “Trans-Africa Road.” Ngũgĩ begins by acknowledging, even celebrating, the project as one of Africa’s great feats of engineering: an infrastructural network that will connect Kenya’s villages and cities with all of Africa’s newly independent nations.2 But once it becomes tarmac, the project transforms places into waypoints, ultimately destroying people’s connections to one another and to the land. Symbolically and literally, “the Trans-Africa Road cleaved Ilmorog [the town at the center of Ngũgĩ’s novel] into two halves”—those of the very rich and the very poor.3 This infrastructure, meant to connect Africans to one another, ends up alienating them instead. This is the tragedy of African decolonization: people struggled for control over their bodies, minds, and land only to be betrayed by a new ruling elite working in collusion with international capital. In Ngũgĩ’s critique, infrastructure is the means by which the Kenyan state becomes neocolonial.

Figure 1 Cover, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Petals of Blood (African Writers Series, Heinemann, 1977).
Ngũgĩ’s “Trans-Africa Road” actually existed. Or, more precisely, a project for a transcontinental infrastructure network—the Trans-African Highway—existed, parts of which were being built in Kenya as Ngũgĩ wrote. This project was quickly lost to history, overwritten by the grand narrative of Africa’s failed postindependence development. Postcolonial scholarship has followed Ngũgĩ in revealing how African states remained complicit in the exploitation and dispossession of their citizens, a state of affairs shaped by Cold War geopolitics and aggravated by the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s. A generation of thinkers have critiqued the ideologies and often-violent practices of postindependence nation building and international “development,” including those in Kenya. Such work mirrors accounts of the sometimes disastrous consequences of large-scale infrastructural developments globally.

Scholars of postcolonial African cities are committed to revealing how people live with such projects. They have turned to ephemeral forms of sociality and urban lifeworlds, revealing the myriad ways in which city dwellers are not simply passive victims but frequently agents of modernity and urbanization. These scholars have overturned the discourse of developmentalism and shifted the kinds of questions asked in urban studies. In the work of urbanists such as AbdouMaliq Simone, people become the living infrastructure sustaining the city. Equating people’s everyday acts with political resistance, Simone and others view the infrastructure of roads and other public works as an overarching force that urban underclasses must overcome in order to redress state-led injustices and become fully vested citizens. This remains an important oppositional narrative, but it tends, inadvertently, to leave intact what it writes against—namely, the power of infrastructure and the state. Most important, such scholarship has often divorced the materiality of infrastructure from its specific cultural contexts.

Yet the material remains of the African independence era are receiving increasing attention today, particularly from historians of architecture and urbanism. Spurred by a recent “global turn” in architectural history and a revival of interest in the legacy of high modernism, this work returns to the study of the city and its infrastructures. Decades after the first pioneering histories of colonial urbanism by Zeynep Çelik, Gwendolyn Wright, Paul Rabinow, and others, an emerging generation is focusing on Africa’s postindependence built heritage. Diverse in thematic and methodological orientation, these scholars share an interest in the global technopolitics of production, read largely through the agency of architects and planners and the institutions in which they are embedded. Their work is pioneering in bringing a largely forgotten architectural history to light and taking seriously the promises of political independence while acknowledging its global Cold War entanglements beyond North-to-South exchange. At the same time, by focusing on architecture as the physical manifestation of postindependence state building and development, this work typically prioritizes statehood above selfhood, national politics and international relations above the experiences of most Africans. In doing so, it neglects the violence of state building—whether socialist or capitalist in orientation—a surprising elision considering the continuing pertinence of postcolonial critiques such as Ngũgĩ’s.

**Thinking with Ngũgĩ**

*Petals of Blood* offers a leitmotif and heuristic device for our discussion in this essay, conveying the unruliness of infrastructure, in both conceptual and material senses. Ngũgĩ ends his novel with a reading of the Trans-Africa Road that contrasts strikingly with his initial indictment. Hopeful in tone, he describes people responding to the highway in seemingly playful, even joyful, ways. Children and young people use it as a playground and a site for leisure. At first, the author jeers at the naive and uncomprehending delight with which children celebrate the names of multinational oil companies—Shell, Esso, Total, Agip. Yet he also suggests that behind such play lies something significant, something left out of normative accounts of modernization. The seemingly silly songs of youth are performances wherein the highway becomes a space of creative embodiment, untethered to the state or its own materiality. The youth create something new, he argues, mixing “fact and fiction . . . in fertile imaginations.”

They sing, in shrill voices, of the road which will surely carry them to all the cities of Africa, their Africa, to link hands with children of other lands:

Over the mud
Over the tar
Over the air
From Luanda to Nairobi
From Msambiji to Cairo
From Dar to Libya
We all help one another

And so they will go on, varying only the names of the cities of Africa, their Africa!

Why would an author so well known for his critique of postindependence development describe infrastructure as a source of youthful transformation? Why end a searing condemnation of the highway with an apparent negation of that same critique? *Petals of Blood* points to a complex set of contradictions largely unaccounted for in current postcolonial urban studies or in the architectural scholarship on the massive building projects of the postindependence era.
Africa’s great modernist buildings, roads, dams, and telecommunication systems of the 1960s and 1970s were not constructed only to serve as tools of state building, nor are they today simply admirable monuments serving to globalize the discipline of architectural history. They were built as part of an aspirational modernity, a world of progress and technology, of social mobility and the production of new social and cultural forms in domains far beyond architecture or planning.

How did infrastructure come to serve as a medium of subjectivity or a new mode of representation? What new imaginaries and practices did infrastructure afford? What modes of address did it demand from people? Such a line of inquiry allows us to understand the built infrastructure projects of postindependence Africa both as real sites of sociability and contestation and as vehicles for imaginative self-making. Ngũgĩ’s account of the Trans-African Highway asks us to explore how infrastructure was used as an aesthetic medium and to consider how the possibility of unprecedented mobility changed people’s views of their present and future selves. It asks us to excavate the historical specificity of infrastructural forms.

