Landscapes of Power

Susannah Crockford
October, 2020

In *Landscapes of Power*, Dana Powell maps a failure: the proposed Desert Rock power plant which never came into being   beyond paper thin promises made via PowerPoint presentations. Yet Powell traces its seismic impacts across energy policy, activism, and art in the Navajo Nation. The shifting dynamics of relative power and powerlessness drive her analysis of a project-in-becoming that offered sugared seduction known as "development," yet threatened a way of living rooted in the landscape powered by those social arrangements that in the development lens are viewed as deprivation.

It is a failure because Desert Rock never came into being, however the double bind of extraction burden and resource depletion continues to fall on *Dinétah* (the word in the Navajo language for the traditional homeland of the Navajo people) through the inequitable relations of settler colonialism. It is the continuous contours of this landscape of power, so well-drawn by Powell, that I focus on in this review, drawing inspiration from my own continuing anthropological research on climate change in Northern Arizona and from my field site in the rural area located in the south of the Grand Canyon and in the west of the Navajo Nation.

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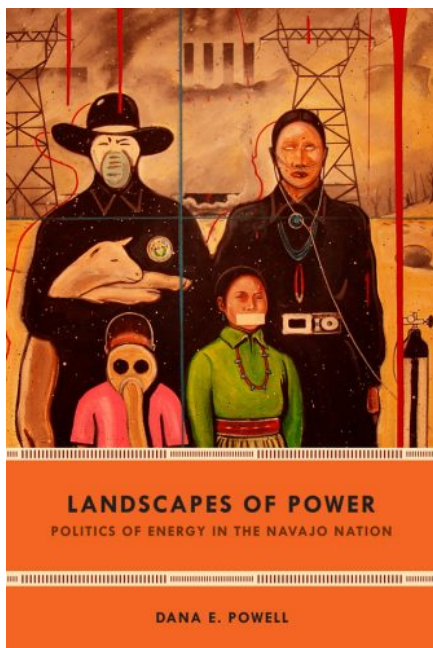
The double bind that Powell describes, in which Navajo lands are polluted through resource extraction yet Navajo people do not benefit from the profits derived, disrupts the meanings of sovereignty in the context of energy policy. While tribal government figures see material benefits in controlling their own fossil fuel resources and pursuing deals with third-party corporations to extract them, for activists this continues practices that are environmentally degrading and undermine a rural way of life as well as Navajo philosophy. The tension between environmental justice and energy sovereignty plays out in ways specific to Diné, with more at stake than how the lights are powered. The rich history described by Powell of the resistance in the town of Burnham against a proposed coal mine in the 1970s, close to the subsequent proposed site of Desert Rock, acts as prolegomena to the later refusal. The enduring uncertainties of settler colonialism fueled both the Burnham coal wars and the resistance to Desert Rock are both fueled by the Navajo land is both sovereign and colonized: it is a nation state with

its own powers to draw treaties and taxes, but it is also subject to the policies and regulations of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the US federal government.

Lakota Sioux scholar and activist, Vine Deloria, documents the reaction of white Americans upon learning the resource wealth controlled by sovereign tribes. Deloria explains how this information triggered demands for Lakota Sioux to be absorbed into mainstream society. Assimilation and appropriation undermine Indigenous legal rights to their ancestral lands so that those resources can be plundered (2003: 1-2). Sovereignty and resource extraction have always been entangled in settler colonialism. The western side of the Navajo Nation abuts the Grand Canyon on the Colorado Plateau, where uranium and coal have long been mined. Before the mouth of the Grand Canyon, near the town of Page and Lake Powell, is the Navajo Generating Station, a 2.25 gigawatt coal-fired power plant. It embodies the same poisoned sustenance that Desert Rock offered, being both dangerous to the health and environment of the area, and also a significant employer ([83%](#) of the plant employees are enrolled tribal members). Yet the power it generates is primarily used to fuel the Central Arizona Project. This hundreds-mile long pipeline takes water from the Colorado River, which carves the Grand Canyon, and delivers it to the desert-bound metropolises of Phoenix and Tucson. The Navajo Generating Station is a funnel for resources out of the Navajo Nation, benefitting the settler cities, leaving behind health problems and environmental damage, for a minority to have jobs. The activists that Powell quotes called the economic promise of Desert Rock "blood money" because of such tensions.

> *The provocative question that Powell raises is: how much do residents want the grid? Activism against Desert Rock was a rejection of fossil fuels, but a qualified one, and Powell neatly highlights the ambiguities of aligning Navajo activism with that of environmentalism.*

The Navajo Generating Station is now at the end of its life. After 46 years of operation, the lease for the power station has been taken over by the Navajo

Nation and it will be decommissioned. The Governor of Arizona, Doug Ducey, caused controversy in the final months of negotiations by trying to keep the plant open, in line with President Trump's pro-coal policies, for example by [exempting](#) the plant's coal from sales tax. But the plant was losing money, natural gas was cheaper, and the same force that animated opposition to Desert Rock, made it a losing proposition.

A new proposed hydroelectric power [plant](#) in Big Canyon, with dams on the Little Colorado, in May 2020 continues the corporate lures of development at the expense of public and ecological health. Yet development occurs in bubbles. In much of the Navajo Nation and the rural hinterlands of the Grand Canyon, many residences still have no access to power and remain off the grid. The provocative question that Powell raises is: how much do residents want the grid? Activism against Desert Rock was a rejection of fossil fuels, but a qualified one, and Powell neatly highlights the ambiguities of aligning Navajo activism with that of environmentalism.

In this book, Powell reveals that the fight against fossil fuels is not necessarily synonymous with climate activism. For the Navajo, the threat to a way of life was of equal importance to the aims of climate mitigation. This work is therefore an important contribution to the anthropology of climate change because it qualifies what is meant by such catch-all terms as 'environmentalism' and 'climate justice' in an indigenous context.

References

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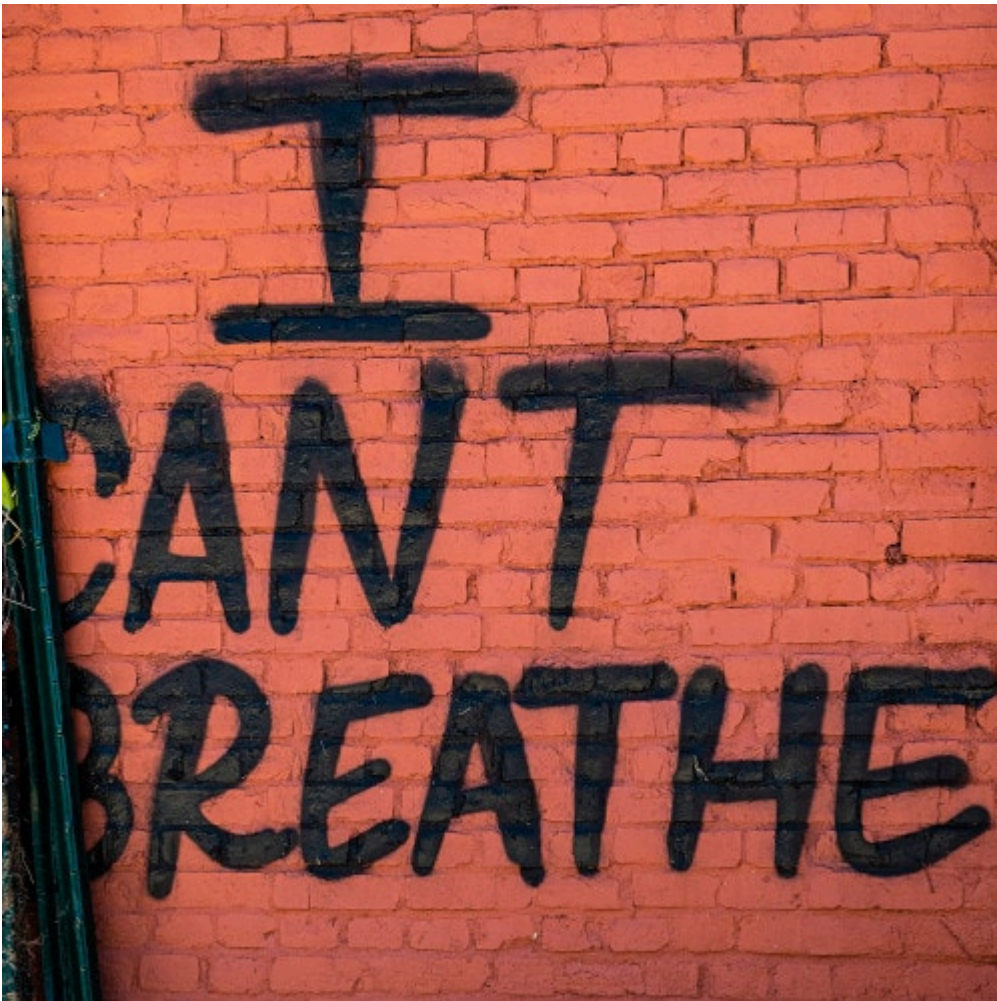
Read Lena's Gross' review [here.](#)

Read Nimisha Thakur's review [here.](#)

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Call for Reviews: Black Lives Matter

Allegra
October, 2020

The brutal murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 has once again revealed the terrifying fissures that cut across our societies and the hashtag Black Lives Matter emerged as a symbolic call for solidarity on a global scale. Racism dangerously exists, in formal institutions and beyond. It is time that we situate ourselves on the right side of history as calls for political anti-racism are gaining in strength everywhere. At this historic juncture of global societal transformation, the Allegra team has curated a list of recent books that explore the issue of race. Difficult questions related to the multiple forms that racism takes in countries like the United States, United Kingdom and South Africa – such as police brutality and torture, micro-aggressions in our everyday lives, the racist legacies of academia, the nexus between black politics and feminism and traumatic lived experiences of young black people – are addressed in these books. If you are interested in reviewing one of them and utilizing academic spaces to express your solidarity with BLM, do get in touch with us!

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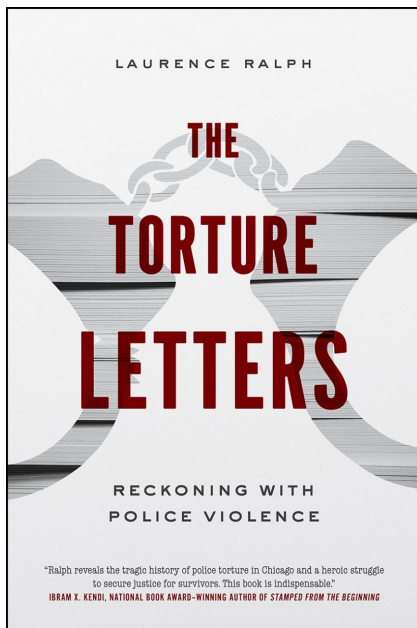
Laurence Ralph, 2020. [The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence.](#) The University of Chicago Press.

In *The Torture Letters*, Laurence Ralph chronicles the history of torture in Chicago, the burgeoning activist movement against police violence, and the American public's complicity in perpetuating torture at home and abroad. Engaging with a long tradition of epistolary meditations on racism in the United States, from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* to Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, Ralph offers in this book a collection of open letters written to protesters, victims, students, and others. Through these moving, questing, enraged letters, Ralph bears witness to police violence that began in Burge's Area Two and follows the city's networks of torture to the global War on Terror. From Vietnam to Geneva to Guantanamo Bay—Ralph's story extends as far as the legacy of American imperialism. Combining insights from fourteen years of research on torture with testimonies of victims of police violence, retired officers, lawyers, and protesters, this is a powerful indictment of police violence and a fierce challenge to all Americans to demand an end to the systems that support it.

With compassion and careful skill, Ralph uncovers the tangled connections among law enforcement, the political machine, and the courts in Chicago, amplifying the voices of torture victims who are still with us—and lending a voice to those long deceased.
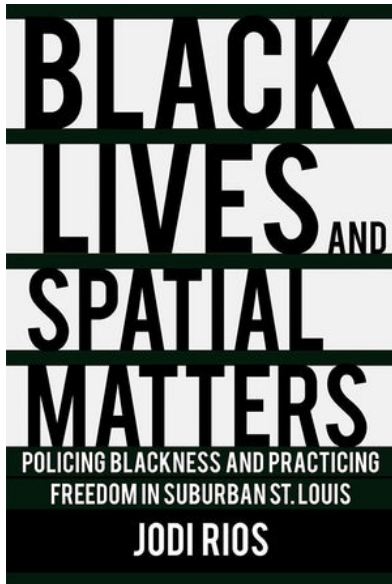
Jodi Rios, 2020. [Black Lives and Spatial Matters: Policing Blackness and Practicing Freedom in](#) Suburban St. Louis. Cornell University Press. *Black Lives and Spatial Matters* is a call to reconsider the epistemic violence that is committed when scholars, policymakers, and the general public continue to frame Black precarity as just another racial, cultural, or ethnic conflict that can be solved solely through legal, political, or economic means. Jodi Rios argues that the historical and material production of blackness-as-risk is foundational to the historical and material construction of our society and certainly foundational to the construction and experience of metropolitan space. She also considers how an ethics of lived blackness—living fully and visibly in the face of forces intended to dehumanize and erase—can create a powerful counter point to blackness-as-risk.

Using a transdisciplinary methodology, *Black Lives and Spatial Matters* studies cultural, institutional, and spatial politics of race in North St. Louis County, Missouri, as a set of practices that are intimately connected to each other and to global histories of race and race-making. As such, the book adds important insight into the racialization of metropolitan space and people in the United States. The arguments presented in this book draw from fifteen years of engaged research in North St. Louis County and rely on multiple disciplinary perspectives and local knowledge in order to study relationships between interconnected practices and phenomena.
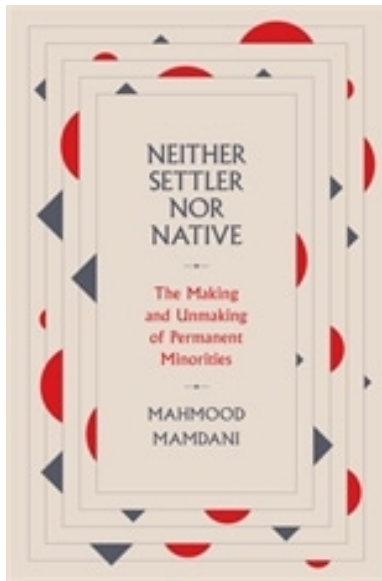
Mahmoud Mamdani, 2002. Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities. Harvard University Press. In this genealogy of political modernity, **Mahmood Mamdani** argues that the nation-state and the colonial state created each other. In case after case around the globe—from the New World to South Africa, Israel to Germany to Sudan—the colonial state and the nation-state have been mutually constructed through the politicization of a religious or ethnic majority at the expense of an equally manufactured minority.

