

Anticipated Lives: AI, Infrastructure, and the Ethics of World Literature

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Abstract This introduction proposes a paradigm shift in the literary and cultural analysis of artificial intelligence, moving away from binaries of AI as a passive tool or an active antagonist. Instead, it conceptualizes AI as an “anticipatory infrastructure” we inhabit—a relational, ambient system that actively structures social possibility, agency, and ethical boundaries. Rather than merely automating tasks, AI infrastructures predict, classify, and format futures, deciding which lives are optimized and protected and which are marginalized or deemed disposable. Focusing primarily on contemporary East Asian speculative and realist literature and cinema, this special section explores the emotional and moral textures of life inside these technological systems. The collected essays demonstrate how narratives register the “phenomenology of infrastructure”—revealing how deeply intimacy, care, grief, labor, and kinship are mediated by algorithmic logic. Ultimately, this introduction argues that world literature serves as a crucial ethical archive. By rendering the background systems of modern life visible, narrative forms allow us to critique the political economy of prediction and imagine alternative modes of relation before these technological futures solidify into common sense.

Keywords artificial intelligence; infrastructure; anticipated lives; literary ethics; world literature

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The dominant cultural imagination of artificial intelligence still oscillates between two familiar figures: AI as instrument and AI as antagonist. In the first, machine intelligence appears as a neutral apparatus awaiting human direction, a technical extension of human intention. In the second, it appears as a rival agent threatening to displace, deceive, or dominate its makers. These figures remain powerful because

they dramatize AI in recognizably human terms: as servant or enemy, prosthesis or monster, obedient machine or rebellious other. Yet both figures preserve a clean ontological and ethical boundary between the human and the technical. They assume that the human subject stands outside the technological system, deciding how to use it or how to resist it. This special section begins from the proposition that such a framework has become insufficient for understanding the literary and ethical imagination of AI in the twenty-first century.

The six essays gathered here share a single, consequential premise: artificial intelligence is most accurately understood not merely as a tool we use or an other we confront, but as an “infrastructure” we inhabit. Infrastructure names more than material systems such as roads, electrical grids, water networks, railways, databases, platforms, and communication channels. It also names the often-unnoticed conditions that organize social possibility: the arrangements through which mobility, information, labor, care, security, consumption, memory, and belonging are distributed. Susan Leigh Star’s influential formulation is useful here: “infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept,” something that becomes infrastructure only in relation to organized practices (Star 380). Infrastructure is therefore not simply an object in the background; it is a condition of action, perception, and social coordination. It works precisely by withdrawing from attention. When functioning smoothly, it appears as background, environment, and common sense; it becomes visible most dramatically when it fails, excludes, or demands repair. To call AI infrastructural is therefore to shift attention away from isolated machines or spectacular acts of automation and toward the dispersed systems through which intelligent computation becomes ambient, normalized, and morally formative.

This infrastructural understanding of AI also requires a revised account of agency. If AI is approached only as a tool, ethical responsibility seems to rest mainly with the user who commands it. If AI is approached only as an autonomous antagonist, responsibility is displaced onto the machine as a quasi-human actor. But infrastructure complicates both assumptions. Infrastructural systems act not through singular intention but through protocols, classifications, feedback loops, standards, defaults, interfaces, institutional routines, and predictive models. They do not simply execute human will; they help pre-format the field in which human will becomes thinkable, legible, and actionable. Langdon Winner’s now-classic claim that “artifacts can have politics” remains vital for this discussion because it reminds us that technical arrangements are never neutral containers of social life (Winner 121). They shape what counts as a normal action, a rational choice, a viable life, an acceptable risk, or a desirable future. In this sense, AI does not only answer

questions, recommend objects, automate tasks, or generate images; it reorganizes the conditions under which subjects perceive themselves and others.

The ethical significance of this shift is profound. Infrastructure is never merely technical. It is a social and political form that distributes access, vulnerability, attention, and value. It determines who is connected and who is abandoned, whose movements are facilitated and whose are monitored, whose grief is recognized and whose is datafied, whose future is protected and whose life is rendered inefficient, risky, or disposable. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's work on classification clarifies why these distributions matter ethically: "Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another" (Bowker and Star 5). AI infrastructures operate through precisely such classificatory acts. They sort bodies, behaviors, emotions, risks, and futures, often under the seemingly benign languages of service, personalization, optimization, and care. Infrastructures promise continuity and improvement, but every promise is selective. The dream of seamlessness often conceals a hidden economy of dependence, extraction, exclusion, and sacrifice. For this reason, the infrastructural turn in literary studies is not simply a matter of adding technological context to textual interpretation. It calls for a mode of reading attentive to the ways narratives disclose the background systems that govern feeling, kinship, embodiment, labor, ecological relation, and futurity.