Because of its scale, cost, and ambition, infrastructure is often thought of as a story of geopolitics, state building, and “big men.” How might we avoid considering infrastructure on these terms? How can we read it against the grain? In answering this challenge, we are inspired by older cultural histories of infrastructure in the global North, as well as by more recent anthropological studies. Yet instead of grafting questions of contemporary urban life onto the now often-decaying infrastructure projects of the post-independence period, we are interested in excavating their historicity, in seeing how they transformed citizenship and selfhood at the time of their construction. Selfhood, connected to social issues such as identity politics and claims to citizenship, is first and foremost about being in the world.

This essay should be read not as a definitive history of the Trans-African Highway but as an alternative model for studying the architecture and infrastructure of postindependence Africa. While we attend to key aspects of that specific project’s early history, we are primarily interested in infrastructure’s ability to be generative in social and cultural terms. We take seriously Ngũgĩ’s imaginaries of decolonization and social unity to explore how infrastructure in the era of African independence was both the business of statehood and a key site of embodiment and subject making. We approach infrastructure as a tool of empire and capitalism and as a site of uncertainty and contradiction. Thus, we join recent historical scholarship on African decolonization that counters the pessimistic view shaped by hindsight and instead foregrounds the “possibilities and constraint” in the transition to decolonization—while avoiding nostalgia and attending to the complex politics of individual and communal experience. As Ngũgĩ suggests, people’s engagement with the highway was simultaneously complicit and subversive. We therefore explore a series of dialectical relations—between citizen and state, landscape and society, and community and self—to show the myriad lives and afterlives of infrastructure.

Our approach to infrastructure requires a methodological shift, if not a reversal. Further study of the Trans-African Highway must entail in-depth case studies of specific built environments, coupled with long-term fieldwork along particular stretches of the highway. Yet here we begin by decentering the institutional archives of planning and material production, which inevitably reassert the agency and power of builders and planners. Instead, we combine archival research and historical ethnography with an exploration of visual culture to reveal how Africans engaged and transformed infrastructure. We present infrastructure and its attendant popular culture as imaginative acts and performative spaces. This approach allows us to emphasize the subjective and affective dimensions of infrastructure that have been neglected in much previous scholarship. Ultimately, we argue for the importance of a history of reception, which will require further work to reveal the everyday business of living with infrastructure.

The story we tell is mainly a Kenyan one, but it holds broader significance for understanding how infrastructure was inhabited and embodied in postcolonial contexts. We seek to capture how Kenyans in the 1960s and 1970s envisioned their present and future lives through transcontinental technology projects such as the Trans-African Highway. In exploring how they engaged the infrastructural work of the postindependence era, we take seriously Ngũgĩ’s suggestion that the highway is exploitative and divisive but also fundamentally generative. His narrative offers a lens through which we can understand the material and subjective dimensions of infrastructure at a precise historical moment, before its future was foreclosed.

Pan-African Dreams and the Developmental Complex

Coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the Trans-African Highway was perhaps the most ambitious African infrastructure project of the postindependence era (Figure 2). UNECA’s ambition was to create a network of highways across the continent to connect its newly independent nations with one another. The highway was promoted and endorsed by Africa’s most important independence fighters, including Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah, as a tool of Pan-African integration.
and development, moving the continent’s people and economies from past to future.

Significantly, these leaders had envisioned independent Africa’s future as fundamentally postnational. Many had initially rejected the idea of sovereign nation-states entering a world order they saw as outdated and imperialist. As historian Frederick Cooper and others have emphasized, Africa’s anti-colonial activists and politicians formulated alternative organizational visions. Leaders such as Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Milton Obote, Mamadou Dia, Léopold Senghor, and Patrice Lumumba worked toward forming supranational polities where the rights of citizenship would not be linked to nationality. Senghor supported intercontinental federations, in which formerly colonized and colonizers would be connected in new, truly just political formations. The Trans-African Highway gave form to these federative visions.18

Widely known during the 1970s, the Trans-African Highway was often referred to as the “unity highway.”19 Thousands of kilometers of road—from Lagos to Mombasa, from Cairo to Gaborone, from Dakar to N’Djamena, and so on—would, according to consulting engineers, “play a part in bringing about a fundamental shift in the goals of African development, away from concentration on raw material production and a dependent relationship on Europe and towards a more varied economy of greater self-sufficiency and interdependency.”20 The highway would allow Africans to overcome the impact of centuries of European colonialism, during which the continent’s raw resources had been extracted for export (Figure 3). The network of roads would connect Africa with itself, spurring inter-African economic and social development and the formation of a new continental collectivity while overturning the extractive logic of colonial railways (which usually ran from inland areas to ports).21 The highway would be the circulatory system of a developing technocracy through which Africans would become economic producers as well as consumers.

Foundational to understanding Pan-Africanism as a political and public infrastructural project is the Ghanaian path to self-rule under Nkrumah’s leadership as prime minister and later president.22 As the first sub-Saharan African state to emerge from colonial rule, Ghana was widely considered the

Figure 2 Map of the Trans-African Highway project; late 1970s (Rolf Hofmeier, “Die Transafrikastraßen: Stand der Planung und Realisierung,” Africa Spectrum 14, no. 1 [1979], 35).
Key to this was infrastructure. Nkrumah inherited a major late colonial infrastructure project—a gigantic dam in the Volta River basin that would produce hydroelectric energy for aluminum processing—and he transformed it into the cornerstone of western African industrialization and modernization. Infrastructure—from rural electrification to new towns, highways, and harbors—would foster a new, disciplined citizenry ready for a newly liberated Africa. As the work of building the first Pan-African nation proceeded, local discontent over forced resettlement was silenced. Infrastructure would bring into being a new public, a united African public—or so it was assumed.

