

adapted from a forthcoming chapter in
Rebecca Zorach and Christopher Heuer, eds. *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains*.
Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

Sarah Kanouse **My Electric Genealogy:** excerpts and notes from a performance in progress



Ed Kanouse, ca 1922
Genesee Brown, 2014

My grandfather would have been ninety-nine the year my daughter was born.

They share a century, but not one with a name. He, born ten years into the twentieth; she, nine years after its not-yet-apocalyptic end. I float two-thirds of the way between them: the Kanouse reproductive rhythm seemingly calibrated in 33-year cycles, like a brood of undiscovered cicadas.

Poised on opposite shores of that oceanic expanse we call the twentieth century, they will never see each other's faces, but mirror images they are all the same.



Ed Kanouse at
work, ca. 1948

My grandfather was born during what textbooks call the "Second Industrial Revolution," that period of rapid change in electricity, chemistry, agriculture, and transportation from the end of the American Civil War until the middle of the twentieth century. My grandfather loved electricity. His passion for the intricacies of energy – generating it, moving it, using it – may have exceeded all other passions in his life. Having missed the great discoveries, he focused on their implementation. He started work at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power just after the end of the "Water Wars," when ranchers and farmers tried to sabotage the aqueduct that sacrificed the Owens Valley and ensured the city's growth.

With long distance water secure, for a while, the DWP turned to long-distance power. My grandfather specialized in transmission: the art of moving enormous quantities of electricity across vast, desert distances. He started as a line tester, monitoring current as it moved 266 miles toward Los Angeles from the monumental Hoover Dam. He worked his way up from there. The spider-vein network of lines he designed, planned, and administered fueled an ever more voracious California lifestyle: the radios of the 30s; the TVs of the 40s; the air conditioners of the 50s; the all-electric kitchens of the 60s; and the Jacuzzi tubs and heated pools of the 70s. By the time he became the Department's General Manager in 1968, the utility had to remind its sticker-shocked customers, "It's not just a light bill anymore."

Like long-distance water, long-distance energy insulated human senses from the extremities of desert life. LA's development jumped coastal mountains and sprawled into the hot inland valleys where I grew up.

Between my grandfather's birth and my daughter's, LA's population grew twelvefold.

Between my grandfather's birth and my daughter's, the earth got hotter by one degree.

From Intake magazine,
the internal publication of
the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power,
December 1970

It's not just a light bill
any more.

It's not just a light bill
any more.

Sometime in my teens, my grandfather rallied from his long, but not slow, decline. I already identified as an artist, and somehow that information stuck with him when little else could anymore. During one of the visits that terrified me to contemplate—even the best days smelling of urine and death—he said he had something important to show me. Slowly turning, he retrieved a box from the wheeled table beside the club chair where he spent his days. He fumbled the lid off and exhaled deeply at the sight of the contents. A stack of 8 x 10 photographs came out, each capturing a single high-voltage transmission tower in sharp black and white. He had taken them all and proudly talked me through each image.

WHEN DO YOU NOTICE ELECTRICITY?

WHEN DO YOU SEE IT, HEAR IT, SMELL IT?

DO YOU FEEL IT COURSING THROUGH YOUR BODY, AND IS IT A PULSING OR A WARMTH?

DO YOU SEE IT IN THE WILD, WHIPPING THROUGH THE SKY IN LIGHT-BRIGHT BOLTS?

OR HEAR ITS DOMESTICATED BUZZING IN THE WALLS OF YOUR BEDROOM?

DO YOU TAKE IT FOR GRANTED, FORGETTING ALL IT'S DONE, THE WAY IT HELPS YOU BUILD BODY + MIND?

DO YOU NOTICE IT MOST WHEN IT'S GONE?



My cousin,
the Pacific DC Intertie,
in Burbank, CA
July 2014

The details of the design decisions seemed hazy to him, or maybe I've forgotten details I didn't understand to begin with. What struck me was my grandfather's experience of these objects' aesthetic force. "This one is just...so...beautiful," he'd exclaim. I smiled, indulging an old man his moment, and tried to see the beauty in the images that he did.

Today, it is difficult to understand the impact of electricity on what we now think of as daily life. Like the Internet this century, electricity brought radical change in the organization of work, recreation and home. Seasonal and geographical patterns of daylight no longer governed the rhythms of human activities, which industrialization had already accelerated. For my grandfather's generation, electricity carried an affective and aesthetic force beyond its mere utility. This excess of meaning registered in turn-of-the-century slang we still use today. Energetic people are called "live wires" or "dynamos," after the first industrial generators. To "feel electric" means to be socially, or sexually, aroused. Many of the first public displays of electric lighting were installed as much for pleasure, consumption, and spectacle as for utility. World's Fairs delivered fantastic lightscapes that inspired illuminated thoroughfares and entertainment zones in cities across the country. Patterns of mobility quickly reoriented around zones of street lighting and the automobile. Headlights and tail lights added to the newfound brightness of night. Electric signage soon followed, commodifying the newly accessible evening public spaces with advertising and providing some of the most iconic and nostalgia-drenched images of twentieth-century petro-modernity.

