INFRASTRUCTURAL POETICS IN YAHYA HASSAN AND SHADI ANGELINA BAZEGHI

Solveig Daugaard

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the relationship between infrastructure and attention through the lens of contemporary Danish poetry. It applies Susan Leigh Star's concept of "infrastructural inversion" on the poetic practices of two Danish poets with immigrant background, Yahya Hassan and Shadi Angelina Bazeghi, by focusing on the infrastructural conditions for the production, circulation and reception of their poetry via literary institutions and liberal news media in Denmark in recent years.

KEYWORDS

Infrastructural Poetics, Yahya Hassan, Shadi Angelina Bazeghi, Infrastructural Inversion, Contemporary Danish Poetry, Attention

In his book *The Marvelous Clouds*, media theorist John Durham Peters proposes the introduction of a new academic doctrine which he frames as a practice diametrically opposed to the laws of the attention economy: "—perhaps now" he writes, "it is time for *infrastructuralism*. Its fascination is for the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes. It is a doctrine [...] of things not understood that stand under our worlds."[1] Intriguing as this may sound, if we mostly do not choose what we pay attention to, then how exactly, are we to implement such a doctrine?

Habits, norms, and patterns structure our bindings to each other and to the world. When these patterns are infrastructural in nature it means they work without us paying attention to it, they influence us outside of attention. To feminist sociologist of information Susan Leigh Star and professor of informatics Geoffrey Bowker, what qualifies as infrastructure is what we only become aware of when it is no longer working properly. We notice the piping when the water starts leaking. Therefore, instances of breakage, blockage and friction of infrastructural motion are invaluable sources of insight into infrastructure. Writing about new media infrastructure, they use the concept of "infrastructural inversion" to frame how historical changes are frequently ascribed to new "spectacular products" or "heroic actors" when in fact, they are practically always much more "a feature of an infrastructure permitting the development of that product" or supporting that hero.[2]

Performing an infrastructural inversion of our thinking about aesthetic practices means forcing ourselves to dwell on embedded structures, and to ask the hard questions like what *are* the "things not understood that stand under our worlds" as Peters puts it? The worlds I will be looking into—or under—in the present sketch, are foremost those of contemporary literature and liberal media. If the concept of art in general is tied to the post-enlightenment, transcendental subject then literature in particular is the media technological mold of the modern individual, generating individuality in its production as well as its reception. Both writing and reading are generally conceptualized as solitary activities that presupposes, or even produces, interiority.[3]

However, the figure of the free-standing individual takes new forms in the contemporary media ecology of literature. To secure the circulation of a slowly consumed medium such as literature in today's hectic attention economy where the shelf-life of each publication is drastically decreasing, and an all-dominating "people/human interest bias" has taken over contemporary media,[4] the

Infrastructural Poetics in Yahya Hassan and Shadi Angelina Bazeghi

individual author's body, personal biography, and various identity attributes have increasingly become a crucial, if not *the* crucial, interface that absorbs the attention when contemporary literature is being addressed in public. As with all interfaces, the persona is a relational phenomenon co-constructed by many agents across the numerous platforms on which it unfolds.[5] Part object and part user, it is also made from our affective attachment toward what we can identify—or disidentify—with; what we recognize as other but also as somehow already familiar.

To perform an "infrastructural inversion" on this condition, I would suggest, is not a matter of forcing oneself to disregard this interface and "get back to" focusing on the writing that "ought to be" the center of attention—as it is repeatedly advocated by critics in the endlessly recurring and always heated cultural debates on the subject that most often perceive the impact of the persona as a trivialization of the discourse on literature.[6] Rather, it would be an attempt to look *through* and *beyond* it, to the specific set of infrastructural conditions that support it and allows it to circulate.