An excellent illustration of Nkrumah’s modernization ethos is found in Efua Sutherland’s 1961 The Roadmakers: A Picture Book of Ghana, with photographs by William Bell. The book celebrates modern technology as the means by which Ghana would realize its postindependence ambitions, with disciplined citizens working hard toward a common goal. The ideology and aesthetics of technological progress that once served to enforce colonial control would now undergird national and continental political liberation. Bell’s photos depict the newly independent state’s road infrastructure as a vehicle for physical and social mobility. In one image, an African worker, a former colonial subject turned citizen, is shown at the steering wheel of his vehicle, his pride and exuberance in full view (Figure 4). Road infrastructure here is the bearer of liberal government, of law and order, constructing a new relationship between the (male) citizen and the state. This representation elides the unruly nature of infrastructure—even during the colonial period the state could never fully control how locals used roads and dams—but Roadmakers emphasizes the new political freedom it brings. The road is presented as unifier, liberator, and integrator—rearranging fragmented communities into a collective connected to many other places and communities, freeing new citizens from outmoded colonial and traditional constraints (e.g., lineages and ethnicities). Historians of Europe have examined how infrastructure produced self-regulating individuals by enabling “free circulation.” In 1960s Africa, however, such freedom was also regarded as resoundingly decolonial—a road toward true self-determination—even if African automobility predated independence.

The theoretical basis for this infrastructural path to decolonization entailed a mix of Pan-African and socialist ideas, yet its formal language was that of a technologically advanced modernism. To some, this new, postindependence modernism was distinct not only from the eclectic styles of the colonial era but also from the “tropical” modernism of more recent vintage. Thus did Nkrumah shift from British architects like Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry to the internationally renowned, U.N.-affiliated Greek planner Constantinos Doxiadis. Doxiadis’s technocratic, rationalist modernism became paradigmatic for development in the decolonizing global South.

Soon after he was hired by Nkrumah, Doxiadis began working on an unsolicited overarching infrastructure plan for Africa, which he published as a report in 1962 (Figure 5). In contrast to the piecemeal development and exploitative logic of former colonial powers, his plan treated Africa as a single region open to physical transformation. Modern transportation was the key, as new networks would open up regions, boost intra-African trade and industrialization, and foster greater balance among economic and settlement structures. The realization of such a vision would require vast collective action, and Doxiadis was well aware that success could be achieved only with the coordination of a continental-scale institution such as UNECA (established in 1958 to boost intra-African progress). While the archives are silent on whether Doxiadis shared his report with Nkrumah, a copy was sent to UNECA in Addis Ababa, where it remains to this day.

As Doxiadis worked, a variety of actors were seeking to remake Africa’s infrastructural landscape. African leaders began developing new national and international highway plans of their own. Before he supported the Trans-African Highway
Figure 4  William E. Bell, photos in a two-page layout in *The Roadmakers* (Efua Sutherland and William E. Bell, *The Roadmakers: A Picture Book of Ghana* [Accra: Ghana Information Services, 1961]).

Figure 5  Doxiadis Associates Consulting Engineers, “Africa—Balanced Settlements” (Constantinos A. Doxiadis, *Toward an African Transport Plan* [10 Mar. 1962], fig. 21, D-GA 642, DF, Doxiadis Archives, Athens).
project, Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, and, like Nkrumah, a leading figure of African decolonization, had already projected a new highway from Nairobi to Addis Ababa, nicknamed “Hell’s Highway,” in cooperation with Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia. Around the same time, in 1969, the Japanese government proposed to the governments of Kenya, Uganda, Zaire, the Central African Republic, and Nigeria a four-lane highway running the 4,800 kilometers from Lagos to Mombasa, to be built by the Mitsubishi Corporation. The African nations were initially suspicious of the project and questioned Japan’s intentions.

UNECA soon stepped in (with the support of the Organization of African Unity) to coordinate the ambitious transcontinental roadway project. It was not Nkrumah or Kenyatta but Robert Gardiner—Ghana’s Oxford-trained director of social welfare under Nkrumah—who eventually became the intellectual and political leader of what quickly became known as the Trans-African Highway. Nkrumah dismissed Gardiner in 1959, possibly because of personality conflicts, but in 1962 Gardiner was appointed executive secretary of UNECA, in which capacity he expanded Doxiadis’s 1962 plan to involve multiple highway corridors connecting all parts of the continent, excluding apartheid South Africa. To coordinate construction, he established the Trans-African Highway Bureau in 1971.

Gardiner’s rhetoric was only vaguely Pan-African, and he made few explicit references to the political leaders of the movement. For example, he stated: “We are opening up a whole continent, making the continent an entity instead of isolated portions—to foster a greater flow of trade and more intimate cultural and political relations among African states.” Ultimately, Gardiner believed, the realization of the highway network required pragmatism, and he scaled back Japan’s original Mombasa–Lagos proposal. Instead of a four-lane highway, there would be a single-track, all-weather road mostly following existing road, and only 5 percent of the entire stretch would be built from scratch. Yet even that would remain a huge undertaking, requiring tremendous effort and expertise.

Then as now, African elites (like those in many other parts of the world) believed that public infrastructure and economic development should be spearheaded by technical experts, with little or no input from the local communities they served. Definitions of the public good offered by experts often went unquestioned, even though these individuals typically came from outside the region, usually from the industrialized global North (Europe, Japan, the United States). Some even came from the old colonial capitals. Experts from Belgium, for instance, proposed to survey the Zairean portion of the highway, and the Cameroonian leg was surveyed by French and German experts. Thus, despite the utopian rhetoric of Pan-African development, the Trans-African Highway was shaped by a web of governmental and corporate initiatives that reproduced late colonial modernization plans, norms, and ideas. Yet the highway project also entailed new global connections—with socialist Europe building massive projects across Africa, and American and European oil companies establishing themselves in Nigeria and elsewhere. This Cold War globalization reflected the shift in expertise from colonial administration to international development agencies and multinational corporations, a shift from place-specific to “portable” knowledge. This mirrored the placeless, generic design qualities and managerial modalities of the Trans-African Highway itself. Completion of the highway system involved not just building a set of roads but also creating new vehicle and road standards and regulations, visa requirements, and international vehicle insurance systems.