Infrastructures enable, shape, and constrain life at any given historical moment. They are relational and not immanent: we make them, and they make us. Alan Liu has argued that over the course of a century in which American lives unfolded in organizational formations of ever greater intricacy and reach, the experience of infrastructure has become "operationally, the experience of culture" itself. Deborah Cowen notes that infrastructures are "systems engineered to order social and natural worlds." For that reason they occupy a central position

within a wide range of contemporary political conflicts, from port and road occupations to the Flint water crisis to pipeline construction on sovereign Indigenous land. The political nature of infrastructure is also personal for Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Clayton Rosati, who describe an “infrastructure of feeling,” in which technology, matter, and space form the “tangible, material conditions within which...our social emotions are developed, felt, and communicated.” For Lauren Berlant, infrastructure is “the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure.”

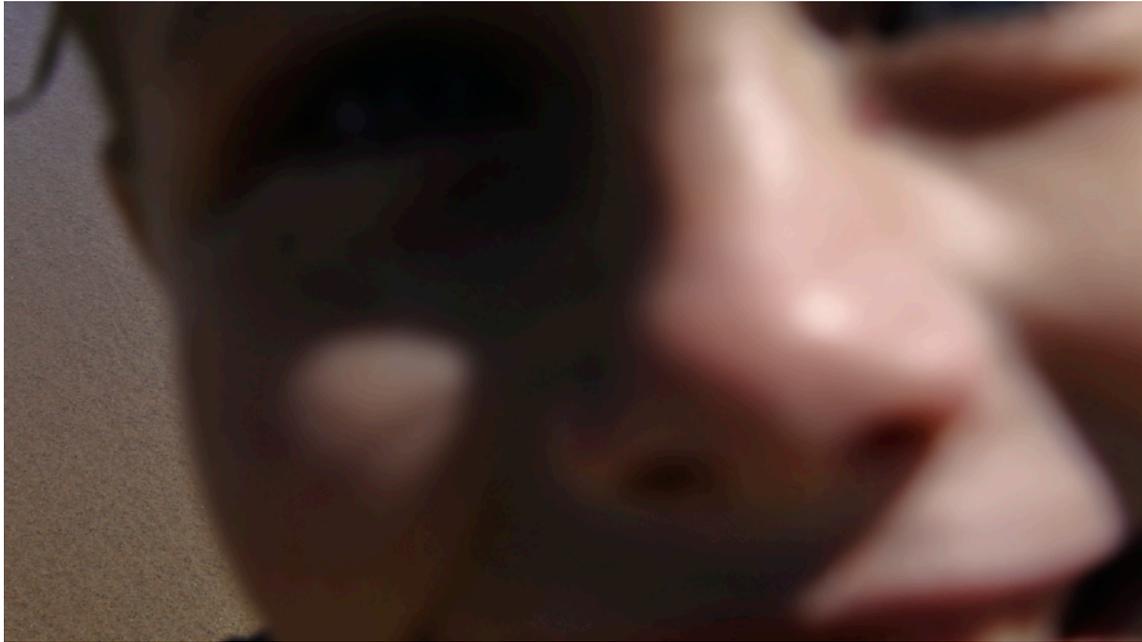
This project is an invitation to both *feel* and *think* with infrastructure. It's about conflicting notions of the future, uncertain filiations, and different ways of assembling the past. It is reparative, but it is also critical. In it, I hope to queer the environmental history of my family even at the moment of its first and fragmentary writing. By queer I mean to establish another ‘horizon of possibility’ for my familiar family tree than the linear progression through generational begets: a “straight time” that leads inexorably to my child and a 406.75 ppm world. By queer I mean to locate and compose a set of ‘improper’ family relations arrayed against, or maybe residing inside, what we presume we know.



Kanouse Family
Northridge, CA
April 5, 1981
Very likely a joint
birthday party for my
cousin and me. He's in
the shorts. I'm the imp
in the swimsuit.
Photo by Jenne Fannan

My grandfather gestated transmission towers, brought forth miles of cable, and nursed power plants into being. Like all parents, he could hardly fathom what he had birthed and who he was leaving behind. He made the desert buzz. In this transhuman infrastructural genealogy, I am kin not just with my human cousins or even other critters but also with the Victorville Switching Station, the Sylmar Converter Station, the Pacific DC Intertie, the Hoover Dam. My tools in finding these relations are clumsy and my research skills imprecise. It is a performance of poor theory that “proceeds through appropriations and improvisations, through descriptions

that do not leave what it describes unchanged.” I ask you to remain open “to that which outpaces understanding.”



My grandfather would have been ninety-nine the year my daughter was born.