What I call *infrastructural poetics* is a poetic practice that facilitates and pushes forward this infrastructural inversion. Often, this practice will involve writers that are somehow not applying to the demands by which the structures are designed, and therefore experience friction or even blockage as they try connecting to them. So, one of the ways this poetic can work is when something does not work. Such writerly practices are more prone than writing in general to generate awareness of the infrastructures of production, distribution, and reception that the literary work is embedded in, but that we are generally unable to see because our attention is absorbed by something else. An infrastructural poetics works to transpose the readers' attention from the writing on the page, which we have been trained by literary reading practices to focus on, as well as from our affective investment in the author's persona that distracts us from it, and toward the collective agencies and institutional designs that condition them both. And crucially, it incites us to recognize our own embeddedness in these structures and our implication in maintaining them, but also directs our awareness toward the more overarching designs, priorities, and values they are built on.

In this brief essay, I will sketch an outline of the infrastructural poetics of the two contemporary poets, Danish-Palestinian Yahya Hassan and Danish-Iranian Shadi Angelina Bazeghi.[7] On the face of it, both connect successfully with the most official, institutionalized infrastructures of Danish literary culture: Both

attended the official Danish Author's Academy, Forfatterskolen, and both have had their two poetry collections published by the most established literary publisher, Gyldendal,[8] and significantly for what I want to address, both made their entrance into the world of Danish literature under intense attention from the national, liberal news media. But, the inequities embedded in these infrastructures become striking, not only in the respective poetic projects of Hassan and Bazeghi, which are both of them explicitly calling out the violence imposed on racialized, classed, and gendered bodies as they connect to the infrastructures of the Danish literary world, but also when we observe how differently it played out, when their two practices initially connected with the institutional structures in question, at the very beginning of their careers as poets and public figures. The latter will be my primary focus in the following.

Analyzing infrastructure means problematizing the taken for granted relationship between foreground and background. As Star and Bowker stress "A given infrastructure may have become transparent, but a number of significant political, ethical and social choices have […] been folded into its development—and this background needs to be understood if we are to produce thoughtful analyses of the nature of infrastructural work."[9] In Yahya Hassan's practice, everything seemingly presses toward the foreground. His poems are written in capital letters, as if yelling out their intense, confrontational images at the top of their lungs. Embodying the voice of his poems, and the violent experiences they were depicting, the young poet stepped onto the stage of the media, took the spotlight, standing alone, cut loose from any social and family context. Beaming in solitary poetic genius his persona caught the eye of an audience far beyond the segment normally paying attention to poets, and it has continued to do so, even after his untimely death in the spring of 2020. In contrast, Shadi Angelina Bazeghi's poems exhibit a distinct preference toward lower case letters, splintered and multiple narrative voices, multilingual citations, use of mathematical and computational notation, machinic repetitions of dissolved, fragmented syntax spread out over the printed page—all characteristics that tap into various types of background information flows, and all strategies that stand back from creating the strong, unified textual persona that is so imperative in Hassan's poetry. The way these differences are conditioned by infrastructural design, becomes clearer if we look to the way their poetic personas were shaped, distributed, and amplified as they made their entrance into the literary scene.

The poetry of Bazeghi was first distributed to a national public in 2006 when she won the writing contest "Nye stemmer" (new voices) aimed at "poets and writers with an ethnic and cultural background other than Danish."[10] The contest was set up by Gyldendal and the newspaper *Berlingske* as a mediating gesture of sorts in the aftermath of the 2005–2006 Muhammad caricature crisis—and an anthology with the 14 best contributions was published and heavily marketed by the paper. In the reviews of the book the problematic tokenizing gesture of setting up a writer's contest for "ethnic writers" is articulated but generally forgiven out of sheer eagerness to hear these "new voices."[11] But more interestingly, one notices a sting of disappointment with the winning poem, which is barely mentioned in several of the reviews.[12] Or more precisely perhaps, with the winning poet, Bazeghi, for being so well-read and culturally advanced. Several reviews are explicitly discontent with her being a student at "Forfatterskolen" and thus already part of Danish literary institutions and not really qualifying as a "new voice."[13] In the interviews Bazeghi gave at this point, she highlights her upbringing with literature, the extensive library her parents had in her childhood home in Teheran before the family fled from the war when she was 12, and the collected poetry of the iconic poet Forugh Farrokzhad as the most treasured possession she brought with her from Iran. Bazeghi's first poetry collection—which contains the first poem published in *Nye stemmer*—did not appear until 2015 and in the years between she dedicated herself to poetic translation work, foremost introducing her poetic heroine Farrokhzad into Danish. As already stressed, our attention is generally caught by what we recognize—and something in Bazeghi's story was not recognized—or it did not resonate with the unarticulated matrix of the "immigrant writer" that was implicit in the design of the writing contest.[14] Consequently, the intense media interest awoken by the contest, died out almost instantly after the anthology had been published.