The Trans-African Highway gave rise to a generative visual culture. A postage stamp issued by Kenya in 1980 illustrates how seamlessly Pan-Africanism and foreign corporate interests were intertwined in the Trans-African Highway, at least ideologically (Figure 6). The stamp’s design reproduces an established Pan-African visual trope: Africa dominates the earth’s surface—a radical break from colonial cartographic representations, which typically put Europe at the center. Kenya now stands at the center of a web of roadways; these lift off the earth’s surface, encircling the planet, flying out into the galaxy, expanding into the far reaches of outer space. Highways are the lifeline of a newly independent and unified continent, but they are so much more. They symbolize Africa’s shaping of the transportation systems of the future, those that will lead humanity into uncharted worlds. Here we see an early instance of Afro-futurist visual culture being used for propaganda purposes, with the goal of proclaiming Africa as the globe’s future engine of development.

The same visual language was used by Japanese car manufacturers to advertise their products to African consumers. A magazine ad for Datsun from 1978—its colors saturated and dramatic, suggesting fecundity and sublime delight—shows a road, its tarmac in pristine condition, spearing the African wilderness (Figure 7). Collaged onto the photograph is a heraldic emblem showing the continent bisected by a single vertical dash of two-way tarmac, resembling the road in the photograph. As shown in the map-like emblem, the continent stands at the center of a cosmos of diminutive planets and stars. This advertisement shows how the Trans-African Highway was connected to the global visual culture of tourism and elite leisure in the era of decolonization. The commodity and consumption cultures represented here are almost identical to those of the late colonial and early postindependence eras. That is, the visual culture of colonial development, its modernist futurism, was embraced by postcolonial governments, the flow between the two eras, and
between Africa and the global North, appearing almost seamless. African integration here implies total commensurability with global standards.

The reality of the Trans-African Highway, however, was quite different. Despite the involvement of UNECA and the Organization of African Unity, the highway’s construction was ultimately the responsibility of individual African states. State leaders had their own political agendas, and large-scale building projects served as instruments to achieve these—whether they involved quelling secessionist movements or extending power over peripheral regions. As Guy Arnold and Ruth Weiss note in their 1977 book on African highways, “Although all pay lip service to the ideal of African unity, each country in fact is sufficiently nationalistic and sufficiently wrapped up in its own development problems to regard the issue of the highway as a side issue, an agreeable international luxury rather than anything more important.” Moreover, African governments were understandably suspicious of foreign involvement, since foreign governments and corporations had historically been more interested in Africa’s mineral resources than in the continent’s social or economic development; promoting disunity among African countries might actually be to their benefit. Such concerns reveal little of the often-contradictory workings of the “international development complex,” yet in conflicts between countries, infrastructure was used more often for strategic reasons than as a tool of integration. This became clear during the mid-1970s, when Mozambique closed its transport connections with Rhodesia, and Uganda accused Kenya of blocking its road and rail outlets to the coast. Infrastructure was a vital medium of international politics, but not necessarily in the ways Pan-Africanists had once imagined.

Architectures of Mobility

The first completed section of the Trans-African Highway was the Nairobi–Mombasa corridor. Improved under Kenyatta in the late 1960s, this is the only stretch still (occasionally) identified by locals and officials as the “Trans-African Highway.” While large portions of this corridor were left un-built, in particular the Congo section, the 500-kilometer segment from Mombasa to Nairobi existed as a tarred road by the 1960s. The most traveled part of the corridor, this road followed the route of the colonial railway, reinforcing the linear infrastructural development prevalent in the country since the late nineteenth century (Figure 8). In the late colonial and early postindependence eras, this road—even before it became part of the Trans-African Highway network—fostered new varieties of tourism, leisure, and state theatrics. That is, the newly paved highway allowed for speedier travel from the colonial capital of Nairobi to the Swahili coast, where elite white and South Asian Kenyans from the inland regions sought recreation and leisure.

One monument to colonial and postcolonial mobility on the Swahili coast, located at the end of the highway near Mombasa’s old port, was the luxurious Oceanic Hotel (Figure 9). Designed for the waterfront by the German architect and city planner Ernst May, who moved to East Africa in 1933, the hotel was built between 1956 and 1958.
and demolished in 2000). May was a determined defender of colonialism in Africa and saw the hotel as an oasis of white European civilization. His design reflected this imperial vision, and racial segregation was inscribed in its plan: the hotel was reserved for the colonial elite, while servants were housed in barracks at the edge of the property, indicated as “African quarters” on the plan (Figure 10). The hotel is still celebrated in accounts of tropical modernism for its insistently abstract and international style, its great curving mass, and its “natural” ventilation system.

During the immediate postindependence period, politicians and aspiring middle-class Kenyans used the hotel for major government ceremonies covered by the international press, and for political meetings and social gatherings. At the
same time, the hotel became a space of class mobility and leisure for a new elite of mainland Kenyans. Mombasans, often dismissed as traditional and outmoded by residents of Nairobi, used the Oceanic for events such as weddings in order to present themselves as pioneers of modernity and convey their rising social status (Figure 11). Oral histories collected in the 1960s illustrate the significance of the Oceanic for the Muslim women of Mombasa’s Old Town. By hosting events at the Oceanic, they sought to be seen as “equals” to other elite women. Their stories reveal their awareness of the hotel as a space meant for whites, Asians, and up-country elites. The hotel became a place where local women could claim their rights as citizens and appear equal to others, especially those ranking above them in the racial hierarchy of colonial Kenya. Mombasa resident Shamsa Mohamed Muhashamsy described the first event at the Oceanic organized by the Arab Women’s Institute:

We were the first [women] even to know what a hotel was like. Our organization brought our women into the Oceanic Hotel. . . . Now we were real women. Today we, women of the buibui, have begun to enter hotels. . . . The organization brought us to the hotel. There were Europeans and Indians there. We rented the place and entertained our guests with lectures and speeches in English and Swahili. We saw that now we were equal.46

The phrase “women of the buibui” signals her insistence that Muslim women produce modernity too: only Sunni Muslims wore the buibui, black gowns and head coverings, and during the colonial period the British protectorate often focused on veiling as a sign of coastal Muslims’ backwardness.