Neither Settler nor Native offers a vision for arresting this historical process. Mamdani rejects the "criminal" solution attempted at Nuremberg, which held individual perpetrators responsible without questioning Nazism as a political project and thus the violence of the nation-state itself. Instead, political violence demands political solutions: not criminal justice for perpetrators but a rethinking of the political community for all survivors—victims, perpetrators, bystanders, beneficiaries—based on common residence and the commitment to build a common future without the permanent political identities of settler and native. Mamdani points to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa as an unfinished project, seeking a state without a nation.
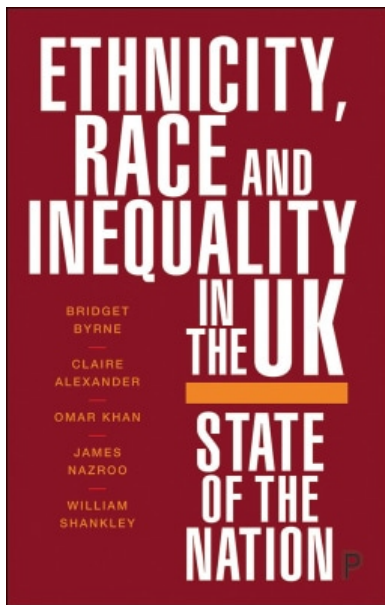
Bridget Byrne, Claire Alexander, Omar Khan, James Nazroo and William Shankley, 2020. [Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation.](#) Policy Press.

50 years after the establishment of the Runnymede Trust and the Race Relations Act of 1968 which sought to end discrimination in public life, this accessible book provides commentary by some of the UK's foremost scholars of race and ethnicity on data relating to a wide range of sectors of society, including employment, health, education, criminal justice, housing and representation in the arts and media.

It explores what progress has been made, identifies those areas where inequalities remain stubbornly resistant to change, and asks how our thinking around race and ethnicity has changed in an era of Islamophobia, Brexit and an increasingly diverse population.

Nadine El-Enany, 2020. [(B)ordering Britain:Law, Race and Empire.](#) Manchester University Press.

(B)ordering Britain argues that Britain is the spoils of empire, its immigration law is colonial violence and irregular immigration is anti-colonial resistance. In announcing itself as postcolonial through immigration and nationality laws passed in the 60s, 70s and 80s, Britain cut itself off symbolically and physically from its colonies and the Commonwealth, taking with it what it had plundered. This imperial vanishing act cast Britain's colonial history into the shadows. The British Empire, about which Britons know little, can be remembered fondly as a moment of past glory, as a gift once given to the world. Meanwhile immigration laws are justified on the basis that they keep the undeserving hordes out. In fact, immigration laws are acts of colonial seizure and violence. They obstruct the vast majority of racialised people from accessing colonial wealth amassed in the course of colonial conquest. Regardless of what the law, media and political discourse dictate, people with personal, ancestral or geographical links to colonialism, or those existing under the weight of its legacy of race and racism, have every right to come to Britain and take back what is theirs.
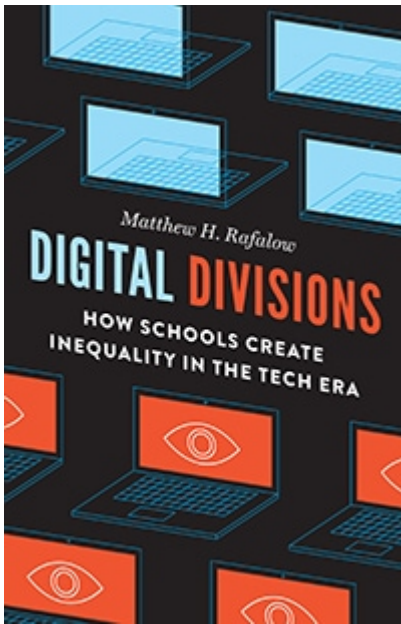
Matthew H. Rafalow, 2020. Digital Divisions: How Schools Create Inequality in the Tech Era. The University of Chicago Press.

In the digital age, schools are a central part of a nationwide effort to make access to technology more equitable, so that all young people, regardless of identity or background, have the opportunity to engage with the technologies that are essential to modern life. Most students, however, come to school with digital knowledge they've already acquired from the range of activities they participate in with peers online. Yet, teachers, as Matthew H. Rafalow reveals in *Digital Divisions*, interpret these technological skills very differently based on the race and class of their student body.

Rafalow finds in his study of three California middle schools that students of all backgrounds use digital technology with sophistication and creativity, but only the teachers in the school serving predominantly White, affluent students help translate the digital skills students develop through their digital play into educational capital. *Digital Divisions* provides an in-depth look at how teachers operate as gatekeepers for students' potential, reacting differently according to the race and class of their student body. As a result, Rafalow shows us that the digital divide is much more than a matter of access: it's about how schools perceive the value of digital technology and then use them day-to-day.

Anne Warfield Rawls and Waverly Duck, 2020. [Tacit Racism](). University of Chicago Press.

We need to talk about racism before it destroys our democracy. And that conversation needs to start with an acknowledgement that racism is coded into even the most ordinary interactions.

Every time we interact with another human being, we unconsciously draw on a set of expectations to guide us through the encounter. What many of us in the United States—especially white people—do not recognize is that centuries of institutional racism have inescapably molded those expectations. This leads us to act with implicit biases that can shape everything from how we greet our neighbors to whether we take a second look at a resume. This is tacit racism, and it is one of the most pernicious threats to our nation. In *Tacit Racism*, Anne Warfield Rawls and Waverly Duck illustrate the many ways in which racism is coded into the everyday social expectations of Americans, in what they call Interaction Orders of Race. They argue that these interactions can produce racial inequality, whether the people involved are aware of it or not, and that by overlooking tacit racism in favor of the fiction of a "color-blind" nation, we are harming not only our society's most disadvantaged—but endangering the society itself.

Laura T. Hamilton and Kelly Nielsen, 2021. [Broke: The Racial Consequences of Underfunding Public Universities.](#) University of Chicago Press.

Public research universities were previously able to provide excellent education to white families thanks to healthy government funding. However, that funding has all but dried up in recent decades as historically underrepresented students have gained greater access, and now less prestigious publicuniversities face major economic challenges. In *Broke*, Laura T. Hamilton and Kelly Nielsen examine virtually all aspects of campus life to show how the new economic order in public universities, particularly at two campuses in the renowned University of California system, affects students. For most of the twentieth century, they show, less affluent families of color paid with their taxes for wealthy white students to attend universities where their own offspring were not welcome. That changed as a subset of public research universities, some quite old, opted for a "new" approach, making racially and economically marginalized youth the lifeblood of the university. These new universities, however, have been particularly hard hit by austerity. To survive, they've had to adapt, finding new ways to secure funding and trim costs—but ultimately it's their students who pay the price, in decreased services and inadequate infrastructure. The rise of new universities is a reminder that a world-class education for all is possible. *Broke* shows us how far we are from that ideal and sets out a path for how we could get there.
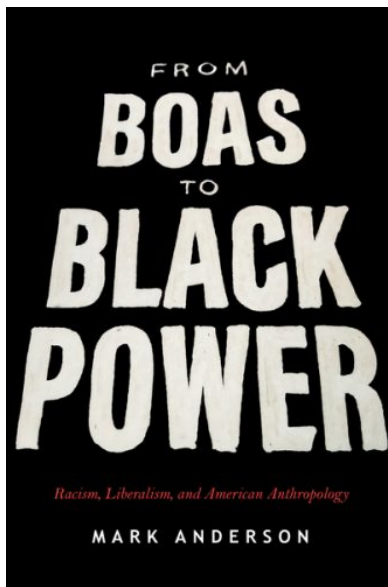
Mark Anderson, 2010. From Boas to Black Power: Racism, Liberalism and American Anthropology. Stanford University Press.

From Boas to Black Power investigates how U.S. cultural anthropologists wrote about race, racism, and "America" in the 20th century as a window into the greater project of U.S. anti-racist liberalism. Anthropology as a discipline and the American project share a common origin: their very foundations are built upon white supremacy, and both are still reckoning with their racist legacies. In this groundbreaking intellectual history of anti-racism within twentieth-century cultural anthropology, Mark Anderson starts with the legacy of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict and continues through the post-war and Black Power movement to the birth of the Black Studies discipline, exploring the problem "America" represents for liberal anti-racism. Anderson shows how cultural anthropology contributed to liberal American discourses on race that simultaneously bolstered and denied white domination. *From Boas to Black Power* provides a major rethinking of anthropological anti-racism as a project that, in step with the American racial liberalism it helped create, paradoxically maintained white American hegemony. Anthropologists influenced by radical political movements of the 1960s offered the first sustained challenge to that project, calling attention to the racial contradictions of American liberalism reflected in anthropology. Their critiques remain relevant for the discipline and the nation.
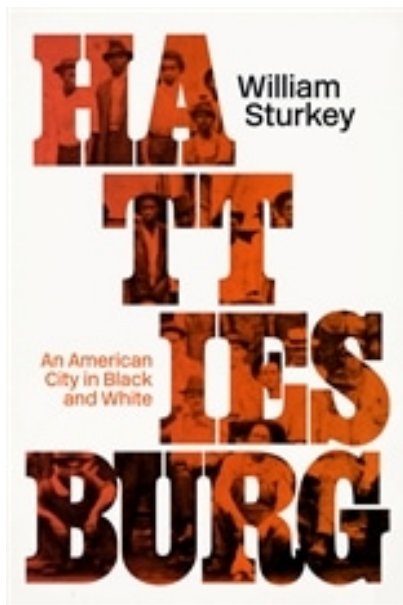
William Sturkey, 2019. [Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White.](#) Harvard University Press.

If you really want to understand Jim Crow—what it was and how African Americans rose up to defeat it—you should start by visiting Mobile Street in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the heart of the historic black downtown. There you can see remnants of the shops and churches where, amid the violence and humiliation of segregation, men and women gathered to build a remarkable community. William Sturkey introduces us to both old-timers and newcomers who arrived in search of economic opportunities promised by the railroads, sawmills, and factories of the New South. He also takes us across town and inside the homes of white Hattiesburgers to show how their lives were shaped by the changing fortunes of the Jim Crow South. Sturkey reveals the stories behind those who struggled to uphold their southern "way of life" and those who fought to tear it down—from William Faulkner's great-grandfather, a Confederate veteran who was the inspiration for the enigmatic character John Sartoris, to black leader Vernon Dahmer, whose killers were the first white men ever convicted of murdering a civil rights activist in Mississippi. Through it all, *Hattiesburg* traces the story of the Smith family across multiple generations, from Turner and Mamie Smith, who fled a life of sharecropping to find opportunity in town, to Hammond and Charles Smith, in whose family pharmacy Medgar Evers and his colleagues planned their strategy to give blacks the vote.
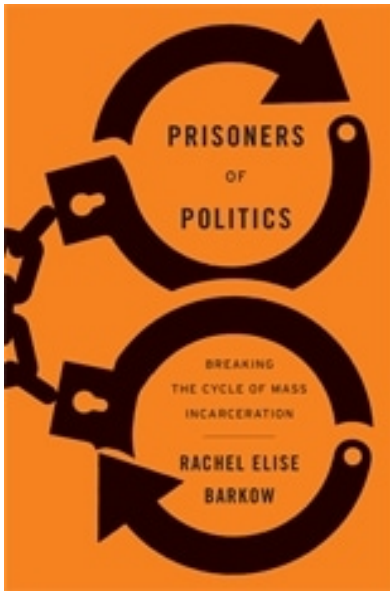
Rachel Elise Barkow, 2019. [Prisoners of Politics: Breaking the Cycle of Mass Incarceration.](#) Harvard University Press.

The United States has the world's highest rate of incarceration, a form of punishment that ruins lives and makes a return to prison more likely. As awful as that truth is for individuals and their families, its social consequences—recycling offenders through an overwhelmed criminal justice system, ever-mounting costs, unequal treatment before the law, and a growing class of permanently criminalized citizens—are even more devastating. With the authority of a prominent legal scholar and the practical insights gained through on-the-ground work on criminal justice reform, Rachel Barkow explains how dangerous it is to base criminal justice policy on the whims of the electorate, which puts judges, sheriffs, and politicians in office. Instead, she argues for an institutional shift toward data and expertise, following the model used to set food and workplace safety rules. Barkow's prescriptions are rooted in a thorough and refreshingly ideology-free cost–benefit analysis of how to cut mass incarceration while maintaining public safety. She points to specific policies that are deeply problematic on moral grounds and have failed to end the cycle of recidivism. Her concrete proposals draw on the best empirical information available to prevent crime and improve the reentry of former prisoners into society.
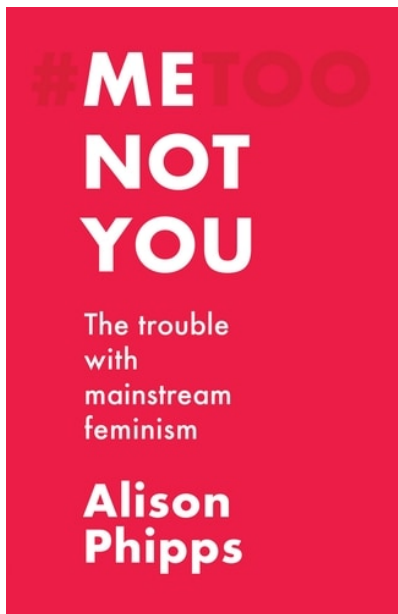
Alison Phipps, 2020. Me, Not You: The Trouble With Mainstream Feminism. Manchester University Press.

The Me Too movement, started by Black feminist Tarana Burke in 2006, went viral as a hashtag eleven years later after a tweet by white actor Alyssa Milano. Mainstream movements like #MeToo have often built on and co-opted the work of women of colour, while refusing to learn from them or centre their concerns. Far too often, the message is not 'Me, Too' but 'Me, Not You'. Alison Phipps argues that this is not just a lack of solidarity. Privileged white women also sacrifice more marginalised people to achieve their aims, or even define them as enemies when they get in the way.

Me, not you argues that the mainstream movement against sexual violence expresses a political whiteness that both reflects its demographics and limits its revolutionary potential. Privileged white women use their traumatic experiences to create media outrage, while relying on state power and bureaucracy to purge 'bad men' from elite institutions with little concern for where they might appear next. In their attacks on sex workers and trans people, the more reactionary branches of this feminist movement play into the hands of the resurgent far-right

Laura Briggs, 2020. [Taking Children: A History of American Terror.](#) University of California Press.