In contrast, when Yahya Hassan's debut collection came out in 2013, it fitted the matrix on the mark. While certainly not trying to make the case that Hassan was not a gifted poet and a charismatic character with a story to tell, I *am* suggesting that there was an infrastructure in place to receive him, that amplified certain aspects of his poetry and his persona and kept others from circulating. And that Bazeghi's poetry partially fell through the cracks of the same infrastructure. The conditions around the first interview he gave in the late-night TV news program *Deadline* can point toward an infrastructural inversion of the figure of Hassan that is

extracted by public attention. His major breakthrough into public discourse, the interview focused on his abusive childhood, his criminal record, and his anger directed at his parent's generation in the Muslim diaspora in Denmark. But additionally, the feature involved a calculated *playing* of a recently formed alliance between national public service media and social media platforms. Prior to the airing of the interview, a five-minute clip was shared on the Facebook page of *Deadline*, featuring Hassan in the news studio, reading the poem from the debut collection with the book's most explicit attack on Islam and the Muslim diaspora.[15] Here, no doubt informed by the response patterns seen during the Muhammad caricature crisis a few years prior, the *Deadline* team made a set of editorial choices based on the sense of controversy in Hassan's poems vis-à-vis his ethnicity and, unsurprisingly, comments on the page exploded. A large and extremely diverse group of users was activated—many of them both highly unlikely to participate in conversations about literature and in debate on public service media but paradigmatic for the intense, messy, and violent reception of Hassan that has followed. This initial social media interaction with Hassan's practice mirrored the violent content of his poetry, but more importantly, it conflated with the media stereotyped version of the "immigrant" Hassan's rebellious attack on his community of origin. Here, we could, with our own eyes, read the death threats, swear words, and spelling mistakes of this criminal, violent, and hypocritical immigrant underclass he was trying to escape, which was already carved out in advance in our minds by public discourse.

To conclude, the difference in infrastructural distribution between these two poetic practices testifies to an increasing polarization of public discourse vis-á-vis a Middle Eastern diaspora and to a media historical development manifested by the integration of social media into public service debate. But it also tells us something about the receptivity, or the lack thereof, toward communal gestures in poetry in general, and in poetry by racialized writers in particular. And it demonstrates the varying intersections of race with class and gender, and with the axis from solitary genius to solidaristic alliances. With Bazeghi on the one hand, adapting from the very beginning of her career a collaborative, translational, inclusive poetics that resists coming together in a unified poetic text and poet persona, and the individualistic gesture in Hassan on the other. In a sense Hassan connects successfully to the infrastructure: As he performs as an independent "brilliant" individual, his poetry is given extreme distribution, but it also lets

out how mercilessly these infrastructures commodify and consume him, his body, and his life story, and how the connection he achieves is preconditioned by the *selling out* of his background. This is something articulated in the poems from the very beginning—but more intensely in his second book thematizing the bodily costs of the individualistic gesture through repeated imagery of the speaker's struggle with keeping himself and his body together, with preventing it from blowing up, while literature's support structures (publishers, educators, journalists, etc.) and cultural consumers alike are depicted as doing their thing, infinitely "more at home" in Hassan's life than he himself is, to paraphrase a line from the poem "STATSBESØG" ('STATE VISIT').[16] Which, in turn, of course also calls out these functions as problematic, close to uninhabitable. What Hassan's poetry, along with his public performance, did most devastatingly was hold up a mirror to the literary public's fascinated consumption of the "immigrant genius"—inmixed as it was with disgust-and-fear—that caused all positions this public took toward him to appear ludicrous and morally dubious: from the motherly or fatherly tenderness directed at Hassan as an abused and abandoned child[17], over the 'brotherly' celebration of his street-wise gangster credit[18] to the objectification of him as an autonomous aesthetic phenomenon, himself *becoming* poetry.[19]

