

Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough

Ethnographic Responses



Edited by

FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ AND PATRICK LAVIOLETTE



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MAINTAINING WHOSE ROAD?

AGNIESZKA JONIAK-LÜTHI

Imagine a road. Is there anything more associated with a sense of placelessness, of being in between, both not here anymore but also not there yet? At the same time, as iconic books and films such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* or, less well known to an Anglo-American audience, Andrzej Stasiuk's *Wschód* and other road stories make vividly clear, a road is also a place of experiencing, a place where ideas, things and relationships come into being and fall apart. In contrast to their representations on maps as seemingly smooth and straightforward lines, roads 'in experience' are in fact continuously transforming bundles of social relations between materials, humans, discourses, knowledge, environment, the state, capital and more – relations that stretch across place and time.

Julie Chu (2014: 353) argues that 'thinking infrastructurally . . . demands an outward orientation to . . . distributive forms of agency drawing efficacy from links to elsewhere and elsewhen'. In a similar line of inquiry, Brian Larkin (2013) notes that infrastructures, roads including, have a 'peculiar ontology', which is grounded in the fact that they are things but also relations between things, and that they are matter that enables the movement of other matter. It has been suggested that this 'peculiar' rhizomatic ontology supposedly emerges from its usual invisibility upon moments of 'breakdown' and 'malfunction' (Star and Ruhleder 1996; Graham and Thrift 2007). These moments reveal the complexity of relations out of which infrastructure is fashioned. Yet breakdown and malfunction, both negatively charged normative terms used to describe a situation of 'failure' (Ureta 2014), appear to imply a simple binary where an infrastructure can either be in a state of function, when things work 'properly' (i.e. in a way

envisaged by the producer, engineer, designer or the state), or in a state of malfunction. The latter designates cases where infrastructures do not work as they are nominally expected to do, which is implicitly assumed to be to everyone's disadvantage. However, other studies demonstrate that the spectrum is broader and more ambiguous, necessitating a shift beyond the duality of function and malfunction (Campbell 2012; Kernaghan 2012; Barnes 2017). Thinking of the ways in which roads are frequently used in Central Asia as surfaces for drying grain and fruit in autumn, or how they feature globally as platforms for social protest – both resulting in their clear malfunction in the eyes of engineers – reveals the difficulty of differentiating where (and for whom) function ends and malfunction begins. Though I would like to distance myself from the normativity of malfunction and breakdown, the process of decay – the term I prefer – and the work of maintenance to patch it up are nonetheless ethnographically highly interesting as they lay bare the multiple and competing interests, projections, appropriations and asymmetric relations of which roads, similarly to other infrastructures, are always part and which are influenced by their dilapidating materiality.

Scholars have drawn attention to the inherent sociality of maintenance (Schwenkel 2015), and have also discussed maintenance as a source of technological innovation and maintenance as learning (Graham and Thrift 2007). On the other hand, maintenance work has been used as a lens through which to recast infrastructure as dynamic and mutable (Strebel 2011; Denis and Pontille 2014) among other things. In this snapshot, my aim is to focus on the politics of maintenance, and its social ambiguity. Jessica Barnes (2017: 148) points out that although the material object of maintenance appears in most situations to be quite clear (for example, a damaged road surface), the purpose of maintenance is much more complex and involves restoring 'the social and political relationships in which that object is embedded'. In regard to roads, the complexity of those relations reflects the fact that 'roads are sticky metaphors' (Campbell 2012: 483): they mean different things at different times to different people. They are platforms for projecting dreams, expectations, fears, claims to power and political agendas, which are all extremely dynamic. Because of this, their decay and maintenance are ambiguous processes around which tensions accumulate.

Roads in northern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and in particular the recently built expressways, are the locus of such tensions. Situated in northwest China at the border with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia, extensive rocky deserts and expansive pastureland characterise the area. The latter has been used by, mainly, Kazakh pastoralists to graze their sheep and horses. Having in the past rotated seasonally between a

few camps throughout the year, under government pressure transhumance has been reduced over recent decades to migration between, most often, just two sites: the summer pastures and the winter settlement. The section of expressway that comprises the main focus of this snapshot passes through the Tengri Tagh/Tian Shan mountains between the city of Ghulja/Yining and Sairam Lake, where some excellent pastures are located. It was completed in 2015, replacing the old, winding dirt road. This change in the materiality of the road – from a simple dirt/gravel track to a four-lane, asphalted and fenced-off highway – has had various effects on the Kazakh pastoralists in this region. For one, the expressway bisects and has thus blocked some of the seasonal migration routes. As funds for underpasses to enable the migration of wild and domestic animals appear to have often been ‘repurposed’ by local government and Communist Party officials, pastoralists and their herds find themselves incarcerated by highway fences and embankments.

While the purpose of the new highway is to facilitate faster travel, this acceleration is granted selectively only to those who can afford it, individuals who take advantage of the road to move between urban centres where the few access ramps are located. Numerous pastoralists, who moved from distant locations in the grasslands to the direct vicinity of the road with the aim of connecting to this new speedy world and profiting from its increased traffic flows, found themselves excluded by fences, dykes and embankments. Responding to this engineered exclusion, herding families have removed sections of fence from along the expressway and added some makeshift earth structures to bridge the dykes and establish access to the road. This has also made it possible for motorised tourists to reach the pastoralists’ roadside yurts, where they offer food, entertainment and accommodation. At the same time, herders have obtained direct access to the expressway, which facilitates individual travel and has also become crucial in the transportation by truck of herds between summer and winter pastures.

Hence, by destroying parts of the expressway infrastructure, the herders have *maintained* their access to the new road. As the pastoralists remove parts of the fence and make changes to the hard shoulder, maintenance teams repeatedly repair those fences, remove the improvised additions and streamline the roadside, with the purpose of *maintaining* the road in the form designed by the engineers and representing the priorities of the central state. The road is meant to be convenient and smooth for those who pay for it at toll gates, not for the herders who live between them. Secondly, as the crucial link in the emerging Belt and Road Project, the expressway is intended to enable long-distance transport between China and Central Asia, in addition to spurring tourism and facilitating circulation of govern-

ment, Party and military personnel in this border region. As the road 'travels' (Clifford 1992) through different spatial scales, being a local, translocal and also transnational connection, tensions arise around the question of which social-material relationships should or should not be prioritised and maintained. Further questions about who holds the power to decide what kind of maintenance work is needed, and who should conduct such work in a region as ethnically divided and riven by anti-state violence as Xinjiang, must also be considered as state-sponsored infrastructures and forms of mobility are in the process of appropriating and encroaching upon other material practices.

Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Zurich.

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