Operating as a theater for the enactment of modern citizenship, the hotel was intimately related to mobility. In 1973 Kenyan vice president Daniel Arap Moi opened a temporary exhibition about the Trans-African Highway on the hotel’s premises. While Moi’s exhibition presented the highway as a pathway to modernity, the Oceanic Hotel was shown as facilitating aspects of Kenyan citizenship, including new possibilities for leisure, travel, distribution, and consumption. The highway’s Nairobi–Mombasa stretch made the Indian Ocean coast accessible to mainland Kenyans in new ways, rendering it a site of leisure and pleasure to be enjoyed by the rising middle classes. In this context, the Oceanic was described as a “gateway” building. Cars and oceangoing ships were associated with it, and posters, articles, films, and postcards presented the hotel as a monument to modern mobility. The 1962 edition of *Kenya Safari*, a brochure produced by the Kenya Government Information Services, shows an aerial view of the hotel juxtaposed with a luxury passenger liner (Figure 12). The accompanying text reads: “Gone are the days
when ships paid only sporadic visits to the East African ports and the voyage was a lengthy affair. Nowadays Mombasa, one of the most up-to-date and most highly mechanized ports in Africa, is visited regularly by ships from all over the world.47

Another photograph of the Oceanic from the period emphasizes the property's large parking lot, the footprint of which was more than double that of the hotel itself. The curving road leading to the hotel's driveway allowed one to be seen driving to and from the place (see Figures 9 and 10). The circular fountain at the hotel's entrance was meant not for walking around but rather for being driven around. Such car-centric design was standard by this time in North America, but it was exceptional in Kenya. Modern mobility here was for the first time fully mechanized. Photographs emphasize how the architecture seamlessly integrated mechanized movement with the hotel as a site of leisure.

The Trans-African Highway was not only a practical transportation system; it also created spaces for doing new things. In effect, it constructed leisure as an extension of the performance of modern citizenship. Architectural monuments acted as nodal points in the highway network, allowing travelers to stop and enjoy the pleasures of being mobile. A prime example of this is the structure known as the Man-Eaters of Tsavo, built in the 1970s near Voi, halfway between Mombasa and Nairobi. This modernist gas station and rest stop featured overnight accommodations (Figures 13 and 14). Its form and name derived from some of the most spectacular tales of adventure and horror associated with the building of Kenya's colonial railroad. The “Tsavo man-eaters” were two lions that killed several railway workers during the 1890s. The rest stop's narrow, segmented form was a modernist homage to the train carriages of the colonial era. Abandoned in the 1990s, the Man-Eaters of Tsavo is now thought by many to be haunted; it figures prominently in the memories of locals who recall the heyday of travel and new forms of leisure in the 1970s and 1980s. People remember the building's tasteful decor and beautiful views. Despite its futuristic exterior, its interior offered a nostalgic and romantic view of the colonial past, displaying photographs of Europeans traveling on trains and hunting wildlife. The rest stop's restaurant evoked the experience of dining in first-class train cars of the colonial period (Figure 15).

People in Mombasa still recall the importance of stopping to eat at this restaurant. The structure was set on stilts to give guests the same panoptic view that elite colonial-era visitors would have enjoyed from a first-class dining car. Colonial-era print media often presented illustrations depicting the interiors of railway dining cars, with elegant passengers eating off fine china while gazing out at the beauty of the African landscape. Eating and enjoying the view through the windows of a now-static train, visitors to the Man-Eaters rest stop also consumed an experience once available only to the colonial-era elite.48

Dandies on the Highway
Photography and print media, such as magazines and government brochures, provide evidence of the reception of the
Trans-African Highway during the immediate postindependence era. These archival representations of the highway serve as active historical agents, revealing the cultural and subjective experience of tarmac mobility. In fact, photography, because of its mobile and transferable form, acted as a new material medium of modernity.49

One of the political dimensions of infrastructure is that it makes people recognizable and governable as certain kinds of citizen-subjects, in this case as respectable modern members of a new nation-state. The ideal subjects of the Trans-African Highway might at first seem to have been middle-class families. A Ford automobile advertisement that appeared in the East African edition of Drum magazine in 1970 was aimed at middle-class male breadwinners whose private homes and cars were afforded by white-collar office work (Figure 16). This ideal type in the grand narrative of African modernization and development figured frequently in Drum articles and ads. Through such media, the print culture of the late colonial and early postcolonial periods in Kenya emphasized the consumption of iconically modern products: cars, cigarettes, and single-family homes.

In Drum and other popular magazines, the dream of becoming a white-collar office worker was presented with particular zeal. Capitalist labor demands were made benign
in advertisements showing workers first and foremost as consumers. The violent history of turning Africans into wage laborers, and subsequently into consumers, was supplanted by a happy space of bourgeois individuality. These advertisements also elided the realities of daily life in modern Kenya. Most men in industrializing late colonial Kenya were blue-collar laborers, sometimes forced; at best, they were salaried workers or clerks. The rise of labor unions and strikes in the late 1950s shaped the Kenyan male experience.50

The migrant and resident labor systems of colonial Kenya depended expressly on preventing Africans from moving about freely. The colonial administration enacted countless measures to restrict the movement of Kenyans and increase the supply of labor. Central to these measures was the kipande, a compulsory identification card that all males over age fifteen had to wear around their necks. The system violated the lives of Kenyans in many ways. It was used primarily by the colonial government and white landowners to ensure that workers—typically performing hard, poorly paid labor under harrowing conditions—would not abandon their posts. Various other forms of identification were also issued to Africans, but not to Asians or white Kenyans. The colonized found it humiliating to have to wear these identity cards, which they saw as symbols of their dispossession. The kipande system controlled the
bodies of the colonized. It restricted their physical mobility and reduced them to laboring things—stock to be moved, rather than individuals able to move of their own accord. Not surprisingly, anticolonial agitation and political activism often focused on the slavery-like conditions forced on Kenyans through the *kipande* system. Anticolonial protest coalesced around demands to abolish the system and the injustices of land alienation.

This history of dispossession through immobilization helps to explain why consumerist car advertising could be charged with such revolutionary power. Even if some African elites had enjoyed mobility during colonial times, the automobile’s symbolic extension of freedom to all Africans was nothing less than a revolution in citizenship. The embrace of automobility and middle-class commodity culture in postindependence Kenya conveyed not just the politics but also the poetics of infrastructure. Transportation systems did not simply reproduce the social norms of capitalism or of individualist modernity. Rather, people made these systems their own precisely because they were vehicles for overcoming psychic trauma: they offered new spaces for the performance of autonomous selves.