While he also produced numerous gestures of re-connecting with others, for instance in his attempts to embark on a political career with the declared goal of bridging the gap between the Muslim diaspora and the Danish political system, these were consistently not taken seriously, and not met by the public discourse distributing his work. Especially after his passing, what is emphasized in Hassan's story is above all an aesthetic praise of his poetic innovativeness, his ability to twist and turn familiar tropes of Danish culture to make them appear unfamiliar, along with a strikingly pathos-filled and selective narrative about his uncompromising dedication to poetry at the cost of everything else.[20]

In contrast, the poetic inventions and twisting of words that Bazeghi has produced in her poetry and her translations have often been read as "mistakes" rather than innovations as she recounts in her second poetry collection *Flowmatic* (2020) and demonstrates in the afterword to her translation of Audre Lorde's poetry (2019) [21] which performatively traps its reader by confronting her with her own approach to linguistic irregularities as blunders rather than poetic devices.[22] And while her outspoken dedication to poetry is no less emphatic than Hassan's it is—in

contrast to his (at least as it is reproduced in the reception)—explicitly connected to her family background and country of origin, as she dedicated years to lifting her cultural heritage of Persian poetry into the Danish literary context. If she is also then, in a sense, also selling her background to the audience of Danish literature, she does so on entirely different terms. But what makes the poetics of both writers specifically *infrastructural* is the way both of them—each from his or her own end—perform an infrastructural inversion by calling our attention to our own participation and implication in the infrastructures of literature as they are at work in co-constructing the poets, the poems and ourselves, the readers.

1 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 33.

2 Susan Leigh Star, Geoffrey C. Bowker, "How to Infrastructure", in *Handbook on New Media: Social Shaping and Social Consequences of ICT,* ed. Lievrouw and Livingstone (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 233.

3 Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990)

4 See Christine Isager and Steffen Moestrup, "Portrayal by Inappropriate Interaction: Persona Meets Persona in Journalistic Profiling", *Persona Studies* 7, no.1 (dec. 2021), 77–89, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2021vol7no1art1469.

5 For elaboration, see Solveig Daugaard, "Medieøkologien og jungleloven: Christina Hagens forfatterskab og bogens fremtid", *Tidsskriftet Spring* 45 (2019), 29–64.

6 See newspaper commentaries such as, Mette Høeg, "Dansk litteratur lider under kvindelige forfatteres dominans", *Weekendavisen*, May 8, 2015; Asger Schnack, "Litteratur som forvandling", *Information*, Jan. 29, 2019, Mikkel Krause Frantzen, "Vil en forfatter, der har været misbruger gerne have særbehandling af anmelderne?", *Information*, May 14, 2021, but also scholarly accounts including Stefan Kjerkegaard, *Den menneskelige plet. Medialiseringen af litteratursystemet* (Copenhagen: Dansklærerforeningens forlag, 2017), 49–50.

7 Whereas the reception of Bazeghi's poetry has not been much discussed in an academic context, the reception of Yahya Hassan—including the intense role played by news media and social media—has been discussed extensively in Danish literary scholarship. E.g. Isager and Moestrup's "Portrayal by Inappropriate Interaction" deal specifically with his persona in journalistic media but not with his poetry. While his approach is quite different from mine, Stefan Kjerkegaard sums up crucial points regarding the influence of Danish public debate, language and literary history upon the dissemination of Hassan's work and the relationship between autobiographical elements and mediatized reception that confirm the necessity of applying a contextually inclusive approach to Hassan's work to understand its unique aesthetic and social impact. See Kjerkegaard, *Den menneskelige plet* and "A Lyrical 'I' Beyond Fiction: Yahya Hassan and Autobiographical Poetry in Denmark After Karl Ove Knausgård's My Struggle", *The European Journal of Life Writing*, VOLUME X, 2021, https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.10.37640.

8 Shadi Angelina Bazeghi, *Vingeslag* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2015); Shadi Angelina Bazeghi, *Flowmatic,* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2020); Yahya Hassan, *Yahya Hassan* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2013); Yahya Hassan, *Yahya Hassan 2* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2019).