Taking Children argues that for four hundred years the United States has taken children for political ends. Black children, Native children, Latinx children, and the children of the poor have all been seized from their kin and caregivers. As Laura Briggs's sweeping narrative shows, the practice played out on the auction block, in the boarding schools designed to pacify the Native American population, in the foster care system used to put down the Black freedom movement, in the US's anti-Communist coups in Central America, and in the moral panic about "crack babies." In chilling detail we see how Central Americans were made into a population that could be stripped of their children and how every US administration beginning with Reagan has put children of immigrants and refugees in detention camps. Yet these tactics of terror have encountered opposition from every generation, and Briggs challenges us to stand and resist in this powerful corrective to American history.
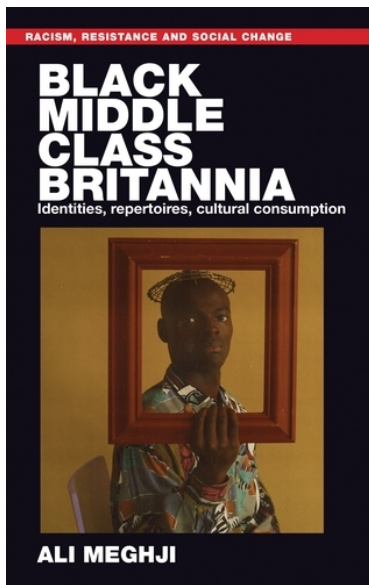
Ali Meghji, 2019. [Black Middle-class Britannia: Identities, Repertoires, Cultural Consumption.](#) Manchester University Press.

This book analyses how racism and anti-racism affects Black British middle-class cultural consumption. In doing so, it challenges the dominant understanding of British middle-class identity and culture as being 'beyond race'. Paying attention to the relationship between cultural capital and cultural repertoires, Meghji argues that there are three modes of black middle-class identity: strategic assimilation, ethnoracial autonomous, and class-minded. Individuals within each of these identity modes use specific cultural repertoires to organise their cultural consumption. Those employing strategic assimilation draw on repertoires of code-switching and cultural equity, consuming traditional middle-class culture to maintain equality with the white middle-class in levels of cultural capital. Ethnoracial autonomous individuals draw on repertoires of 'browning' and Afro-centrism, self-selecting traditional middle-class cultural pursuits they decode as 'Eurocentric' while showing a preference for cultural forms that uplift black diasporic histories and cultures. Lastly, class-minded individuals draw on repertoires of post-racialism and de-racialisation, polarising between 'Black' and middle-class cultural forms. Black middle class Britannia examines how such individuals display an unequivocal preference for the latter, lambasting other black people who avoid middle-class culture as being culturally myopic or culturally uncultivated.
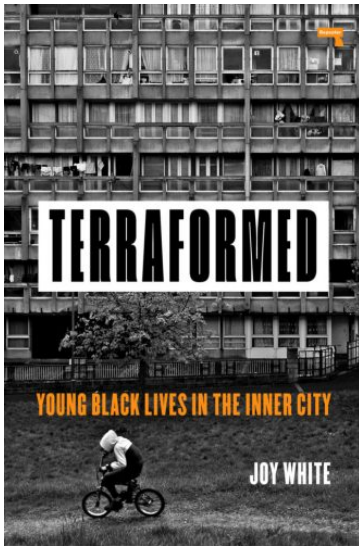
Joy White, 2020. [Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City.](#) Repeater.

In *Terraformed*, Joy White offers an insider ethnography of Forest Gate — a neighbourhood in Newham, east London — analysing how these issues affect the black youth of today. Connecting the dots between music, politics and the built environment, it centres the lived experiences of black youth who have had it all: huge student debt, invisible homelessness, custodial sentences, electronic tagging, surveillance, arrest, ASBOs, issues with health and well-being, and of course, loss.

Part ethnography, part memoir, *Terraformed* contextualises the history of Newham and considers how young black lives are affected by racism, neoliberalism and austerity.

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All reviews should be completed within two months of the receipt of the book.

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Size: 12.

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No footnotes.

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When submitting the review, do not forget to include your name, (academic) affiliation (if any), a photograph of yourself and a short bio of 2-3 sentences.

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#Failures: When things don't hold: Anthropologies of failure,

breakdown, and dysfunction

Chakad Ojani
October, 2020

The fragility of our infrastructures and modes of living seldom become as ubiquitously palpable as they have with the current COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the corona virus has fundamentally challenged taken-for-granted life rhythms, mobility patterns and forms of sociality, albeit with unevenly distributed consequences still impossible to grasp in their eventual impact. More than anything, the pandemic has suddenly foregrounded failure, breakdown, and dysfunction as conditions that have always been virtually present and looming in the backgrounds of our daily lives.

Observations of failure, breakdown and dysfunction are frequently made with reference to abstract and large-scale objects such as system, capitalism, planet, or climate. But numerous smaller-scale expressions may be found also when zooming in on the level of the mundane.

Beyond the context of the current emergency, theorists have long noted how in our contemporary condition of late capitalism, failure and crisis seem to be not only inevitable, but integral aspects of how our politico-economic system operates. As Dimitris Dalakoglou and many alongside him have observed, failure appears to be a means whereby this system reflects, revises and restarts, although without ever challenging any underlying structures (Dalakoglou 2017: xiii). Without downplaying the effects of the still unfolding pandemic, we thus extend our interests in this introduction to the fragility of how things hold together more generally (Gan and Tsing 2018).

Observations of failure, breakdown and dysfunction are frequently made with reference to abstract and large-scale objects such as system, capitalism, planet, or climate. But numerous smaller-scale expressions may be found also when zooming in on the level of the mundane.

For instance, in his foreword to *The Material Culture of Failure,* Dalakoglou observes how we are increasingly surrounded by "cheap and fragile stuff" that is

prone to fail and fall apart, and which does so "with disproportionate frequency" (2017: xiii). Likewise, Mark Fisher (2009) suggested that "capitalism is inherently dysfunctional" by drawing on observations of the dramatic rise of mental health problems. What he denotes a "mental health plague" signals how the cost of making capitalism appearing to work is higher than we may sometimes think (Fisher 2009: 19). Experiences of everyday, smaller-scale occasions of failure become interpreted as expressions of something larger and systemic, something that theorists posit as increasingly characterized by failure and dysfunction.

The idea behind this thematic thread, and the symposium that preceded it, arose out of such mundane observations. We had just returned from fieldwork in Kosovo, Georgia, and Peru. Sitting around our kitchen table in our emblematic post-industrial Manchester brick house, we were wondering what we were to do about our leaking roof, strange smells, and mice. On top of this, we had passed on an unforgiving flu to each other, which showed no signs of subsiding. We suspect that it was all these things in conjunction that directed our attention to how we had all also experienced and observed various forms of failure, breakdown, or dysfunction in our respective fields. Akin to how we complained about our new home, our interlocutors too would frequently invoke these concepts to make sense of their own conditions.

It is difficult to tell whether or not the currently omnipresent sense of failure, dysfunction, and breakdown is specific to our contemporary condition of late capitalism.

It is difficult to tell whether or not the currently omnipresent sense of failure, dysfunction, and breakdown is specific to our contemporary condition of late capitalism. Yet, alongside numerous other authors (Appadurai and Alexander 2019; Beekers and Kloos 2017; Carroll et al. 2017; Howe and Takaragawa 2017; Martínez and Laviolette 2019), we wish to interpret the ubiquity of these diagnoses as a sign of their importance for ethnographic inquiry more broadly considered. These concepts are integral aspects of how the everyday holds

together and is made sense of. Hence, we are curious about their meanings, multiplicities, and uses as descriptive and sense-making devices. We also wonder what their capacities are as heuristics for making sense of the contemporary.

Ethnographic attention to breakdown has been prominent in studies of infrastructure and technology for quite some time now. It is from here that we take much of our inspiration, but we find in this attention also trajectories that stretch back to more long-running anthropological interests. Consider, for example, how scholars have long framed social and cultural phenomena as achievements that require laborious maintenance, attention, and care. This has been the case for symbols, ideas, and subjectivities, as well as organizations, technologies, and environments. A classic example may be found in the Manchester School founder Max Gluckman's (1963) notion of rituals as mechanisms to reaffirm social order. Yet it is an interest that reaches also into contemporary inquiry into a wide array of phenomena. Not least infrastructure and technology, where holding is increasingly perceived as something that cannot be taken for granted and becomes, instead, the very thing that requires explanation. Concomitantly, this has steered ethnographic attention to situations in which such assemblages do *not* hold. Breakdown thus emerges as a fruitful object of study, as it often foregrounds otherwise hidden relations and silent work

both to the ethnographer (Star 1999) and to interlocutors (Morita 2014).

What happens when dysfunction becomes the very fabric of everyday life?

In this thematic thread, we draw inspiration from this emergent focus on breakdown but broaden its scope to encompass also failure and dysfunction as additional modalities through which holding becomes contested. By attending to these issues ethnographically in Taiwan (Breen), Tanzania (Haberland), Peru (Ojani), India (Perczel), Russia and Kyrgyzstan (Reeves), Malaysia (Rudge), and the UK (Sartori, Taylor), the contributors reveal their embeddedness in disparate and situated moral, economic, and social frameworks. Some of the overarching questions raised are: What happens when dysfunction becomes the very fabric of everyday life, and how does this impinge upon hopes and expectations? What does failure do, both as discursive category and lived experience, and how do people make sense of and deal with such conditions? How can moments of breakdown operate as productive events with unanticipated effects? In short, what happens when things don't hold?

While asking these questions, we also carefully point out that a focus on failure, breakdown and dysfunction should not by any means be understood exclusively as a call for "dark anthropology" (Ortner 2016). Rather, the following contributions demonstrate how a study of how things fail to hold can also be sustained by approaches with an open-ended or hopeful bent.

While productively orienting our attention to the integration of perpetual failure in new business models (Taylor), the way narratives of dysfunction help fashion successful business cases (Perczel), or how such discourses can be riddled with classed and racialized tropes (Sartori), these anthropologies also remain sensible to the interstitial and generative spaces engendered when things don't hold, not least by attending to how failure might yield various forms of knowledge and inventiveness. In this connection, they consider the way failure may allow one to feel God (Breen), render speculatively conceivable otherwise backgrounded relations (Ojani), and how successfully being categorized as failed can help create certain opportunities (Haberland). Failure and breakdown, they observe, can even be intrinsic to certain forms of multispecies entanglement (Rudge). Finally, we learn how everyday temporal disjunctures – "failing time" – among undocumented migrant workers can be understood within the framework of "a political economy of necessary asynchronicity" (Reeves). Importantly, an anthropology of how things do not hold allows us to explore not only the ways people envision alternative futures, but might likewise help us enact different modes of knowing. Attention to how these conditions are made sense of emically displaces our own preconceptions and bring something unexpected into view.

Should failure always and everywhere be understood in opposition to success ?

This entails several challenges. As anthropologists, we must above all ask whose failures we are talking about. That is, for whom is something a failure? We further wonder whether an anthropology of failure might be any different from an anthropology of success and, moreover, if failure should always and everywhere be understood in opposition to success in the first place? What does an anthropology of failure, breakdown and dysfunction do? Why is it important now? The contributions to this thematic thread attend to these questions in multiple ways, not least by way of example. Together they show how failure, breakdown, and dysfunction might not just serve as productive analytic categories, but many times become that to which our interlocutors steer our attention and oblige us to tell stories about.

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#Failures: Failure is a Feeling

Gareth Breen
October, 2020

We were sat upstairs in a favourite hot-pot restaurant in old Taipei, nestled in between a deep red temple and a scooter repair shop, behind a metro station. Between mouthfuls I was trying to conduct an informal interview with Brother Huang, Sister Xie and their fourteen-year old daughter Mei-lin. They are members of a global, fundamentalist church-group, founded by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972) and Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997), which rejects

the hierarchy and denominationalism of Western 'Christianity', as they understand it (Breen 2019). They refer to themselves simply as 'the church' [zhaohui] – a neologism in Chinese). I asked the family what it is that makes 'the church' special to them. Brother Huang replied that life in 'the church' is "simple" and "predictable". Sister Xie picked up the train of thought and took it along more Biblical lines.

"Jesus washed the feet of his disciples," she said, "in the same way, when we come to the meetings, we wash each other. We are not here to compare, 'my daughter is so beautiful etc.', we just share [fenxiang]". "How do you get dirty?" I asked. Sister Xie chuckled. "It's not sinful," her husband interjected. "It's not about sin," she continued, "but about contact with worldly things, like going on the metro". Mei-lin finally offered her answer, which I felt summed up what her parents were trying to get at very well. "It is just this feeling [ganjue]", she said, "when you see others going to make offerings to temple gods [qu baibai], it doesn't have this feeling". Although Mei-lin and I do not value the difference between Taiwan's temples and 'the church' in the same way, on some level I knew exactly what she meant.

> *"Jesus washed the feet of his disciples," she said, "in the same way, when we come to the meetings, we wash each other. We are not here to compare, 'my daughter is so beautiful etc.', we just share [fenxiang]".*

I want to suggest that failure is constitutive of this distinct 'feeling', perhaps a meta-feeling, which makes 'the church' what it is for many members. We will see, however, that such feelings of failure are not always easy to attain. They occur on the thresholds between 'the church' and the world beyond it. By following the slipperiness of feeling failure in 'the church', this post seeks to help feel for a notion of failure (as feeling) which would be useable beyond my fieldsite in Taipei. In the introduction to The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Do Wrong, Carroll et al. sketch out 'a theory of failure'. They state clearly what failure is and is not, and differentiate sharply between failure as an analytic device and as an

experience. "'[F]ailure' occurs", they write, "when the subject's process of inscribing themselves in the world – that is, the process of objectification – is interrupted or aborted". That is, 'failure' describes that moral moment "when objectification ceases to adhere" (2017: 26). Without undoing the theoretical work done here, this post aims to remind us that failure can be a productive even if elusive feeling, one that is not always easy to feel, but which can mark the threshold between the inside and outside of a regime of living, such as 'the church' in Taiwan. In losing the feel for failure I want to suggest, be we anthropologists or their interlocutors, we risk losing sight of the social worlds it leads into and out of. Failure can be the experience of dropping out of one world and into another.