This also suggests a different reading of Ngũgĩ’s children alongside the highway. Their desire to be elsewhere, always looking beyond their immediate place, is the search for a world on the horizon—a decolonial world of collective freedom. Perversely, this is a world sold by international corporations such as Datsun, which helped invent the new African consumer of the postindependence era. While infrastructure can and often does turn people into cogs in a technical system, it can also be a means of creating something new. Children do something with the highway when they sing and play alongside it. Their play remakes the road into a future-oriented space, which they transform into an extension of their senses and selves.

Road infrastructure and the mechanization of mobility—even if these remained largely imaginary in the postindependence period—also allowed for the enactment of a particular postcolonial subjectivity: the male dandy. This figure appeared prominently in the pages of African popular magazines during the 1960s and 1970s and, to some extent, in the streets of postcolonial African cities. As opposed to the male breadwinner in front of his single-family home, the dandy was concerned not with middle-class respectability but with the delights of being carefree, alone, and on the move. Advertisements for cars in this period addressed African men with the promise of physical and psychic freedom. For example, an advertisement for a Datsun sports car that appeared in *Drum* in 1970 shows the African dandy man as a machine-driven flaneur (Figure 17). This marks the beginning of a tradition of Afro-futuristic self-styling that continues to this day. Contemporary Kenyan artists such as Osborne Macharia and Cyrus Kabiru create photographic portraits of young urbanites as glinting machine–human hybrids. Their work is intentionally surreal, but the 1970s Datsun ad suggests a subtler phantasm, where independence, individuality, and even solitude are tools for self-making. The dandy becomes a kind of cyborg—the opposite of the colonial “native” as much as the subject of petit bourgeois respectability. The advertisement’s focus on the lone driver is a radical break with colonialist notions of the African male as being rooted in the ancient lineages and familial networks of his “tribe.” As the advertisement suggests, “With the SSS you’ll never lack the power to get away from the crowd.”

The background seen in the Datsun advertisement is Kilindini Harbour, the modern industrial port of Mombasa.
The harbor was expanded in 1964, in part to accommodate the needs of the massive new oil refineries nearby.\textsuperscript{55} In the ad, what we usually think of as the mundane industrial background of modern life has been turned into a playground for a lifestyle that African men were now meant to consume, together with their cars.\textsuperscript{56} The harbor, a center for oceanic transportation, was also connected to the colonial railway and, subsequently, to the modern highway. This seamless mobility across land and sea was what Ngũgĩ found so disconcerting, but it also made Africa the place of youth’s future. In the Datsun ad, the harbor’s advanced technologies, represented by giant cranes and new container ships, set the stage for a self-confident yet casual “New Man,” who, again, is singular and alone. The background is a technological sublime evacuated of its laboring bodies—the men and women who built these infrastructural projects both before and after independence.

Still, the dandy is a phantasm. The motor vehicle transformed everyday life in Africa, but for most, mobility remained a public, collective experience, not an individual or recreational one.\textsuperscript{57} Even today, only a select few enjoy individual automobility, and driving continues to be an overwhelmingly male activity. Most people walk.\textsuperscript{58}

More accessible technologies of self-expression and self-actualization were available in the postindependence period, however. Portrait photography, for example, became incredibly popular in the urban centers of Mombasa, Nairobi, Kinshasa, and other cities. It allowed individuals, women as well as men, to create new aesthetic spaces of individuality. Like roads, photography can be understood as part of the infrastructural system of postindependence modernization. Photography allowed individuals to translate, even transpose, the mobility of tarmac transportation networks into pictures of self-performance.

For many young Africans in the 1960s and 1970s, photography offered a means of expressing excess, exteriority, and artifice.\textsuperscript{59} Many commercial studio photographers in this era catered to the youth culture of Africa’s major cities. In Mombasa, P. V. Parekh’s studio was visited by young Kenyans, Ugandans, and Tanzanians because the photographer encouraged his sitters to manifest their most playful, individual selves.\textsuperscript{60} One of Parekh’s portraits of a young man emphasizes the subject’s role as a consumer of fashionable clothing, music, and culture (Figure 18). With legs crossed, hands clasped across his knees, he appears as a nonlaboring, single man with the time and wealth to enjoy his leisure. His sunglasses and watch reveal him as a consumer of modern luxuries. A playful, self-satisfied smile lingers on his lips. Photographs such as these are theatrical constructs in which the sitters knowingly engage the commodity and mass-media culture of the postcolonial era.

![Figure 18](image)

**Figure 18** P. V. Parekh, photograph of a young man, Mombasa, 1966 (collection of Heike Behrend).

### Dialectics of Consumption

Infrastructures embody the dialectics of consumption: they are exploitative and divisive but also fundamentally generative. The embrace of cars and automobility and the movement toward machine-based aesthetic play were not just vectors of subjective emancipation or the formation of a Pan-African public imaginary. They were also part and parcel of new forms of subjugation, misleadingly presenting consumption and commodification as liberating and desirable activities.

The international oil industry so central to twentieth-century capitalism and the political economy of postindependence Africa entailed structural violence—or, rather, infrastructural violence.\textsuperscript{61} While consumption was a creative process not entirely controlled by international corporations, it still benefitted them. Oil companies focused their advertising on fostering lifestyles that required high levels of oil consumption.\textsuperscript{62} Oil in this sense fed the motor of...
neocolonial capitalism even as it served as the creative medium for the private, self-absorbed, modern Kenyan dandy. This postindependence subject embodied the cultural spectacle of oil-based capitalism.⁶³

Companies such as the Italian-based ENI, responsible for the construction of pipelines and gas stations across Africa, produced images to suggest that ordinary Africans thoroughly enjoyed their newly imported technologies (Figure 19).⁶⁴ The imagery used by European corporations in Africa was similar to that used by local government officials. Africans were pictured consuming things for the same reasons in ENI’s imagery as in William Bell’s photographs of Ghana (see Figure 4). The similarities of these images reveal how both states and corporations sought to convey the impression of Africans happily embracing industrial technologies that would improve their lives. Buildings along the Trans-African Highway, such as rest stops and the Oceanic Hotel, were extensions of such propaganda, normalizing and making desirable car-based lifestyles. That is exactly why so many corporations sought a role in shaping postcolonial Africa through infrastructure: it would pave the way, literally, to oil-dependent societies.