AI intensifies this problem because it is an anticipatory infrastructure. It does not merely support present action; it predicts, sorts, and prepares futures in advance. Through algorithmic inference, risk calculation, behavioral modeling, automation, and recommendation, AI systems convert uncertain futures into manageable probabilities. They make anticipation operational. What appears as convenience or efficiency is often a moral ordering of the future: which bodies should be protected, which desires should be cultivated, which losses should be minimized, which relationships should be optimized, which forms of slowness or dependency should be treated as failure. Anticipatory infrastructure thus governs not only by prohibiting or commanding, but by shaping expectation. It teaches subjects what to hope for, what to fear, what to accept, and what to become.

The title phrase "anticipated lives" names this condition. It refers to lives that are no longer simply lived in the open uncertainty of the present, but are increasingly predicted, modeled, prepared, optimized, protected, or abandoned according to imagined futures. An anticipated life is a life seen in advance by systems that claim to know its probable needs, risks, desires, capacities, and value. Such anticipation can be protective, as in technologies of care, safety,

medical assistance, or environmental warning; but it can also be disciplinary and exclusionary, when prediction becomes a means of deciding which lives are normal, efficient, productive, lovable, viable, or disposable. The term therefore holds together both promise and danger. It suggests that AI infrastructures do not merely respond to life; they participate in defining what kinds of life deserve continuation. At the same time, the literary works examined here show that life always exceeds anticipation. Fear, grief, disability, aging, animal vulnerability, maternal care, ecological uncertainty, and unexpected attachment interrupt the smooth logic of prediction and disclose ethical possibilities that cannot be fully calculated in advance.

This is why affect occupies a central place in the essays collected here. The infrastructural condition is not experienced only at the level of policy, technology, or political economy. It is lived through intimate and ordinary feelings: love, anxiety, fatigue, comfort, grief, shame, hope, fear, attachment, and care. AI enters domestic space, reproductive imagination, convenience-store routines, elder care, mourning technologies, ecological anxiety, and multispecies survival. It does not remain outside the human as a discrete device; it becomes part of the emotional architecture of everyday life. The essays in this special section therefore understand affect not as a private residue left over after technology has done its work, but as one of the primary media through which infrastructure operates. To ask how AI feels—or how humans feel through AI—is to ask how technological systems reorganize ethical relations.

Literature and film are especially important for this inquiry because they can make infrastructure perceptible without reducing it to explanation. Technical and policy discourses often describe AI through capacity, risk, governance, or innovation. Literary narratives, by contrast, dwell in ambiguity, embodiment, duration, and contradiction. They show how systems are inhabited before they are understood, how people adapt to arrangements they cannot fully see, how care and coercion can become entangled, and how technological promises may be experienced simultaneously as shelter and confinement. Narrative form is able to register what might be called the phenomenology of infrastructure: the half-visible background that structures a character's sense of self, relation, and possibility. In doing so, literature does not merely represent ethical problems that have already been defined elsewhere. It becomes a mode of ethical thinking in its own right. Donna Haraway's insistence that "it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" offers a concise rationale for the literary method pursued here (Haraway 12). If stories participate in world-making, then literary and cinematic

narratives are not secondary illustrations of technological change; they are critical sites where alternative relations to technology, life, and responsibility can be imagined.

The works examined in this special section are particularly concerned with the future, but they resist treating the future as a simple temporal horizon waiting to arrive. Instead, they reveal futurity as something institutionally and affectively produced in the present. Reproductive futures, automated futures, posthuman futures, climate futures, and biopolitical futures are not neutral projections; they are organized through infrastructures that decide what kinds of continuity matter. The future, in these texts, is not simply imagined. It is managed, priced, optimized, mourned, rehearsed, and unequally distributed. The central question is therefore not whether AI will be good or bad for humanity in general, but how specific infrastructural arrangements generate specific forms of humanity, dependency, disposability, and responsibility.