Instead, he died eighteen years earlier, when I was still in high school. The recorded milestones of my life, my parents' and his—the birthday parties and Christmases, the parade of school portraits, the heading-off-to-college, first relationship, first apartment, first job—these are so twentieth century. I can and cannot place my daughter in these pictures. The world where these normative rites of passage make any sense is being rearranged as I watch.

My daughter is growing, animate, but suspended. She is eight years old now, her short life marked by climate milestones as much as developmental ones. She turned five in the warmest year on record, and six, and then seven. Her father and I hold our breath and buy her piano lessons. We talk to her about serious things—climate change, colonialism, racism. Most of the time she is curious: “Why did slavery happen, mommy?” Sometimes we overdo it: her face crumbles and she covers her ears. “Don't tell me how bad the future will be!”

I don't know what is coming, I tell my daughter, and me. I don't know that it'll be all bad. I don't know what it will be like at all. An emptiness where her future is concerned is preferable to the images of apocalypse that populate our collective environmental anxieties. I can't parent in a state of “sublime despair,” so I cultivate an openness, a state of blankness, a possibility. It doesn't come easily to me. I catch myself picturing her in college as I walk across some campus, wondering if her love of poetry will survive another decade identifying the features of informational texts. These inherited fantasies end with a wrenching feeling in my gut: who knows if that world will still exist. Who knows?



This composited video still overlays my daughter's face from the previous image with the aftermath of the spectacular destruction of Hoover Dam from the 2015 Warner Brothers disaster film *San Andreas*. Moments before this Bierstadt-inspired tableau, the anonymous child in the foreground is rescued by Dr. Kim Park, a CalTech seismologist who seemed poised to be a major character in the film before abruptly dying a hero's death. His Asian identity underscored by a name fashioned from two of the three most common Korean surnames, Dr. Park ends up serving little purpose in the plot beyond sacrificing himself to save a white girl. This fluff disaster flick demonstrates reproductive futurity's normative whiteness—and the deadly consequences for all those othered by it.

Elders at climate action meetings choke up when they see her and tell us, blinking back tears, that they testify, march, and blockade for her future. At these moments, I am both moved and alarmed. I am moved because, quite honestly, climate change went from abstract to intimate only when I had this child, and moments of feeling shared with a stranger are too rare. For the same reason, I am also alarmed. The

symbol of child-as-future—only ever inhabited by those who look like *my* child—has been mobilized for all kinds of repressions. *That* future is more about the reproduction of the present than the remaking of the world. The futures I can easily picture for her - the ones that resemble my own past - I know they foreclose the futures of others. Which is to say they are no future at all. The world that now exists - the one that settler cultures so fear losing - is someone else's apocalypse, survived.

Sustain what, for whom, for how long?

Ed and Betty Kanouse
1986
Photo by Melicent Hunt



My grandfather passed away one year after the first inter-governmental report established that human activities were warming the planet. He was too far gone to notice, but I was both old enough and young enough to care. The next year was the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and, tellingly, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first colonial voyage.

At the Summit, Chile proposed the notion of "ecological debt." The word captures how the prosperity and development of the Global North was financed by hundreds of years of extraction, deforestation, land theft, and pollution in the Global South. The idea helped to reframe the debate surrounding poor country's cash debts to the World Bank and the IMF and set the stage for the alter-globalization movements of the 1990s and early 2000s, about the time I got involved in political struggle. It resurfaced a few years later in the debate over how to fairly distribute the sharp emissions cuts needed to limit global warming to a still suicidal, still genocidal two degrees.

The scale of ecological debt defies all attempts at accounting it. How to place a value on the disappearance of a species? How to put a price on an entire way of life? Would doing so be an act of responsibility, or the definition of its limit? Placed in the wider scale of colonialism, it becomes clear that the ecological debt owed by the Global North and its settler-colonies vastly exceeds the value of all unpaid loans held anywhere in the world.

In other words, what do I owe on behalf of my grandfather? What will my daughter owe for me?

From opposite shores of that oceanic expanse we call the twentieth century, they will never see each other's faces, but mirror images they are all the same.

"DEBT IS MUTUAL," NOTEN WRITES.

LIKE CURRENT ON AN OLD TRANSMISSION LINE, "CREDIT RUNS ONLY ONE WAY."

"BUT DEBT RUNS IN EVERY DIRECTION, SCATTERS, ESCAPES, SEEKS REFUGE. THE DEBTOR SEEKS REFUGE AMONG OTHER DEBTORS, ACQUIRES DEBT FROM THEM, OFFERS DEBT TO THEM. THE PLACE OF REFUGE IS THE PLACE TO WHICH YOU CAN ONLY OWE MORE AND MORE BECAUSE THERE IS NO CREDITOR, NO PAYMENT POSSIBLE."

Wendy Brown calls justice "a practice of responsible relations between generations."

But my genealogy is also electric.