In this process, infrastructure, architecture, urban planning, and other design disciplines all played key roles. Formal state institutions, technical experts, and businesses were not particularly interested in megaprojects as potential sites of political action or settings for personal or collective expression.⁶⁵ For them, infrastructures were tools to produce good consumer-citizens. An inner life, a self, was not a necessary component of technical systems. The ramifications of oil infrastructures for postcolonial subjectivity are perhaps clearest in the case of the refinery at Mombasa, completed in February 1964.⁶⁶ Planned in the colonial period, it nonetheless came to symbolize postcolonial economic freedom, effectively liberating Kenya from having to import refined oil. At the same time, the refinery was the result of an agreement between the colonial government and various international companies, one that has made Kenya’s energy system entirely oil dependent to the present day. A 1964 government brochure produced to celebrate the refinery’s opening details the advantages of modern mobility for Kenya’s citizens, noting that access to gasoline would enable unprecedented levels of private car ownership and ease the way for frequent air travel between Mombasa and Nairobi. Further, the refinery would produce enough bitumen to build five miles of tarmac road every day.⁶⁷ Such promises were comparable to those conveyed by the modernist architectural structures then springing up in Nairobi.

The brochure evokes a future in which Kenya is covered with a web of tarmac offering unprecedented mobility to all. A photograph titled “The Refinery at Night” presents the distilling unit as a pristine assemblage of industrial technology, suggesting that independent African nation-states can now be masters of technopolitics (Figure 20). The gleaming towers evoke the emerging futurism of 1960s pop culture, an aesthetic that often made even mundane things like gas stations look like science fiction movie sets. But that was exactly the point of such images: the towers and tubes of the refinery here are sites of stagecraft. The glinting structures are empty, aesthetized technoscapes, devoid of humanity. The technological heroism of Kenya is celebrated as a means for economic renewal in a spectacularly, distinctly futuristic, even cinematic, space. Like the highway in the first Datsun advertisement described above, the photographed refinery is seemingly a neutral, technical symbol of a modern nation—generic and placeless. Oil technology becomes...
an aesthetic form, an affective space from which the subject disappears. This is what cultural historian Edward Dimenberg calls the “technological romanticism” of large-scale infrastructure systems, wherein public transportation systems are imbued with heritage value, becoming monuments geared toward inspiring a sense of national belonging.68

The alienation of individual subjectivity under such a regime is nowhere clearer than in the main protagonist of Ngũgĩ’s novel, Wanja. Ngũgĩ describes how the disruptive development of capitalism in postindependence Kenya, even as it allows for new kinds of freedom and self-realization, produces new forms of oppression and subjugation. Wanja, whose fate is bound up with the construction of the highway, becomes the embodiment of both victimization and self-realization. A working woman, she flees her past in Nairobi, moving to the village of Ilmorog, where most of the book’s action is set. After the highway is built, trade in Ilmorog booms, and the village grows rapidly, eventually becoming the town of New Ilmorog. This growth affords new possibilities for some of the novel’s characters, but large businesses, the government, and banks see the greatest benefits; most of the people living in Kenya’s countryside are harshly affected. Many of the villagers eventually lose their land, but Wanja is able to secure hers through her embrace of capitalism. She opens a brothel and turns toward commercial sex work in anticipation of the flow of potential customers the new highway will bring.69 Her view of life is stark: “You eat or you are eaten . . . what’s the difference whether you are sweating it out on a plantation, in a factory or lying on your back, anyway?”70 As the novel’s main symbol of the struggle for decolonization, Wanja is caught up in the contradictions between neocolonial oppression and African liberation. She has to sell herself, but she is also a successful entrepreneur, making capitalism her own.71 Her economic success allows her to critique the state and establish her property rights. Wanja embodies the dialectics of statecraft and selfhood.

Postindependence nation building requires not just the production of new selves but also the unmaking of other, former selves. As Ngũgĩ suggests, the highway reduces people and land to commodified things, mobile and interchangeable, nodes in the planetary network of capitalist globalization: “And so, abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of earth’s surface: every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation.”72 Ngũgĩ’s ideas are suggestive of how the road transforms people into passive and seemingly homogeneous consumers: “We are all of the road now . . . People, dwellers in the New Ilmorog, often sit on banks of the road to watch cars whining and horning their way across the seven cities of Central Africa in an oil company–sponsored race, and they muse: how man will play with death in mechanised suicide squads for a few silver dollars!”73

Ngũgĩ’s “oil company–sponsored race” was, like his road, based on real life in eastern Africa. Inspired by the colonial practice of men crossing the African wilderness on safari, “car safaris” were popular late colonial spectacles among white elites. These rallies were appropriated by Kenyans soon after independence (Figure 21). They suggested transgression and excess—an almost suicidal, out-of-control consumerism. Unlike the Bell photograph described above (see Figure 4), mobility here was not part of a new, disciplined postindependence citizenry; rather, it was a theme appropriated from a once-elite white leisure culture, now given a new purpose and logic. The thrill of danger, of speed, of penetrating the African wilderness evoked colonial violence and control but also articulated new forms of male selfhood. Reinventing colonial culture, African men here were the agents of a new subculture, guided by the fantasies and desires that infrastructure affords.74

Afterlives
The Trans-African Highway, largely forgotten after the 1980s, has begun to reappear in plans for African infrastructure, with...
the Chinese now taking a predominant role in financing and construction. In Kenya, a new Chinese-funded highway will replace the decrepit Trans-African Highway. The project may be reminiscent of postindependence Pan-African dreams—but its geopolitical context and content are very different. The revived Trans-African Highway is central not only to China’s African policy but also to President Uhuru Kenyatta’s national policy, part of his Kenya Vision 2030 development program. This new iteration of the Trans-African Highway raises questions about infrastructure’s power that are similar to those raised a generation earlier, albeit in a different historical context.