It is no accident that this special section draws predominantly on East Asian literary and cinematic imagination—Korean, Japanese, and adjacent fictions of the near future. These works arise from societies marked by rapid demographic aging, dense urbanization, advanced platform economies, automation, precarious labor, familial transformation, and technological saturation. They register with particular acuity the emotional textures of life lived inside systems that promise safety, convenience, longevity, and efficiency while also intensifying solitude, normativity, surveillance, and exclusion. At the same time, the significance of these works is not merely regional. Their speculative and realist imaginations speak to a planetary condition in which AI, climate, capital, and governance increasingly converge as overlapping infrastructures of life.

The theoretical wager of this special section, then, is that world literature offers a privileged archive for understanding AI not as a future technology approaching from outside society, but as an already emergent condition of social existence. By bringing together infrastructure humanities, literary ethics, biopolitics, affect theory, posthumanism, and Anthropocene thought, the following essays ask how narratives reveal the moral architecture of intelligent systems. They invite us to read AI not only where robots speak or machines rebel, but where infrastructures quietly format desire, care, death, labor, kinship, and survival. To read AI infrastructurally is to ask: What kind of world is being built in the background? What forms of life does it make possible? What forms does it render unintelligible, inefficient, or expendable? And what ethical imagination might literature cultivate before these futures harden into common sense?

Jooyoung Kim opens the conversation by reading the film *Mother/Android* as a portrait of AI as “affective infrastructure.” Refusing the binary of helper and threat, Kim shows how machine intelligence becomes woven into the fabric of domestic and reproductive life, reshaping emotion, ethical judgment, and the very idea of reproductive futurity. Through three linked problems—the internalization of surveillance within intimacy, the technologization of pregnancy and motherhood, and the commodification of love—the essay locates in the film a moral and interpretive crisis, and turns to literary ethics to recover the language of care, vulnerability, and relational responsibility under technological governance.

Inseop Shin and Hyunyoung Lee turn to Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*, reading the protagonist Keiko Furukura’s gradual “AI-ification” as an allegory of the human subject reorganized by anticipatory infrastructures. The convenience store operates as a moral and operational machine that simultaneously shelters and constrains, supplying Keiko with scripts to mimic and a structure to belong to. Rather than narrating a redemptive arc toward social acceptance, the essay reads Keiko’s story as an unsettling meditation on what remains of the human when life is reduced to operational data.

Jinhyoung Lee develops the special section’s most explicit ethical proposal through Bora Chung’s science fiction story “A Song for Sleep.” In the relationship between a ninety-three-year-old woman with Parkinson’s disease and the AI-operated elevator that loves her, Lee locates a profound “affective incommensurability”—the machine’s unrequited devotion meeting the woman’s fear of death. From this asymmetry he draws the concept of “inter-infrastructuring”: an ethics of mutual dependency in which humans and machines sustain one another’s transitive modes of existence, pointing toward a more reciprocal model for automated futures.

Myungsim Yang examines Hirano Keiichirō’s novel *Honshin* (2021) to analyze how social imaginaries of future technology are formed. Through “infrastructural text studies,” Yang reads the novel’s Virtual Figure and Real Avatar services as anticipatory infrastructures that do more than perform technical functions in a fictional 2040 Japan: they reorganize emotion, death, mourning, and agency. The essay reveals infrastructure as a political instrument—one that issues promises of possibility even as it discloses deeper transformations in human identity and its entanglement with technical and social institutions.

Taehee Kim widens the frame to planetary scale, reconceiving climate and AI as converging “infrastructural hyperobjects” that structure human existence across immense spatial, temporal, and computational dimensions. Advancing three

claims—that climate is a historically constructed socio-natural infrastructure, that AI has become a pervasive rather than discrete technology, and that their convergence demands a reconfigured ethical subjectivity—Kim reads the novel *The Second Moon* to articulate the figure of the “hyposubject,” showing how literature can furnish ethical narratives adequate to the entanglement of human and nonhuman within socio-political life.

Yeonhee Woo closes the special section with a biopolitical reading of Cheon Seon-ran’s *A Thousand Blues*. In a future organized around a horseracing system that prizes efficiency and safety, slow or injured racehorses are euthanized and AI jockeys treated as replaceable—an economy in which infrastructure mediates hope and anxiety while sorting viable lives from expendable ones. Woo exposes the ethical asymmetry at the heart of anticipatory infrastructure: its promise of a better future “for some” is purchased by rendering others unworthy of survival.