> *For him, Jesus wasn't necessarily always the best option. … (For this reason, he was known to be much better in fact at bringing in potential new members. He was more relatable to a non-Christian and could understand better their position of non-belief.)*

Church members reiterated the idea that feelings of (being a) failure outside of the church enriched one's experience within it. I was on a bus with Sister Yan and her husband, brother Yang. We were returning to Taipei after going to visit brother Yang's ancestral home [lao jia] in a nearby township. Unlike her husband, sister Yan does not hesitate to say what she feels. She likes to switch between praising and teasing me. Right now, as we race past fluffy, dark green mountains obscured by dusty-looking boxy buildings along the highway, she is in laudatory mode. She soon switches from me to her sons. "They are too lazy", she says. Neither had attended very prestigious universities, she sighs. The younger one is "not very clever", she tells me, "but loves Jesus very much". The older one is "clever but loves Jesus much less". As the conversation lulls, we ring the younger one, living in the UK, and tell him all about the tasty treats we'd tried that day and about the dilapidated state of his ancestral home. The older one lives in Taipei. A while later I went to stay with him for a week.

Feeling failure was to feel God.

Older brother Yang understood things differently from other church members. For him, Jesus wasn't necessarily always the best option. For some problems, the temple gods, or Buddha were likely to be more useful. "Yiguan dao ['Way of Unity']", a popular Taiwanese sect, "are smart", he once whispered to me mischievously. "They worship the Buddha, Muhammed and Jesus." He admitted that for a long time he hadn't felt the same connection to Jesus as his brother had. (For this reason, he was known to be much better in fact at bringing in potential new members. He was more relatable to a non-Christian and could understand better their position of non-belief.) However, he told me of a series of events which had started to change this for him. He had spent some time at graduate school in the US. He told me that he had struggled terribly beforehand with the 'Graduate Record Examinations' (GRE) entrance test, required for admission.

'Always rejoice!' [changchang xile] is a familiar greeting and is uttered as a church equivalent to 'cheeeese!' whenever a photo is taken together.

He felt he was sure to fail. In the end, praying hard before the exam, he scored the lowest possible pass score. He saw this as a message from God. Although God wanted to help, brother Yang told me, He also wanted brother Yang to know that without God, he would surely be a total failure. The low score, for brother Yang, pointed towards a spiritual dependence that he hadn't previously been aware of. The revelation, for brother Yang, was not that God answers your prayers for worldly success (this, he said, was the approach of 'Chinese traditional religion'), but the extent to which we are failures without God. The more we realise how failed we are, brother Yang said, the more we experience the glory of God. What others may have perceived as a success (passing the GRE), brother Yang experienced as a revelation of the extent of his own "failedness" [shibai]. The contours of his failure were also the contours of God's glory. Feeling failure was to feel God.

Church meetings, members say, are all about 'enjoyment' [xiangshou]. 'Always rejoice!' [changchang xile] is a familiar greeting and is uttered as a church equivalent to 'cheeeese!' whenever a photo is taken together. The enjoyment of 'the church' is understood to consist in a transition from 'the mind' [xinsi] to 'the spirit' [ling]. This transition consists partly in the feeling of failure brother Yang spoke of. As sister Xie noted above, 'sharing' is a big part of life in 'the church'. Brother Yang's words in fact fit a familiar pattern that sharing takes. Sharings would often begin with some mishap in the speaker's life, often framed explicitly as a failure on their part, before going on to show how the failure had led them to 'return' [huidao] to Christ, making their experience of 'the church' and its ministry all the richer.

In private, many church members admit that, at times, they lose the 'enjoyment' [xiangshou] of, and their 'feeling' [ganjue] for, 'the church'. Given that the late Nee and Lee are the sole authors of 'the ministry' [shizhi] the church abides by, things can get rather repetitive. After a decade or so in the church, most aspects of the ministry have become familiar. For the church to become 'living' [huode], 'organic' [shengji], 'spontaneous' [zifa], 'new' [xin], 'fresh' [xinxian] to them, it is necessary to relive 'entering into' [jinru] the 'churchlife' [zhaouhui shenghuo], 'the spirit' [ling], 'the Body (of Christ)' [shenti] again and again. A key aspect of this experiential newness is the feeling of 'failure' [shibai] (in 'the world') being turned to 'victory' [desheng] (in the church). Feelings of failure cause one to (re-)turn to the church anew.

In private, many church members admit that, at times, they lose the 'enjoyment' [xiangshou] of, and their 'feeling' [ganjue] for, 'the church'.

It is not always necessary that the failure be directly one's own of course. Through 'sharing', one ideally experiences others' failures (in the world), and (re)turning to the church, vicariously. We can understand that the distinctive feeling of the church Mei-lin described above is composed, in part, by these feelings of 'failure' turned to 'victory' shared amongst the group. As sister Xie

noted, sharing is not about comparing successes. Rather it is about cleansing each other of feelings of failure, feelings that one must feel in the first place, to get a sense of being 'washed' [xijing]. Older brother Yang explained to me a key difference between the church and the temple religions, in which the majority of Taiwanese religionists engage. When the latter prayed, he said, they expected the gods to take care of everything. In the church however, it was acknowledged that God takes over only at that point where our own capacities are expended. "We must try at first", he said, and "where we fail, God will take over".

At times church members became mildly exasperated with me for failing to fail, for failing to feel their failures. We were on a long trip around Taiwan following a church conference held at Taipei arena, where there were over thirty-thousand church members. From the TV there blared out a church documentary on repeat, about the life of Howard Hagashi, a beloved church hymn-writer from Hawaii, with Japanese-Buddhist ancestry. I was on a coach full of non-Taiwanese members, at the back, sitting with Jerome, from South Africa, who had a remarkable life-story, a story that would have been familiar to many students of Christian communities. He had a scar across his face from an encounter with a knife as a gang member. He had owned and run a brothel and spent a good deal of time in prison. He was divorced. As the hours of our engrossing conversation ran on, the depths of his failures, as he saw them retrospectively, grew ever more extensive.

We were interrupted by our arrival at a tour stop. We were at an insect farm and were given a little talk alongside our tour around the farm. Afterwards I was perusing the museum section, peering into a glass case containing a miniature model of an ant colony. Jerome came up to me. "So, what do you think?" he asked. "Pretty amazing, right? If God can change me, he can change anyone." I admitted that his life-story was amazing and that it was a remarkable change he had undergone. My answers weren't satisfying to him, however. He was clearly annoyed that his story hadn't been strong enough to transform me too. As fascinated as I was, our conversation hadn't changed me, hadn't made me want to join the church. I wanted to please him but couldn't emulate the feelings he

wanted from me. He left me, I felt, disappointed.

At times church members became mildly exasperated with me for failing to fail, for failing to feel their failures.

Wandering outside, I went to sit with a church elder who was enjoying a free cup of coffee included in the tour. I told him that I felt I had disappointed Jerome in not being transformed by his story, in the way that he had expected me to be. The elder looked at me and confessed that for him Jerome's story was "not normal". Most church members had not had dramatic lives like Jerome. In fact, he thought that Jerome's experience could be detrimental. Our failures are not meant to make us more attached to our own life story, he suggested, they are supposed to turn us away from ourselves toward 'the church', 'God's plan', the 'brothers and sisters'. It seemed that the feelings of failure, which leveraged members' renewed enjoyments of 'the church', weren't just any kind of failure. There was a right way to fail. Both I and Jerome, for this church brother, were failing to fail. Failure comes in many forms; it lies in many places and it is not always there when you need it.

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Featured image by S. Hermann & F. Richter (Courtesy of Pixabay).

Clouds of Failure

A.R.E. Taylor
October, 2020

Anticipating the failure of digital devices has become part of the fabric of everyday life in the digital world. With their fragile components and ever-shortening lifespans, digital technologies increasingly require their users to take preparatory action if they want to avoid losing their digital photos, files and other precious data when device failure should arise. Programs like Apple's Time Machine or Windows' Backup and Restore make it easy for users to back-up their

computers onto external hard drives. These programs regularly prompt users with push notifications if a back-up is overdue, reminding them that device failure and data loss can occur at any moment, for which they must be prepared.

The cloud is an infrastructure that is made through and for technological failure.

Increasingly, more and more users are now turning to various cloud storage solutions to back-up their files online. Dropbox, Google Drive, Apple's iCloud and Microsoft's OneDrive promise users quick, easy, secure and supposedly infinite data storage, for a monthly subscription fee. Backing-up into the cloud has the advantage of providing users with a centralised online data storage space from which they can access and synchronise their files across their devices. No matter what should happen to a device, cloud providers promise users that their digital data will remain safe, accessible and ready to be quickly re-installed on another system as and when failure arises.

Beyond Device Failure

Obsolete or broken devices have surfaced as valuable entry-points for exploring the unethical and unsustainable operating logics of a technology industry that capitalises on the failure of digital commodities (Parks 2007; LeBel 2012; Gabrys 2013). A focus on cloud storage provides an opening onto another side of this economy of techno-failure, directing analytical attention towards the profit that can be extracted from user *anticipations* of device failure. Such a focus expands the temporal horizons of discard studies, which often addresses the afterlives of digital devices.

For the past several years, I have conducted field research in the 'cloud',

spending time with data centre providers and IT disaster recovery vendors. I've been exploring how, since the mid-twentieth century, the prospect of digital data loss has energised an ever-expanding industry of data recovery, back-up and salvage services. In the process, I've followed the extensive infrastructure, energy and human labour involved in keeping cloud services up and running.

A focus on cloud storage provides an opening onto another side of this economy of techno-failure, directing analytical attention towards the profit that can be extracted from user anticipations of device failure.

As I have highlighted elsewhere, while a flourishing body of literature is now exploring the new forms of data-based and virtualised labour enabled by cloud platforms, the labour of those tasked with maintaining and servicing the infrastructure that underpins cloud capitalism itself has been critically overlooked. Shadowing the work of cloud professionals, including security guards, disaster recovery managers, IT technicians and data centre operators, my research intersects with a growing body of scholarship that focuses on maintenance, repair and failure (Star 1999; Graham and Thrift 2007; Harvey et al. 2013; Carroll 2017; Russell and Vinsel 2018; Mattern 2018).

Failover

The cloud is an infrastructure that is made through and for technological failure. At its most basic, cloud computing describes a form of 'online' data storage. Rather than storing data locally on the hard drives of personal computers, the cloud enables users to store files on servers in data centres that are accessed remotely 'as a service' through the internet. Providing a data storage site safely removed from the local storage of the device, cloud providers strive to ensure that

device failure doesn't result in data loss.

This promise is primarily achieved through the construction of multiple, often globally-distributed data centres. If for any reason the primary data centre should experience an outage due to local-level disaster, it will automatically switch (or, in data centre parlance, 'failover') to the back-up data centre(s), which is ideally located outside the disaster region. Guided by logics of preparedness, the end result of this extensive failover infrastructure is 'a massively-distributed geography of back-up and repair spread across the world' (Graham 2013: 30).

The ultimate goal is to produce a 'world without events' for cloud clients – that is, a world in which device malfunction, obsolescence, thefts, or upgrades barely register as disruptions.

By choreographing and connecting an expanding network of data centres, cloud providers aim to ensure that, when clients' devices or IT systems fail, their data can be instantly retrieved and re-downloaded without delay, minimising any disruption that failure would otherwise generate. The ultimate goal is to produce a 'world without events' (Masco 2014: 31) for cloud clients – that is, a world in which device malfunction, obsolescence, thefts, or upgrades barely register as disruptions. By rendering client data continuously available across devices that continuously fail, cloud providers strive to smooth out and absorb the disruptive impact of device failure. This has implications for how we think about and theorise failure in relation to digital technologies.

The Failure of Failure?

It has long been a commonplace in analyses of human-machine relations that the failure of technological objects, systems or tools is a disruptive event. Stemming from Heidegger's philosophy of technology, it has been widely theorised that, in

their moments of malfunction, technologies shift status from being almost-invisible tools that facilitated work into stubborn and unruly objects that disrupt routines or habits (Verbeek 2004: 79). If technology is designed to disappear, then, upon breakdown, it forcefully reappears. This moment of reappearance via breakdown has been of great interest to social theorists because it provides an opening onto complex and fragile relations between people, technologies and the industries that design and provision them – relations that are concealed or go unnoticed when the object is working smoothly. From this perspective, failure, malfunction and breakdown present valuable analytical opportunities precisely because they are understood as exceptional, disruptive and revelatory instances rather than normal operating states, through which we can therefore learn something new about our world.

> *If technology is designed to disappear, then, upon breakdown, it forcefully reappears.*

But what happens when failure becomes the norm? What happens when failure 'fails' to disrupt, to produce knowledge or to register as an 'event'? Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander (2020: 120) have recently suggested that digital tools and pre-digital tools carry different epistemic potential when they fail. '[I]s not the failure of the smartphone simply the failure of the iron hammer as the wooden handle breaks?', they ask. They answer this question in the negative, arguing that the regularity with which digital technologies freeze, crash and break narrows the epistemic horizons of their failure. '[O]ur technological failures', they suggest (ibid.), 'do not teach us something new about our world; their repeated breakdowns do nothing more than further obstruct the underlying logic and hidden infrastructures that sustain them'. With digital devices, they posit, the relation between failure and knowledge production begins to break down.

If, for Appadurai and Alexander, it is the *regularity* of device breakdown that renders failure ordinary rather than revelatory, the cloud further obfuscates and

limits the subversive capacity of failure by rendering device loss or malfunction as non-disruptive as possible. With the cloud's promise to ensure users' files are safe and ready and waiting to be swiftly accessed, downloaded and re-installed on their next device, this infrastructure works to absorb the disruptive or traumatic impact of data loss that might otherwise accompany device malfunction. As such, the cloud is a key mechanism through which the ordinary crises of device failure (Chun 2016) are transformed from shocking or rupturing events into permissible and (relatively) non-disruptive and non-revelatory events.

At the same time, the 'world-disclosing properties of breakdown' (Jackson 2014: 230), have not entirely been sealed off by the cloud. While the cloud may strive to render device failure as painless, uneventful and forgettable as possible, it also produces new opportunities for disruption. Users can get locked out of their files if their accounts are hacked or if they don't have internet connectivity. Data could be lost as a result of unanticipated server downtime. The proliferating [excess](#) of cloud infrastructure also increases the potential for cascading, global-scale failures, as testified by data centre failures involving organisations like [British Airways](#).

Maintaining Failure

Underpinning the growing adoption of cloud-based back-up solutions is an awareness and anticipation of the anytime-anywhere potential of digital devices to crash or break, potentially taking the files, photos and other data they contain with them (Schüll 2018). While devices are largely replaceable, the data stored on them is not.