Yet Ngugi’s observations remain as pertinent as ever. Infrastructure—from the automobile and the tarmac road to the aesthetics and practices of mobility these fostered—may have been an instrument of subjugation, but it was also generative in often unforeseen ways. As our research has shown, infrastructure, though a tool of governing elites, allowed for the unpredictable, the unfinished, the transgressive, and the inventive. The history of the Trans-African Highway shows how infrastructure entrenched the exploitation of the working poor, whose mobility was restricted by the postindependence state, even if to a lesser degree than it was during the colonial period. Yet this history also shows how, beyond facilitating circulation and exchange, infrastructure—and its attendant architectural nodes—addressed and constituted people as mobile subjects. Thus, architecture and infrastructure functioned as sites of imagination, subjective inscription, and symbolic expression. Ordinary citizens enacted new modes of being through the physical and symbolic significance of these modern artifacts, modes that had little to do with the intentions of those who built or paid for the artifacts. This new selfhood was unfinished, dynamic, and dialectical.

The Trans-African Highway is relevant as history—with its assumption that lessons from the past can help us to rethink the present—but it also has an ongoing presence, both as an infrastructural imaginary and as kilometers of paved and unpaved roads and their adjacent forms of urbanization. Together with the monumental building projects celebrated as part of a newly revered “African modernism,” these roads are the material present of a past modernity—the ruin of a continent’s aspirations of decolonization and modernization, and a reminder of the deceptions of neocolonialism.

Yet road infrastructure differs in important ways from freestanding architectural monuments. Instead of the patina of spectacular decay, there is merely old tarmac full of holes that slow traffic, disrupting the smooth temporality of mobility. Moving along the stretch of the Trans-African Highway between Mombasa and Nairobi today, it is difficult to find traces of the road’s history. Only when standing on the cracked asphalt, considering the many people it has carried over the years, might we imagine that infrastructure’s specific history. In our everyday lives and our thinking, infrastructure tends to be divorced from its history, meanings, and politics. This reinforces the narrow, presentist focus on infrastructural development that informs most foreign intervention across Africa today. Shaped as it is by an active erasure of the past, such a view suggests that Africa cannot afford history because of its pressing present-day needs. Bringing this particular infrastructural past into view is the work of history, to which we hope our scholarship contributes.

Looking at Africa’s current infrastructural boom from the perspective of these past futures and their present-day remains, we should take account of the lifeworlds produced and transformed by what might seem to be mere technical interventions. We can only wonder what unforeseeable and unpredictable ways of being will emerge alongside the hardships Africans endure as new mega-infrastructure projects are built. We would do well, therefore, as scholarship accumulates on the built heritage and politics of Africa’s postindependence era, to give space to the different modes of being and seeing that infrastructure generates, both historically and today.


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Artforum, and Arab Studies Journal, and in several exhibition catalogues and edited books. http://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/faculty/Prita.html

Notes

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Petals of Blood (London: Heinemann, 1977). We first read this novel as part of our collaborative research with Manuel Herz, who pointed out its significance for the Trans-African Highway project.

2. “The Trans-Africa road linking Nairobi and Ilmorog to the many cities of our continent is justly one of the most famous highways in all of the African lands, past and present.” Ngugi, Petals of Blood, 262.

3. Ngugi, 323.


7. The concept of lifeworlds, derived from phenomenology and current in the field of anthropology, concerns the ways in which the world is experienced or lived by subjects or collectives.


15. This approach builds on recent anthropological work on the materiality of the past, particularly the work of Geisler, Lachenal, and colleagues on the historical and affective presence of medical science in Africa today. See Paul Wenzel Geisler, Guillaume Lachenal, John Manton, and Noëmi Toussignant,


For example, the hotel was featured in the exhibition Designgeschichten zwischen Afrika und Europa: Flow of Forms/Forms of Flow at the Völkerkundemuseum Hamburg in 2018.


Another said a Mombasa-based architect told him it was built by the Hughes and Polking- horne architectural firm of Nairobi. And yet another person said it was a Kenya Shell project.

54. This is further emphasized by the man’s sporty sunglasses and his watch—machinic commodities that allow him to be in sync with the fast times of the future.
55. Alastair Matheson, Kenya: A New Era (ca. 1963), brochure, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress. As Matheson describes: “The wharves now extend beyond Kipevu to the mainland, where there are two deep-water berths and an oil tanker jetty. The jetty has a pipeline to the new oil refinery at Changamwe, through which tankers from the Persian Gulf discharge crude oil for refining” (30).
56. The technological sublime was not just pictured in photographs but also evoked in text. In issues of the East African edition of Drum magazine, photos of the hard surfaces of industrialization were accompanied by text that extolled the materiality of modernization. Articles often described the spectacular qualities of industrial products, in particular their strange surfaces and physicality—in short, their aesthetic impact.
57. This corresponds to Jennifer Hart’s historical account of African drivers in Ghana; see Hart, Ghana on the Go.
60. For an analysis of photographs as objects of modernity that moved along the trade and social networks of eastern Africa, see Meier, Surface of Things.
64. Our source here is the ongoing doctoral research of Giulia Scotto at the University of Basel, whose dissertation in progress is tentatively titled “ENI Empire: Oil, Logistics, and Modernism.”
66. Kenyans achieved independence officially in December 1963, but Kenya did not become a republic until 1964.
68. Dimendberg, “Will to Motorization.”
69. Highways across Africa soon came to be seen and even studied as places of sexual consumption. In the 1980s, the main road from Kinshasa to the interior of the Congo, a route taken by many long-distance truck drivers, became known for the role it played in the early spread of AIDS. See Richard Preston, The Hot Zone: The Terrifying True Story of the Origin of the Ebola Virus (New York: Anchor, 1995).
70. Ngũgĩ, Petals of Blood, 293.
71. Patrick Williams, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 84.
73. Ngũgĩ, 262–63.
74. We use subculture in the sense articulated by Dirk Hebdige in Subcultures: The Meaning of Style (London: Routledge, 1979).