9 Leigh Star and Bowker, "How to Infrastructure", 233.

10 Naja Marie Aidt, Jens Andersen, Rushy Rashid, Janne Breinholt Bak (ed.) *Nye stemmer* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2007), back cover, 7.

11 See e.g. Mai Misfeldt, "De etniske kommer", *Berlingske*, February 28, 2007; Marianne Ping Huang, "At give stemme og tage ordet", *Information*, March 15, 2007.

For a thorough and reflexive overview of the competition call and reception of *Nye stemmer*, see also Dörte Gaettens, "New Voices Wanted: The Search for a Danish Multicultural Literature", in *Literature, Language, and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013).

12 See e.g. Erik Svendsen "De nye stemmer", *Jyllands-Posten*, March 1, 2007; Anette Dina Sørensen, "Antologi: Hybridkulturens stemmer", *Politiken*, March 3, 2007.

13 See e.g. Thomas Thurah, "Fornemmelse for tiden", *Information*, March 22, 2007; Søren Langager Høeg, "Se negrene: Nye stemmer" *LitteraturNu*, March 31, 2007, https://litteraturnu.dk/se-negrene-nye-stemmer-red-naja-marie-aidt-jens-andersen-rushy-rashid-janne-breinholt-bak/; Christian Bonde Korsgaard,"Lad tusinde blomster spire", *Sentura*, March 3, 2007, http://www.sentura.dk/nye_stemmer_anmeldelse.html.

14 See Gaettens "New Voices Wanted" and Natia Gokieli, "The Iconicity of an 'Immigrant Writer' Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Yahya Hassan", *Akademisk kvarter*, vol.10 (2015) for academic discussions of the discursive construction of the 'immigrant writer', which "derives its commercial value from ethnic visibility, recognizability and exemplarity"(Gokieli, 209), and is co-constructed by publishing industries and media paratexts, that support my use of the category in the following.

15 Hassan, "Langdigt", *Yahya Hassan*, 135–169.

16 Hassan, *Yahya Hassan 2*, 12.

17 For examples, see e.g.. Lilian Munk Rösing, "Hvad så Gyldendal, er du blevet pusher?" *Politiken,* October 13, 2013, Johanne Mygind, "Der findes ikke anerkendelse. Der findes kun iscenesættelse", *Weekendavisen*, January 31, 2014, Louise Østergaard, *Ord*, (Copenhagen: People's Press, 2014), Martin Krasnik "Avistid: Jeg blev træt af at være præmieperkeren: Interview med Yahya Hassan", *Weekendavisen*, November 8, 2019. See also Isager and Moestrup, "Portrayal by Inappropriate Interaction" for elaboration of the inappropriateness of journalistic "rhetorical maneuvers" vis-à-vis Hassan's "celebrity"/ "victim of trauma" persona.

18 See Lars Bukdahl, "Mig jeg bekriger jer med ord", *Weekendavisen,* October 18, 2013; Lars Bukdahl, "Y-factor", *Weekendavisen*, January 31, 2014.

19 See e.g. Martin Krasnik "Vi har tabt ham men i det mindste har vi haft ham", *Weekendavisen*, May 1, 2020 and Jes Stein Petersen, "Hans ord brændte", *Politiken*, May 1, 2020.

20 See obituaries and comments in Danish media, e.g. above-mentioned by Krasnik and Petersen, but also Tue Andersen Nexø, "Uden hensyn til nogen overhovedet", *Information*, May 1, 2020; Simon Pasternak, "Ingen politifolk og behandlere på forlaget", *Weekendavisen*, May 7, 2020.

21 Shadi Angelina Bazeghi, "Oversætterens efterord", in *Der er ingen ærlige digte om døde kvinder*, Audre Lorde, Selected and translated by Shadi Angelina Bazeghi (OVO press, 2019).

22 For elaboration, see Solveig Daugaard and Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, *Vi skriver sammen. Adressering, adgang og afhængighed i litteraturen* (København: Billedkunstskolernes forlag, 2022), 57–65.