> *Smartphones, tablets and laptops may come to simply serve as tools with which technology companies can lock users into their cloud service, converting time-limited device-customers into lifelong cloud-customers.*

Purporting to separate data from the fragile materiality of digital devices (by duplicating it on equally fragile servers in data centres), cloud providers thus promise their clients a form of transcendental and perpetual data storage that will last into the future. Different scales of digital time are at work here. While laptops, tablets, smartphones and other digital commodities are defined by their rapid and engineered obsolescence, the cloud offers a longer-term temporality that transcends the lifespan of the device. For technology behemoths like Microsoft, Apple and Google, cloud storage is a key strategic tool [in the long game for revenue growth](). As users generate increasingly large volumes of born-digital data through their devices, their cloud storage needs for these ever-accumulating personal digital archives will continue to grow over their lifetimes, as will the cost of their cloud subscription fees. While a few gigabytes of introductory cloud storage space are often provided for free, the monthly subscription costs for additional storage can quickly become expensive. At the time of writing this article there is no bank-like 'switching service' that enables users to quickly and easily move their data between cloud providers who may offer better rates. Given the difficulty involved in transferring large amounts of data from one cloud storage space to another, smartphones, tablets and laptops may come to simply serve (if they are not already) as tools with which technology companies can lock users into their cloud service, converting time-limited device-customers into lifelong cloud-customers.

By making it quick and easy for users to simply re-download their data to a new device, rather than change the sociotechnical and economic conditions that culminate in recurrent device failure in the first place, the cloud props up and supports the continuity of a techno-economic system based on continuous device failure and perpetual upgrading. This is not simply the work 'of maintaining media artifacts, systems, and technologies' (Jackson 2014: 231) but the work of maintaining the failure of these technologies; the work of rendering their failure permissible by ensuring that their most valuable element – the data they contain – is not lost with them. It is the work of extracting further value from futures of failure beyond profits derived from design logics of engineered obsolescence or

marketing strategies based on encouraging conspicuous technological consumption. When failure becomes regular and intentional ('engineered', 'designed' or 'planned') it requires labour and infrastructure to render it tolerable. The cloud and the device must thus be seen as two parts of a recursive and self-perpetuating techno-economic cycle of data preparedness and technological failure. The failure of technology becomes something to be managed rather than avoided, a techno-precarity (Precarity Lab 2020) that we must learn to live with if we don't want to lose our data.

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Narratives of dysfunction and success stories in e-waste recycling in India

Julia Perczel
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There is a growing consensus that India is going through a waste crisis, and this awareness unfolds parallel to an increasing awareness of the beyond-human time it takes for plastics to disappear. It is striking that narratives of problems with waste, across different genres, often return to the same figures and figures of speech, the same heaps of numbers and piles of rubbish to give emphasis to the

gravity of the affair. These elements reappear as ever more solidifying narratives, the repetitive patterns chalking out narratives of dysfunction that represent the waste crisis. Here I interrogate how such elements, figures of speech from earlier narratives of dysfunctional e-waste management, highlighting the threat of e-waste to the environment, are retooled into stories of success by private business. I do that through the story of a Producers' Responsibility Organisation (PRO), a Delhi-based start-up I call Sahih Kaam (pseudonym to protect anonymity, meaning right or proper work in Hindi) that I worked closely with during fieldwork. I explore the powerful and influential tropes and imaginaries in action, put into practice by private companies in the pursuit of environmental and social change.

Narratives of problems with waste, across genres, often return to the same figures and figures of speech, the same heaps of numbers and piles of rubbish to give emphasis to the gravity of the affair.

The example of Sahih Kaam is revealing of a wider, but underexplored, trend of private sector solutions in a sphere where advocacy groups and their campaigns dominated until recently. The strength of the example lies in the extraordinary efforts by Sahih Kaam to groom action and processes to the high standards laid down by advocates of environmental justice, whereby we can begin to understand what it might mean to implement industrial processes in alignment with environmental criticism.

The narrative of dysfunction

Stories, along with myths and legends, have been important to anthropologists for long. Myths were what revealed the structure of a society for Levi-Strauss, but stories are also studied for the way in which they give a sense of agency to the storyteller over their fate (Jackson 2002). Unlike narratives of crisis (Seeger and Sellnow 2016), narratives of dysfunctional waste management are cultivated over a long period of time to highlight what may not be so readily apparent – the

damage done by human intervention. Yet, they similarly open up a space of action (Roitman 2013) while determining the parameters and modes of that action. My aim here is to understand how stories of success about solving the issue of e-waste by private capital are told through the tropes and figures provided by earlier narratives of dysfunction told by environmental advocacy groups. More than that, I am interested in how these stories are told and retold from different subjective positions, and acquire slightly different meanings with every retelling (Maggio citing Boyd 2014).

The corpus of literature developed a vocabulary and imagery that included a visual language of women and children to emphasise the vulnerability of workers.

From the early 2000s, reports started appearing internationally of the toxic substances that would be released into air, water and soil when e-waste was not handled properly. The main concerns in these early reports was the lack of recycling in high consumption countries such as the US, with discards ending up in landfills or shipped to Asia, including India, to countries with lax or non-existent regulations and a large reserve of cheap labour with preponderance to inappropriate dismantling operations. In particular, incineration, open burning and other salvage techniques used in backyard operations were highlighted for their extremely high cost to the environment and the health of workers, often portrayed as victims. The corpus of literature, primarily available on the internet, developed a vocabulary and imagery that was then replicated over and over again in the following decades, including a visual language of women and children to emphasise the vulnerability of workers. The women in the images are usually depicted in the squalor that is now familiar from popular characterisations of urban mining.

The Delhi-based Toxics Link that helped e-waste become a global issue, as part of their campaign, had prepared, together with GIZ, the German development agency, a document detailing the requirements for a responsible e-waste

recycling. The same document got accepted by government in a not significantly modified form. This is how the law enshrined Extended Producer's Responsibility, or EPR, what a critical non-governmental group through research found to be an effective policy measure to manage e-waste. The first legislation was passed in 2011 and the second, the E-waste (Management) Rules of 2016, came into effect in 2017. EPR is most often talked about as a system in which producers are made to take responsibility for the entire lifecycle of the products that they make or sell. In the Indian context, this means that producers are bound by law to collect and responsibly dispose of a progressively increasing percentage of their items, calculated from previous years' sales data to have become obsolete in a given year. Or, companies specialised in fulfilling EPR obligations, called Producers' Responsibility Organisations, can step in to carry out collective responsibility. The number of PROs had proliferated in recent years, of which Sahih Kaam is one.

Commercial e-waste solutions and an economic rationality became privileged in a way that even surprised those who had brought it about.

While rooted in the critique of government and producers for reneging on their responsibility, the EPR framework gave legal parameters for the space of action opened up by the narratives of e-waste crisis, which incentivised private businesses. In this space, commercial e-waste solutions and an economic rationality became privileged in a way that even surprised those who had brought it about. When interviewing Mr Sinha, assistant director of Toxics Links, he responded emphatically when I asked him whether he had an idea about how the discussion shifted from an environmental concern to that of a business case. "This is something that I also don't understand, this has become a business thing only. Now, I also find that many meetings that I go to, […] I don't hear anything about the environment. Sometimes I get lost as to where am I sitting?!" Yet, in tacit acknowledgement of the shift in the narrative, he then slipped into detail about how to raise the money to dispose of e-waste properly the consumer had to pay. And if the consumer cannot be made to pay, the money would have to be raised in other ways, and that is why EPR became an important policy tool to the industry.

The Success Story as Business Case

Nothing demonstrates this better than the event organised to celebrate the cooperation between the PRO Sahih Kaam and its international investment organisation partner to showcase the viability of business in e-waste. When Sahih Kaam and its international partner, the investment arm of a major international development organisation, closed their year-long partnership, they threw an event. It was held on the top floor venue of a New Delhi downtown five-star hotel and the intention was to demonstrate the great investment potential in e-waste, and Sahih Kaam was the proof for this.

It was a carefully crafted event, where the dangers of e-waste to Earth and its population were demonstrated by a street play enacted by school children from Sahih Kaam's school programme for awareness. The "civil society" opinion was represented by Mr Sinha, who chastised government inaction and failure to define the role of the informal sector waste dealers in the Rules. "The industry" was represented by Coca Cola, though "not from an e-waste but a plastics perspective," and the industry duly took the opportunity to complain of the government's blanket ban on plastics effectively making it impossible to sell their products. The man called the "father of EPR" was also present to explain why he chose the word responsibility when giving a name to the policy tool he invented. In addition, he also warned that the implementation of EPR required a smart and vigilant government. The government took the international investment organisation by its word and extolled the success of the private sector in solving the e-waste crisis. The founder of Sahih Kaam took to the podium to thank his staff for their incredible achievement within a very short period of time and highlighted that much that remains to be achieved, as much for his company as for "the industry" and the government.

Salvage economies are growing out of the possibilities provided by disaster capitalism – the waste crisis of yesterday is now a business opportunity.

As the international investment organisation's turn came to demonstrate the success of the partnership, Vivek, the presenter pulled up a graph representing the growth and volumes of materials collected and disposed of in a responsible manner with certified registered recyclers. Against the solid magenta zigzag, the smiling face of a rural woman in black and white filled the background. The woman, Vivek said, is Suman Bai who made a shift from a solid waste worker to an e-waste collector. This, according to an online news article, brought her self-esteem and enough money to support her six children. The slide then showed the two things Sahih Kaam is most proud about: they had reached their yearly targets in collections, but they also did so by roping in informal sector workers and giving them a source of livelihood. They diverted a significant amount of toxic material from landfills and inappropriate processing, therefore protecting environment and human health.

The slide is also illustrative of how Sahih Kaam used the elements of the e-waste crisis discourse to build into their own self-presentation. The representation drew from the aesthetic language that developed as illustration to documents of advocacy and reportage, demonstrating the plight of e-waste workers through images of women and children working in less than sanitary conditions. However, instead of showing Suman Bai sitting in metallic squalor, on the slide of Sahih Kaam, she smiles a beatific smile at the growing amounts of e-waste collected and disposed of in the right way. She represents the human face of Sahih Kaam's progress even if a significant amount of the company's e-waste came from a small number of mid-level e-waste traders, called aggregators, who were almost all entirely male and not waste pickers themselves. Even if recruiting aggregators and establishing channels for e-waste recycling was no less of an accomplishment – no less a matter of pride and the subject of demonstrative metrics for the company – it was perhaps less picture-worthy in the context of the image narratives that now define the e-waste story.

The event was eventually a success, even if Piyush, one of Sahih Kaam's staff commented, "they are talking like silent killers, nobody wants to take responsibility, it is an open cold war." He was pointing out how despite appearing

to be in total agreement, the different stakeholders at the event seemed to keep gently pushing responsibility around, which they, as employees of the a successful business, knew to make work extremely hard.

Conclusion

This post started with the question of the role of narratives of dysfunction in the fashioning of successful business cases. These stories are evocative of the way in which salvage economies are growing out of the possibilities provided by disaster capitalism – the waste crisis of yesterday is now a business opportunity. Thus, salvage economies are no longer in the domain of the informal, backyard operations, so derided in early environmental reports, they are also gaining ground among start-ups and companies founded and funded by India's richest. The stories that they weave, using the elements environmental narratives fashioned by advocacy groups for protecting the environment, are instrumental in legitimising companies such as Sahih Kaam. As successful business cases are demonstrated, they shift the narrative focus from environmental protection to profit making. However, I wonder whether such stories also point to something more: even as they build on narratives of environmental crisis, they narrate a vision of utopia to contain the frictions – between prioritising livelihoods or human health and the environment – in the looming sustainability crisis.

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Images:

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Atmospheric Failure

Chakad Ojani
October, 2020

Fog catchers (*atrapanieblas*) are fairly simple constructions. They consist of large plastic or nylon nets stretched between two vertically positioned poles, perpendicular to the direction of the incoming, airborne extension of the ocean, fog. As coastal winds push ground touching clouds toward the net, the air's capacity to hold water droplets apart and afloat is lowered. Some of the droplets are trapped and gradually trickle down into a slightly inclined gutter that runs horizontally below the lower edge of the mesh, from where the water is then led

through a pipe and into a storage tank, sometimes adding up to surprisingly large volumes.

Along the South American Pacific coast, fog catchers have been experimented with at least since the 1980s. In Peru, early experiments were undertaken by scientists interested in using fog as a water source for fog oasis reforestation. Subsequent initiatives have been undertaken also in the hills around the capital, but often to altogether different ends. Initiated by NGOs and civil society associations, these later installations have set out to capture and transform fog into water for settlements (*asentamientos humanos*) not yet reached by the city's water infrastructure grid. Accordingly, fog catchers have been understood by some as potential micro-infrastructures able to respond to the absence of more capital-intensive and large-scale water infrastructure supply. However, apart from material remnants and eye-catching videos and newspaper articles, what remains of many such fog capture initiatives is mere disappointment. The grip on the atmosphere afforded by these material assemblages is fleeting, and fog tends to slip into ephemerality again.

I had spent the past month with an NGO known for installing fog catchers in settlements around Lima, and I was interested in learning more about one of their projects, images of which had circulated widely in both national and international media. To my dismay, little of the project remained.

> *The grip on the atmosphere afforded by these material assemblages is fleeting, and fog tends to slip into ephemerality again.*

The mesh must be taken down and protected from the sun each summer, and only a fraction had been put back up again. In addition, I would encounter parts of the fog catchers disassembled and integrated into various auto-construction projects; gutters were attached onto houses, the mesh was used for shading, and the wooden poles had been cut down and repurposed for fences. While my plan to study this system in action seemed thwarted, I was lucky enough to befriend Alejandro and his mother, Rosa, both of whom lived in the area and had much to

tell me about the fog catchers.

They recounted how, given the lack of water in their settlement, the NGO's proposal to provide an off-grid alternative a few years earlier had been gladly received. A few smaller, demonstrative fog catchers substantiated the possibility to trap and transform fog into water in significant volumes, and the NGO director had eventually found some funding. The aim was to expand the number of fog catchers and provide water for multiple uses, including consumption. While Rosa and Alejandro sometimes spoke smilingly about those days, they also expressed deep disappointment. Alejandro called the project a failure (*fracaso*). It had not met his expectations, and he felt betrayed by the NGO director. Not only did the larger fog catchers fail to produce the volumes of water that had initially been promised, but, in addition, the water was laced with all sorts of heavy metals. In the end, the fog catchers never became a viable alternative to the water trucks they are currently reliant on.