Read together, these essays compose neither a unified theory nor a single methodology, but a sustained collective inquiry into the “infrastructural condition” of contemporary life. Their shared concern is not simply how literature represents AI, automation, or future technologies, but how literary and cinematic forms disclose the hidden systems through which life is anticipated, classified, supported, and abandoned. The essays therefore move beyond a thematic study of technology in literature toward a more fundamental question: how do narratives allow us to perceive the infrastructural forces that organize what counts as human, livable, ethical, and future-worthy?

Several throughlines emerge. The first is the displacement of the human–machine boundary by relations of mutual constitution. Across the works discussed here, the human is not imagined as an autonomous essence later threatened by technology; rather, subjectivity is formed within technical, affective, institutional, and ecological systems. Keiko’s convenience-store self, the pregnant body in *Mother/Android*, the elderly woman and the AI elevator in “A Song for Sleep,” the mourners and avatars in *Honshin*, the hyposubject of *The Second Moon*, and the racehorses and AI jockeys of *A Thousand Blues* all reveal that the human is already infrastructurally mediated. These figures compel us to rethink agency not as sovereign mastery but as situated responsiveness within networks of dependency.

The second throughline is the centrality of affect. The infrastructures examined in this special section do not govern only through rules, platforms, machines, or institutions; they also govern by organizing feeling. Love becomes commodified, care becomes automated, mourning becomes data-driven, hope becomes programmed, fear becomes predictive, and slowness becomes a sign of

failure. Yet affect also remains a site of resistance and ethical possibility. Precisely because feelings exceed technical calculation, they reveal the friction between lived experience and infrastructural order. The essays show that to study AI and infrastructure through literature is to study not only systems of control but also the fragile, excessive, and unpredictable attachments through which alternative relations may become imaginable.

The third throughline is the politics of anticipation. Each essay asks how futures are made before they arrive: through algorithms, platforms, reproductive fantasies, service economies, climate projections, biopolitical classifications, and promises of safety or efficiency. Anticipatory infrastructures do not merely forecast the future; they actively distribute it. They decide whose lives are worth protecting, whose bodies are worth optimizing, whose grief is worth preserving, whose dependency is tolerable, and whose existence can be treated as obsolete. The futures imagined in these texts are therefore never universal. They are unevenly allocated, emotionally managed, and politically charged.

This shared inquiry also opens a methodological proposition for world literature studies. World literature is not only a field of circulation, translation, and comparison; it is also a field in which planetary infrastructures become narratable. The Korean and Japanese texts discussed in this special section are locally grounded, yet they illuminate problems that exceed national borders: technological saturation, demographic anxiety, ecological precarity, platform capitalism, posthuman intimacy, and the unequal management of life. Their significance lies not in offering a single East Asian model of technological futurity, but in showing how world literature can trace the uneven routes through which infrastructural modernity is imagined, desired, contested, and suffered.

Looking forward, this special section hopes to encourage further research in at least three directions. First, literary scholars may develop more nuanced vocabularies for reading AI not only as representation, metaphor, or theme, but as an organizing condition of narrative form, character formation, temporality, and ethical judgment. Second, future studies might expand the comparative scope of infrastructural AI imaginaries by bringing East Asian texts into dialogue with African, Latin American, Indigenous, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and other literary traditions where questions of technology, extraction, dependency, and futurity take different historical shapes. Third, the convergence of AI with climate crisis, aging societies, reproductive politics, disability, animal studies, and care ethics calls for more interdisciplinary collaboration among literary studies, media studies, science and technology studies, environmental humanities, and ethics.

Finally, the special section makes a claim for literature itself. If infrastructure works by becoming invisible, then the task of narrative is to make it appear—to render the ambient and the systemic available to ethical reflection. The fictions read here do not offer ready-made solutions so much as they cultivate a form of attention: a way of noticing the moral architecture of the worlds we are building, and of asking, before the future is settled, on whose behalf and at whose expense it is being built. Haraway's statement that "It matters what thoughts think thoughts" helps define this concluding hope: the concepts and narratives through which we think AI will also shape the ethical worlds AI helps bring into being (Haraway 35). It is our hope that these essays, in their convergence and their friction, extend that attention to readers of *Forum for World Literature Studies*, and contribute to an emerging conversation at the intersection of literary studies, infrastructure humanities, and the ethics of artificial intelligence. More importantly, we hope they will invite future scholarship to imagine forms of technological life not governed solely by efficiency, prediction, and optimization, but by care, reciprocity, vulnerability, and shared survival.

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