In addition, the water was laced with all sorts of heavy metals.

"A promise is a cloud"

Sandra is a Lima-based artist who had been working with the NGO, Rosa, and Alejandro, as well as some of the other residents around the period of the project's implementation. Over a coffee, she tells me how she had long been interested in working with fog but never knew how. Fog, she says, is ephemeral and elusive. Unlike the materials that she is used to work with, it cannot be folded or cut. Hence it was only when she learned about the fog catchers that Sandra understood how to engage this "very immaterial material," as she put it to me. The fog catchers offered a way of rendering fog tangible.

Artist: Sandra Nakamura. Photographer: Eduardo Hirose.

Her installation consisted of 19 letter-shaped fog catchers. Situated in a row above Alejandro's settlement, they formed the text "a promise is a cloud" (*una promesa es una nube*), which Sandra had borrowed from an Arabic proverb. To her, the text expresses the condition of many hill-dwellers around the city. She explains to me that the context from which the proverb had been taken is characterised by aridity. This is the case also in Lima, known as the second largest city in the world built on a desert. At the same time, the refrain gains an additional layer of meaning here, because "we have a constant cloud during the second half of the year, which very rarely produces any rain." What is more, "the people who are most affected by water scarcity in the city are in majority migrants from other parts of the country, who have come to Lima in search of the promise of fulfilment that the city offers them. But akin to the rain [promised by

the cloud], this promise seldom reaches concretisation."

Sandra further hoped that the NGO-implemented project would help decrease residents' reliance on water trucks, often criticized by residents for charging expensively and providing water of dubious quality. However, once she returned a few months later to document her installation, Sandra would notice how the mesh had blackened from capturing airborne pollution. Like Rosa and Alejandro, she realized that the water was in no way suitable for potabilization. If she had successfully engaged this otherwise elusive "immaterial material" by rendering ground touching clouds tangible, then maintaining them in this form proved challenging.

The promises that the NGO had made about fog as material possibility had failed to concretise, not unlike the unmet "promises of fulfilment" that Sandra referred to with the refrain. Hence, as I was listening to her, it occurred to me that the fog catchers had themselves become something of a metonym for the very condition that she had intended for her installation to comment on. The NGO-implemented project that Alejandro described as a failure, when interpreted alongside Sandra's refrain, *presented* what she intended for her installation to merely allude to representationally. The ground-touching atmospheric phenomenon that the unfulfilled promises of the city had guided the family to, had itself turned out to be a disappointment, thus rendering the blackened mesh of the art installation a material enactment of its own symbolic content.

Desirable and undesirable relations

I am tempted to describe this encounter with the blackened fog catchers as the result of an intervention into the atmosphere that had rendered visible some of its otherwise withdrawn and inconspicuous qualities (Willems 2017). By obstructing fog's flow, the mesh had translated aspects of the atmosphere into another spatiotemporal scale, whereby airborne particles had become gathered for

Alejandro and Sandra to perceive more directly. In other words, this was a sudden exposure of otherwise hidden relations between fog and airborne particles. In addition to the lack of sufficient water, it was this exposure of qualities that fog was not expected to have that impelled Alejandro to conceive of the initiative as a failure.

The project's failure had oriented his attention to the state and how NGOs often take advantage of the former's absence and inefficiency.

As I kept listening to him, I noticed how Alejandro often shifted between the scale of the project and the scale of the city and Peru more broadly. The project's failure had oriented his attention to the state and how NGOs often take advantage of the former's absence and inefficiency. What Alejandro was talking about was a lack of relations, which was a problem of opposite nature to that which had first led him to think of the project in terms of failure. Whereas the blackened mesh spoke of an excess of undesirable relations between airborne particles and fog, what he was concerned with here was the lack of a series of relations that he thought should be in place.

There are many things that the state demands from you, Alejandro explains to me. There are many things that one is not allowed to do, "because they contradict the Peruvian law." Likewise, he says that there needs to exist a legal framework for using fog catchers. He is disappointed about the lack of legal criteria for fog-water treatment, and how the NGO could go on with their initiative unobstructed, without facing repercussions. Yet, the relations he deemed desirable went beyond those to the state. They entailed also what he called a "social framework that should be in place, before and after a project." He complains that there was not a good enough contact between the NGO and the population, and he explains that this was another reason why the project became unsustainable. The excess of undesirable relations between aerosols which had suddenly been brought into view helped orienting Alejandro's attention to a series of relations that he considered to be absent or insufficiently thick.

Failure's location

It was indeed the fog catchers' failure to live up to his expectations that had oriented his attention to a series of absent relations to the state as well as to the NGO. Even so, Alejandro blamed not the fog catchers themselves, for the relational dynamics that the failure had foregrounded spoke of things that stretched well beyond them as material assemblages with clearly defined boundaries.

> *Rather than having a clearly defined location, the failure had become distributed, relational and, indeed, atmospheric.*

This invites a distinction between what Carroll, Jeevendrampillai and Parkhurst call the "materiality of failure" and "material failure" (Carroll et al. 2017: 5). By invoking these terms, they refer not to the more common way of mapping the materiality-materials duality onto a more general separation between representation and world (Ingold 2007). What they have in mind is instead an idea about a given failure's point of origin and/or reach. That is, the authors distinguish between "some *thing* that goes wrong," and situations in which failure "does not rest on, or in, the material thing" itself, but rather in the context around it (Carroll et al. 2017: 5-6, emphasis in original). Whereas the former is described as a material failure, the latter suggests the *materiality* of failure, which also seemed to be what the project's failure had brought to Alejandro's attention.

Fallen fog catchers in the Atiquipa fog oasis ecosystem. Photo by the author.

What he described as a failure spoke of a series of relations that stretched far beyond the fog catchers themselves, and which needed to become differently configured for fog capture to successfully happen. Rather than having a clearly defined location, the failure had become distributed, relational and, indeed, atmospheric. If failure can be said to be a momentary event, a "moment of breakage between the reality of the present and the anticipated future" (Carroll et al. 2017: 2), then it is also something that may become undone as such by taking on a relational and spatiotemporally distributed form. For Alejandro, a failure to hold airborne water droplets together incentivised him to speculatively envisage the reconfiguration of relations that stretched well beyond the moment and location of the given material failure itself.

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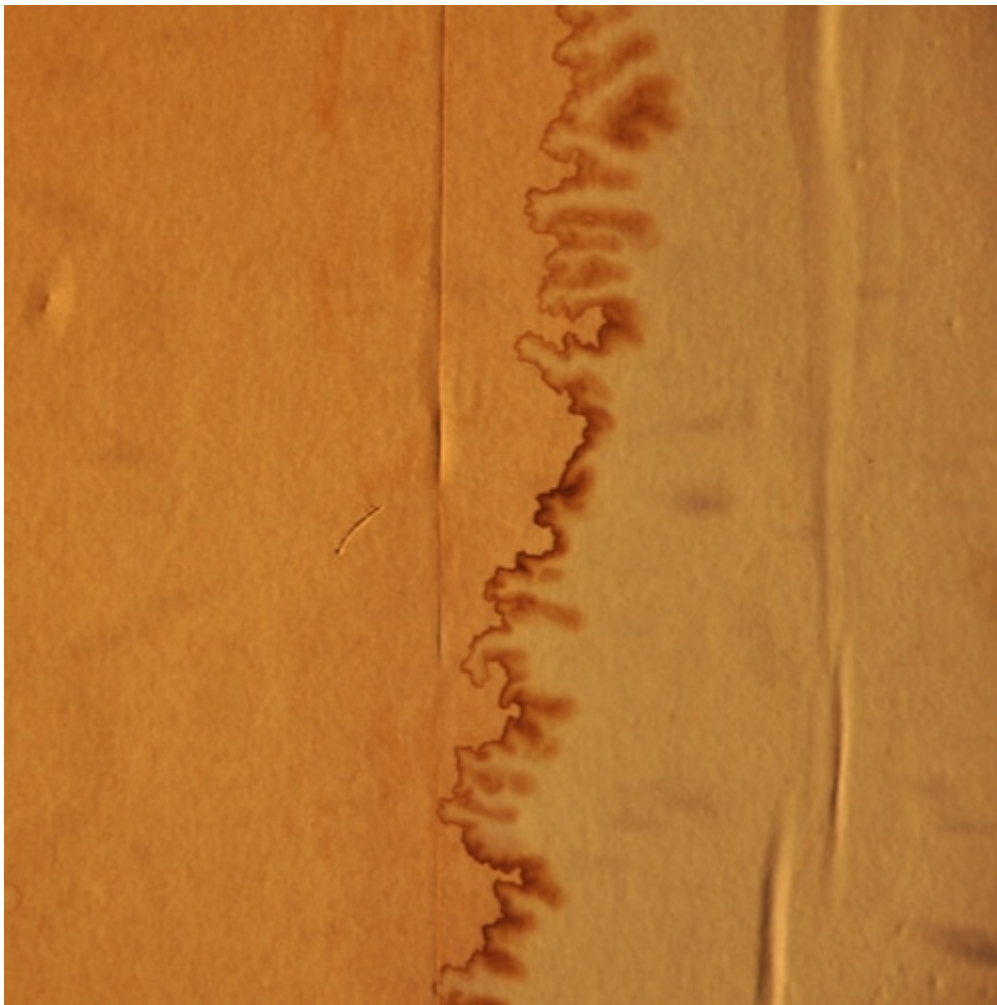Ingold, Tim. 2007. "Materials Against Materiality." Archaeological Dialogues 14 (1): 1-16.

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Featured Image

Fog catchers in Lima. Photo by the author.

Water #Failures and Social Housing

Caterina Sartori
October, 2020

Public and media discourses about housing estates are replete with highly problematic narratives of failure, riddled with classed and racialised tropes that cast estates, and especially modernist high-rise housing estates, as "failed buildings inhabited by failing people" (Campkin 2013). Such narratives are at the basis of arguments to demolish these buildings, a phenomenon that is widespread across London and Britain and which more often than not results in the displacement of working-class communities that inhabit them (Lees *et al.,* 2008, Slater 2009). It is my aim to recast such narratives and develop an ethnographically informed understanding of what failure is from the point of view of residents who live on a modernist housing estate in south London where for the last five years I have been researching the politics of urban regeneration, gentrification and demolition of social housing.

Stories and experiences about the failures of the water infrastructure litterally inundated me throughout my research.

Running through my research are stories and experiences about the failures of the water infrastructure: I was literally inundated by them. Observing how my neighbours and friends are engaged in a daily ongoing collective work of cajoling, encouraging, pushing and forcing the local authority to maintain a dry, warm and clean physical environment in and around their homes, whilst also witnessing the failure of the institutions to maintain a functioning water infrastructure, encouraged me to put water centrestage. Whilst residents have little control over how their water infrastructure is maintained, they assert their agency and influence on a daily basis, with mixed outomes.

Infrastructural approaches

The anthropological literature on infrastructure (e.g. Larkin 2013) teaches us that infrastructures are steeped in political and social dynamics and do not exist outside of them– an ethnographic look at water infrastructures provides me then with a critical lens with which to tackle these two notions, 'housing estates' and 'failure', and locate them historically and politically.

A further reason why water infrastructures are a useful tool for this project is because they speak of the past, present and future of the estate: they were central to the architectural concept of the estate when it was built; they are central to the lived experience of those residing on the site and relying on those infrastructures in their daily life; and they are also central in the narratives around the estate's demolition. A close look at this particular infrastructure therefore affords an insight into the arch of emergence and demise of modernist housing estates: a historical trajectory that links the drive of the State to provide quality council housing to working-class Londoners, to the withdrawal of that responsibility through the privatisation of housing provision and public land. In

the telling of this history through water, I move away from an idea of council estates as failing spaces home to failing people, to a historicised view of institutional neglect and managed decline; and of the practices inbued with agency of dwelling within neglect.

A bit of background

The estate where I conducted my research was built in the 1960s-70s to house about 7000 people. It is constructed in a modernist style, founded on principles of functionalism, the use of exposed raw concrete and a preference for system-building. Central to architectural modernism's concern are principles of flow, connection and social cohesion. At its heart was a drive to construct functional and inexpensive buildings for housing large sectors of the population. Today, most of the residents on the estate where I work continue to be social housing tenants, and a minority are private owners who bought their flats at a discount thanks to the 'Right to Buy' government scheme. It was a matter of fact that at the time of building, the estate would be fitted with all modern mod-cons, including running water, sanitation and heating: the new housing estates were to be modern and healthy buildings, as opposed to the Victorian tenements and terraces they were replacing, which were described in a 1973 documentary film as a "higgeldy piggeldy mess of deplorable little houses", "mean little streets crammed full of houses", and families living in "murky drafts", enveloped in smoke and bad smells. The architectural features of the modern buildings represented a revolution in lifestyle that projected the urban working-class into the future, into a new era of salubriousness and comfort.

In the decades after its construction, the estate was structurally neglected (…) and the narrative of failure came to encompass buildings and people alike.

Almost since it was built, the estate was however described as a failed building in the architectural and general press: an architectural, urban planning failure

based on a distorted modernist vision, doomed to fail as a social experiment of community building and provision of inexpensive housing for working-class Londoners. In the decades after its construction, the estate was structurally neglected, subject to chronic underinvestment and a practice of managed decline, and the narrative of failure came to encompass buildings and people alike. This history is not particular to the estate I research in. The decision to regenerate the estate in the late 90s is also not particular to this building complex, as is the 2005 decision to demolish the buildings entirely rather than refurbish them, as previously planned. Since 2005, therefore, the estate has been under a 'demolition' regime, with works progressing very slowly. The general feeling among residents is that the estate has been in urgent need of care and repair for decades, but that the proposed plans will not benefit the current residents, who will be displaced by the project. The local authority agrees on the state of disrepair of the buildings, and argues that they have reached the end of their lifespan – they are beyond repair and they should be demolished. Beyond the debates about responsibility and blame, are the lived experiences of those who experience living within disrepair on a daily basis.

Water, interrupted

I used to visit my neighbourgh Victoria often, but one particulat visit is vivid in my memory: it was a cold winter's afternoon, and as I entered her welcoming and homely living room, she hugged me and we started catching up on what had been happening over the last few months while I had been away. I asked her about the state of the heating and the hot water – had they been cutting out regularly, like the previous winters when I lived nextdoor to her, or had there been an improvement? Victoria rolled her eyes, reassured me nothing had changed and went on to recount about one particularly distressing January evening that she spent huddled under a blanket on her couch, wearing a hat, scarf and two pairs of trousers, the heating off once again, thinking about "how the council want to take our homes away from us", and despairing about the next steps in her life. She is normally a cheerful and optimistic woman, and it was painful to see her so

despondent. The lack of heat becomes more than a temporary physical sensation, however uncomfortable: it is an existential threat that encompasses the very idea of dwelling and living emplaced in a flat or a building, in a neighbourhood and a community (Fennel, 2015).

The breakdown of the water and heating systems becomes a dehumanising experience that increases the sense of insecurity and precariousness as the shadow of demolition darkens.

When I started my research it quickly became clear that water management was and remains a major issue impacting residents' lives. Water leaks and floods are incredibly common. During the two winters I lived on the estate, district heating system interruptions were weekly occurrences, leaving entire buildings devoid of heating and hot water for days on end. It has become standard that during Christmas, the services will be off – they have been for three years running now. At the worst of times, the entire water supply is curtailed to allow for maintenance to be carried out. Residents spend vast amounts of time and energy dealing with these issues, in groups and as individuals, and talk about them almost incessantly, in the lift, with friends, in groups. Often it is the first questions that they ask each other when meeting: "Is your heating been working?" "I haven't had a shower today, the water supply was off".

The breakdown and dysfunction in a system that is meant to seamlessly deliver water and warmth without drawing much attention to itself, is for the residents more than a simple lack of material comfort. It becomes a dehumanising experience that increases the sense of insecurity and precariousness as the shadow of demolition darkens. It creates an unqual hydraulic citizenship (Anand 2017) which deprives them of the fundamental provision of water and in so doing makes their homes not fit for living in. The local authority argues that the system is beyond repair, and a reason to demolish the complex. Residents like Victoria argue that the local authority is purposefully neglecting the upkeep of the infrastructure, making their homes unlivable so that residents will move out fast

and make the buildings available for demolition. Many think that the council is withholding repairs as a tactic to grind people down and force them out by exhaustion.

Many think that the council is withholding repairs as a tactic to grind people down and force them out by exhaustion.

Victoria thinks it important to hold the local authority accountable – she regularly reports any breakdowns, leaks, heating interruptions and other problems to the phone repair line, although this often means spending half an hour or more on hold waiting for a skeptical attendand to register the complaint. With the help of the self-organised group of homeowners she is an active part of, she decided that a more public approach was needed, and submitted a question to the local cabinet meeting in their slot allocated to questions from citizens. As we waited to enter the meeting room, Victoria was nervous. Going over her papers she needed reassurance; what supplementary questions should she asks, if she gets a chance? We attended as a group, myself with a video camera to witness the event, and others to give her moral support, but when she was called, she had to get up and sit alone in front of the assembled cabinet, a room full of public observers behind her. Her voice trembled as she broke the rules of the assembly and rather than asking a supplementary question, she explained again how upset she was at having to spend days without running water, without receiving any support from the housing officers who work from an office at the foot of her building. Whilst she spoke most cabinet members buried their head in their papers and Ipads. The councillor for housing responded with sentences Victoria and her neighbours had heard time and time again: the council taks its responsibility as a landlord seriously, it is inacceptable that there are so many outtages, but the system is old and centralised, and it cannot withstand severe weather. Promises of more funding for repairs were made. Victoria would have liked to say more, expecially about compensation, but the leader of the council cut her short her and advised her to argue for a policy chage in regards to how compensation would be granted in another forum. The next agenda item was called. Victoria had heard symilar

statements of good intentions before and was skeptical of what by then felt like mere lip service: the problem never seemed to go away, and the recurring mood of these interactions is one where her interlocutors grossly ignore or brush aside the gravity of the situation, leaving residents with the distinct impression that their access to a basic service such as water is not of vital and fundamental importance.

Conclusions

Victoria and many other residents who organise themselves in tenants & residents associations and informal residents networks, speak of being engaged in an everyday battle with the local authority to maintain a functioning, safe and clean environment in and around their homes, especially in relation to the management of water. Their engagement in this sense takes many different forms, of which Victoria's holding the administration publicly accountable is just one.

Their engagement in this sense takes many different forms, of which Victoria's holding the administration publicly accountable is just one.

The residents' daily labour of living within and battling against a system of 'managed decline' is in their understanding closely related to the demolition regime which they are subordinated to. The ethnography of a failure to deliver services related to a basic necessity – such as water – therefore centres and questions the 'urban regeneration' project itself, the allocation of maintenance funds and services, and the influence (or lack thereof) that social housing residents' voices have in the management of their homes. Such an ethnographic approach asks us to fundamentally question the trope of housing estate failure as a failure of a social project, an architecture and its residents, and centres instead the failures of the administration to maintain and deliver vital services, and the agency and commitment of residents to safe housing.

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Images: All photos by author

#Failures: Failed to belong – (Re)Negotiations of care in a Tanzanian social welfare office

Nina Haberland
October, 2020

Every day, women, men, and children sit on the wonky wooden benches in front of the social welfare office, patiently waiting to present their matters to one of the social workers. 'Dysfunction' or 'failure', one could say, forms the daily business of the office: Individuals who 'failed' to build their own life and families which did not hold together make up most of the cases. However, not everyone leaves with the desired letter granting certain rights or forms of support. Only if one can prove to be in need and deserving, the social workers will open a file and start (re)negotiating responsibilities of care between various actors such as family and community members, religious leaders or state agents.

Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic research in the Department of Health in a district in Northern Tanzania I explore the daily interactions between the social welfare officers and their clients and the processes that lead to categories such as

'failed', 'in need' and 'deserving'. Several cases illustrate how the officers maneuver in concrete situations and reveal the application of different categories and the underlying meaning of what it means to be a 'proper' citizen.

'Failure' at the heart of the state

According to Didier Fassin, the state is produced at institutions such as social services and "reveals itself" through the institutions' professionals (2015:15-16). By looking at the concrete actions of those professionals it is, therefore, possible to grasp the politics of the state and to gain "insight into the 'heart' of the state" (ibid.:14-15). The "agents of the state" (ibid.) in this contribution are four social workers who operate in two offices in a district council in Northern Tanzania. Their working areas include violence against children and domestic quarrels, services to poor elderly (e.g. the issuing of exemptions according to pro-poor policies implemented in 1994 to ensure equitable access to health care, see Maluka 2013) and people with disabilities, and support of children in conflict with the law. 'To fail' – or *kushindwa* in Swahili – in this context means to not reach established expectations of how "to succeed, to live a good life, to realize one's values and to discharge one's responsibilities" and is thus a relational category (Zoanni 2018:62). Looking at the negotiations of state welfare through the lens of failure offers an understanding of the underlying societal dynamics and how it shapes society (see Carroll et al. 2017:4).

Negotiating care: Failure, need and deservingness

An elderly man, neatly dressed in jacket and suit trousers, walks into the office and greets us politely. Still standing he explains to Eric, a Social Work student who is volunteering during his semester break, that he needs an exemption for

free medical treatment at the governmental hospital. Eric asks back whether he has a letter from his chairperson. In order to receive free treatment, Eric lectures the old man, he needs an introduction letter from the chairperson of his village. The man seems a bit at loss, staring at Eric. He did not expect such obstacles. Irene, one of the social workers, walks in with another client asking what is going on. When Eric explains, she intervenes. After a quick look at the man and a few questions about his place of residency, she prompts Eric to write the requested letter. She turns to the old man and repeats in a friendly tone that the correct procedure usually requires a letter from the village chairperson, so as to prevent wealthy elderly from receiving free treatment.

The man seems a bit at loss, staring at Eric. He did not expect such obstacles.

That someone has 'failed' to live a 'successful' life needs to be proven by the local government: Operating on the grass-roots level, village chairpersons are expected to know the residents of their unit as well as their circumstances. The introduction letters thus present a first step in negotiating the need and deservingness of a client in question and serve as a primary ground for the social workers' decision to grant or deny their request. In practice, however, many clients come without a letter or with letters issued incorrectly, and the social workers must decide on other grounds. Since need and deservingness "are negotiated both on an individual and on a societal level" (Thelen 2015:505), it is in these interactions between the social workers and their clients where the state comes into practice and reveals established forms of classifications and categories.

In the case of the old man, Eric, a rather inexperienced student, adhered to the required procedure and rejected the client's request. Irene took a more indulgent approach and granted the letter. Having worked in the office for several years, she had developed a trained eye and was able to categorize him easily as a poor elder above 60. Despite mentioning the possibility of fraud, his need and deservingness seemed obvious to her. Irene's immediate decision relates to the

agency's efforts to grant free access to medical care for poor elderly within the district and mirrors the governing party's emphasis on elderly care. Although the old man could not prove his political belonging as a righteous citizen within the district – a prerequisite to receive state support – he could convince Irene that he failed (*ameshindwa*) to pay for his medical bill and deserved free medical treatment. Discretion thus plays a key role in the negotiations of each case, since cases hardly ever fit into the rigid categories of bureaucracy.

Discretion thus plays a key role in the negotiations of each case, since cases hardly ever fit into the rigid categories of bureaucracy.

Past noon, a woman with a small girl following her shyly steps into the office. The mother's restrained and simple appearance, dressed in a *kanga* (a rectangular colorful cloth) wrapped around her hips and a shirt tucked inside, points to the rather poor circumstances of peasant life. I remember them from a couple of days ago: The girl was bitten by a dog and needed medical treatment. James, another social worker, wrote a letter for the hospital to grant free medical treatment as well as an injection against rabies. The girl is still limping and gives a weak, almost apathetic impression. James is worried about her state and writes another letter to continue with the injections. He calls the village chairman who is responsible for the girl. Although I cannot follow the whole conversation, I understand that James, visibly upset, threatens the chairman to be held responsible if the child dies. He starts writing a letter to the chairman and asks the mother whether they had already caught the owner of the dog. She answers in the negative, and James writes another letter to the police to order the prosecution of the dog owner. "So that she [the girl] gets her rights" (*"apate haki zake"*), he adds. Before they leave with several letters for the hospital, the police and the chairman, James calls at the hospital to ensure the girl's immediate treatment. The child is "most vulnerable", he states, and makes yet another call.

Categories such as 'failed', poor, or most vulnerable are thereby negotiated individually and present the necessary features to gain access to state support.

The case of the young girl constitutes another interesting example since she was already above five and thus above the age to receive free medical treatment for children. James nevertheless decided to grant her an exemption by categorizing her as "most vulnerable". The protection of the children, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR), presents another main emphasis of the social welfare office and – besides the deathly threat of rabies – forms the background of James's decision. Categories such as 'failed', poor, or most vulnerable are thereby negotiated individually and present the necessary features to gain access to state support. The leeway social workers are given in handling such situations does not necessarily reveal a weak state but shows "a specific way for the state to exert power over its population" (Dubois 2014:42). Accordingly, having 'failed' does not automatically grant state welfare as the following case demonstrates.

Failed to belong

On a rather calm morning a man in dirty and worn out clothes enters the office. I notice a strong smell of urine when he sits down across from me. He presents his matter to the intern behind the desk, muttering that he has problems urinating ever since he had an accident and needs a new tube for his catheter. I notice the stains on his pants. The intern seems rather perplexed by his request when James walks in. He looks down on the man sitting slumped on his chair and prompts him to repeat his request. After posing a few questions, James turns towards the intern and lectures her about the groups who would receive exemptions: elderly and persons with disabilities, children and cancer patients. The man, who is staring quietly at the tiles on the ground, doesn't belong to any of these categories. James turns back to him and asks about his place of residence. Family? Wife, children, other relatives? The man mumbles something about a deceased wife and one child, no relatives. Asking further about his place of residence he cannot come up with a place except the bus stand. James puts his pen down and leans back in his chair. Without relatives, it is a challenge. He at least needs an introduction from his village chairperson. Otherwise his hands are

tied. The man nods slightly and James sends him away. When he is gone, James explains in a staunch tone that he could not give him money; the police would catch him and accuse him of stealing. Besides, he would buy alcohol instead of the tube anyway. If he had known him, James adds, he could have written a letter immediately.

Although the need of the man was obvious, the question was whether he deserved state support. His unwillingness – or inability – to state where he lived as well as his appearance led James to the conclusion that he was a homeless alcoholic who wanted to exploit the social system. That he mentioned the bus stand only fed into this assumption. Not being able to name any relatives nor having a relation to any of the agents reveals his actual failure: "The excluded are excluded by virtue of their failure to be part of something" (Edwards/Strathern 2000:153). The man failed to prove any kind of belonging and thus could not access state support. In their daily interactions with the clients, the state agents mobilize "values of good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, and feelings like compassion or indignation, empathy or suspicion, admiration or hostility" (Fassin 2015:256). In that sense, James' decision reflects not only his personal aversion but "values and sentiments prevalent within the public realm and political discourse" (ibid.). Accordingly, the actual failure of the man was not his precarious living circumstances but his shortcomings in being a 'proper' citizen: The impression of a drunkard without a place of residency or a family made him an outcast of society undeserving of state support. James' suspicions were reinforced when he saw the man a few days later at the bus stand, drunk.

Looking at the three cases through the lens of failure enabled to reveal the negotiations of care in the context of state welfare and the application of different categories such as 'failed' (*kushindwa*), 'in need' and 'deserving'. The everyday interactions between the social workers and their clients thereby "play a key role in the delivery of public services, in the implementation of state policy, and, consequently, in the definition of what the state actually is" (Dubois 2014:39). The applied categories range between "big structural categories of encompassing relevance" and "the myriad of categories with small and medium societal scope"

(Nieswand 2017:1719) and guide the course of each case. 'Having failed' and being 'in need', however, does not necessarily mean to deserve state support. Only if one can present him- or herself as a 'proper' citizen the social welfare officers, "vested with the power of the state" (Dubois 2014:38), pick up their pen and open a file.

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Don't make me laugh: How getting it wrong shapes interspecies entanglements in the Batek's forest

Alice Rudge
October, 2020

"yeʔ kan plŋal!" "lawac!" "hɛy yeʔ leh!"

"Don't laugh!", "It's taboo!", "We shouldn't!"

Naʔ Srimjam kept admonishing us one afternoon that she, her sister Naʔ Badək, and I, spent making hair decorations in the forest. As the three of us sat cutting leaves into fine swirls, the sisters asked me to film them singing songs from their teenage days, as the act of making the decorations fondly reminded them of those times. But every time Naʔ Srimjam got to a certain part of the song, Naʔ Badək would make her laugh by giving her a funny look, and each of us would break down into tears of giggles. Though Naʔ Srimjam chided that we were being taboo and to stop laughing, prompting us to calm down enough for her to start singing

again, she would immediately burst out laughing once more as soon as she locked eyes with her sister, and so the cycle of tabooed laughter continued. Knowing they shouldn't be making each other laugh only made the situation funnier.

The Batek are a hunting and gathering group, numbering around 1,500 people across the Peninsular Malaysian states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. I conducted 18 months of fieldwork with Batek De' speaking groups in Pahang. Batek people have many taboos on laughter, which are referred to as the *lawac* taboos. In and of itself, laughter that is too loud or goes on for too long is *lawac.* It's also particularly *lawac* to laugh in certain situations, to mix the bloods of certain animals, to mix certain smells or bloods, or have incestuous relations. Laughing around particular non-human entities, such as leeches, millipedes, worms, lice, or monitor lizards is particularly *lawac.* These *lawac* actions risk upsetting the thunder-being, Gubar, who then causes thunder storms that are greatly feared and potentially fatal.

The two sisters, like most others, generally take the *lawac* taboos seriously, expressing adherence to them in ethical terms whereby adherence is 'right' and 'good' *(btʔɛt)*, and failing to adhere is 'bad' and 'wrong' *(jbʔec)*. In everyday discourse, adhering to the taboos is considered a sign of a well-adjusted person who understands how to ensure good relations between people and the diverse other entities of the forest through shaping their own behaviour.

> *In and of itself, laughter that is too loud or goes on for too long is lawac. It's also particularly lawac to laugh in certain situations, to mix the bloods of certain animals, to mix certain smells or bloods, or have incestuous relations.*

Expressed by them in terms of their behaviour being both *jbec* ('bad, wrong, ugly'), and *lawac* ('taboo'), the sisters' laughter that day constituted what in English might be described as a *failure*; to adhere to the taboo, and to coordinate with the desires of Gubar. Though that time we got away with it, as Gubar didn't notice and there was no storm, the act of laughing had the potential for dangerous ramifications. Why, then, would the sisters be laughing at the silliness

of that day in the forest, when they knew the laughter was *lawac*? Why would they potentially cause the relationship between themselves and Gubar to break down – with dangerous consequences? In that instance, the knowing silliness and intimacy of the laughter was simply too seductively, subversively pleasurable for them to avoid.

Such moments of laughter can be thought of as relational encounters that demonstrate the 'friction' of interactions across difference (Tsing 2005). Gubar (the thunder-being), by contrast to Naʔ Badək and Naʔ Srimjam, is 'different': he has a divergent understanding of what the meaning of laughter is, what the meaning of it might have been in that moment of shared intimacy between the sisters, and of how to respond to it. He is more likely to be angry at laughter, and offended that Batek aren't adhering to what he sees as 'the old ways' of following the taboos. Yet in turn, it was the very fact of his different sensibility to the world that continued to make the sisters' laughter so hilariously subversive.

People's ideals might well be to *avoid* the friction caused by 'failure' by adhering to the *lawac* taboos, and thus doing the 'right' thing that doesn't upset others. Yet in reality, in the intimacy of day-to-day life, a level of friction between 'different' persons is inevitable – such as when people are seduced by situations that become all the funnier as soon as someone says ['don't laugh'](#).

This friction is exacerbated by laughter, as it is so difficult to pin down: its meanings are ambiguous, it can erupt unexpectedly, be physically and bodily impossible to control, and therefore create the possibility for misinterpretation, confusion, and offence. Any instance of laughter might be funny to some, but anger-inducing to others. This inevitably causes relationships to fail, particularly when one is surrounded by sentient other-than-human persons such as Gubar, for whom mistakes and misinterpretations can potentially lead to dangerous storms, and by flowers and fruits, around whom laughter can cause offence to the fruit season – stopping fruits from ripening that year.

Human and non-human hunters (such as tigers) often trick their prey by

Just as people might 'get it wrong' by failing to control their laughter, so too might nonhuman entities sometimes fail. In the Batek's forest, certain birds often indicate events. The *wãl* bird, for example, tells that a newborn baby has been born as it imitates the *wãl wãl wãl* sound of a crying infant. But one always has to bear in mind that hearing its call might not always mean that a baby has been born, as the bird, like humans, has the capacity to misinterpret, to get it wrong. Human and non-human hunters (such as tigers) often trick their prey by imitating their calls to lure them closer, exploiting this capacity for failure. Similarly, despite it being Gubar's sensitivities that mean the Batek must control their own laughter, sometimes Gubar too might fail, such as on that day when he just didn't notice that the sisters were laughing.

It can also be difficult for Batek people to interpret Gubar, to tell *who* or *what* is causing his anger. This is not just at the level of which Batek person may have been the cause of the wrongdoing: sometimes Gubar's storms are nothing at all to do with the Batek. Perhaps Gubar is getting angry at flowers, telling them to hurry up and bloom. Again, the ambiguities in how laughter and storms might be interpreted among diverse persons mean that the temptation to allow yourself to laugh is high: maybe Gubar won't notice? Or, if he does notice, perhaps the consequent storm wasn't your fault anyway but the fault of the flowers?

This leaves plenty of space for friction to occur. Different persons are sensitive to the world in different ways. With laughter in particular – as it often emerges spontaneously and uncontrollably – the friction thus caused becomes *part of* day-to-day life. Part of being a sentient, intentional person among these multispecies entanglements – whether you are human, non-human animal, plant, or thunder-being – is making mistakes. Just as you may misinterpret others' actions, your own actions – laughter or other – may in turn be misinterpreted by others. Perhaps, even, to your advantage.

Different persons are sensitive to the world in different ways. With laughter in

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particular – as it often emerges spontaneously and uncontrollably – the friction thus caused becomes part of day-to-day life

There is thus fluidity here between culpable and inculpable failures. The ambiguity of who can be considered the agent of failures and their consequences, in combination with the inevitability of failure across difference, means that culpability for wrongdoing is dispersed. This is an important part of coexistence within this multispecies context.

In their consideration of 'how things hold', Gan and Tsing have focused on multispecies ecosystems to argue that *co-ordination* between species is critical for their co-existence. They point to the importance of the 'accidental' synchronies that make up interspecies 'co-ordination' (Gan and Tsing 2018). To understand how multispecies assemblages hold together, they argue for tracing the complexities of these co-ordinations.

But in the multispecies assemblage that is the Batek's forest, the diverse persons who constitute it often also *fail* to co-ordinate with one another. The shared and oft-articulated knowledge – for example regarding taboos on laughter – mean that people know how they *should* act in order to ensure co-ordination. Yet, the realities of being alive mean one can't always adhere to these demands. There is always the potential for failure despite best-laid intentions.

Given this, it is important to add nuance to the idea that the multispecies assemblages inhabited by hunter-gatherers are constituted relationally among members who dwell 'with', or 'become with', one another, in a co-ordinated fashion (Haraway 2008). While this may often be true, persons also sometimes make mistakes that knowingly upset others, and as such are *not* co-ordinated 'with'.

It is important to question more closely what it means to be 'with' in the immediacy of everyday life. Often, acceptance of the inevitability of failure, and the consequent potential for the breakdown of relationships, is as woven into the

fabric of everyday multispecies coexistence as coordination. There is always the chance for offence, anger, or danger in interspecies interactions. Trying to coordinate oneself with diverse others, but sometimes inevitably making mistakes or throwing caution to the wind, becomes part of what it means to live 'with'.

For Batek people it doesn't matter if you laugh at oil palms.

This breakdown that is central to how diverse living persons end up living 'with' one another is thrown into sharp relief by the oil palm plantations that neighbour Batek forests, on which many Batek people labour. In contrast to the forest, those who design plantation environments seek to banish diversity through their use of regimented, mono-cropped plantations (Tsing 2017). But not only are harmoniously plural interspecies coordinations seemingly banished, but so too are their divergences – their potential failures to align. In plantation spaces, failures of co-ordination cost profit.

This is a far cry from the forest, where getting it wrong is an inevitable part of multispecies life. Reflecting this, though laughter at around certain forest plants affects the fruit season and causes offence, for Batek people it doesn't matter if you laugh at oil palms. Unlike many forest entities, these palms are not sentient persons, raising questions about the kinds of interspecies relationships that become possible. What might failure look like here, and who becomes culpable?

Attention to the spaces of miscommunication and divergence where *things don't hold* can thus aid understanding of the forms of coexistence that are erased by capitalist expansion. But it might also offer new potentials for understanding the kinds of coordinations and *mis*-coordinations between species that people experience at the margins of these plantation environments.

Reclaiming the potential for the failure when living among others is therefore important. It offers a challenge to the romanticising idea that indigenous peoples inhabit multispecies worlds that are somehow more relational, or more spontaneously co-ordinated than capitalist or 'Western' ones. But it might also

offer the opportunity to better understand the gaps – the failures – that might be left by nefarious plantation ecologies. Multispecies assemblages are not only easily definable, coherent wholes. In many contexts, co-existence is dangerous, and lives can conflict, jostle, or be exploited. Failures – for example laughing when you shouldn't – become a part of what it is to live among other species.

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Featured image by Alice Rudge.

#failures: Living Out of Synch

Madeleine Reeves
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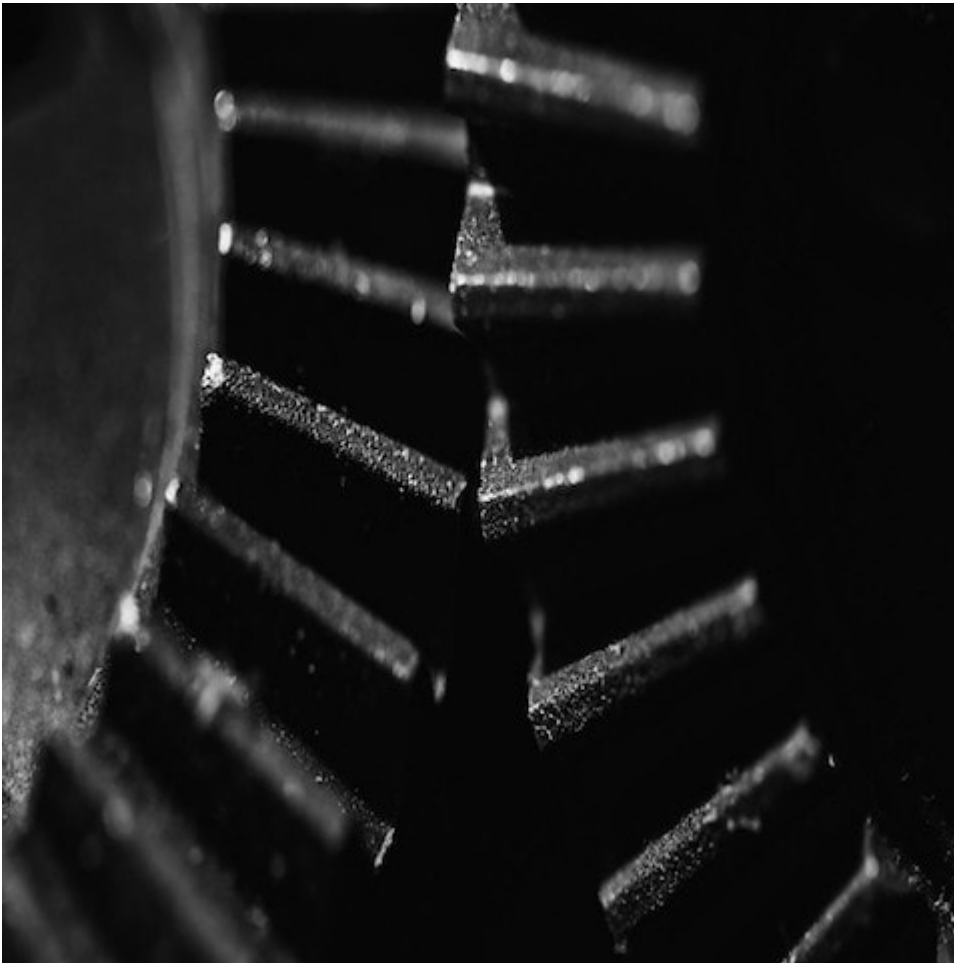
In their introduction to this thematic series, and the [symposium](#) that preceded it, Berisha, Mafizzoli and Ojani invite us to reflect on what happens when breakdown becomes the very fabric of daily life. How, they ask, does this impinge upon hopes and expectations? One answer to that question – or one way to think through how we might approach that question ethnographically, at least – is to attend to the temporal dynamics of breakdown and failure. How are breakdown and failure experienced *in* time and *through* time? How does temporal disjuncture itself come to be experienced a form of breakdown or crisis?

During my research between Moscow and Batken, Kyrgyzstan, I lived, travelled and [queued](#) with migrant workers as they sought to navigate the often-impossible demands of legal regularisation during a period of acute economic uncertainty in the wake of the global financial crisis. I sought to document and understand the physical, mental and emotional effort involved in coordinating different temporal

regimes: those of work, those of social reproduction, those of care, those of social and religious obligation, those of bureaucratic accounting and legalisation.

One way to think through that question ethnographically is to attend to the temporal dynamics of breakdown and failure.

My informants, temporary tenants of two so-called "rubber apartments" (*rezinovye kvartiry*), were adept at suturing together conflicting cycles of work, life and co-residence. In one of the two Soviet *khrushchevki* where I was a temporary tenant, 14 people shared two living rooms and a kitchen (and a balcony during the summer months). In the second, 21 tenants shared a 3-room apartment, with 12 tenants renting mattress-space in the largest of the three rooms. Life in such apartments entailed particular disciplines of co-habitation. Privacy was constantly threatened and the thin lines between intimacy and intrusion had constantly to be negotiated. Alongside a formal rota (*dezhurstvo*) that determined who was responsible for cleaning the apartment, there were expectations of bodily comportment and time-keeping that shaped how co-residents, who might be virtual strangers, and working asynchronous shift patters, occupied space: knowing when it would be possible to have some privacy; at what times it was possible to cook without being watched over your shoulder; or at what points to avoid trying to take a shower so as to avoid the exasperated knocking of the next in line.

Life in such apartments entailed particular disciplines of co-habitation. Privacy was constantly threatened and the thin lines between intimacy and intrusion had constantly to be negotiated.

Co-residence involved the bodily discipline of synchronizing discordant routines. But synchrony was also essential in a much broader sense to making a liveable life in Moscow: to finding ways to earn enough, within given physical and legal constraints, to keep life prospects and future projects alive, to keep the road 'white' (*ak*) or open. The mastery of life as a migrant worker in a deeply hostile

social environment grounded in precarious labour was tied up with the possibility of figuring out its complex polyrhythms: the subtle forms of coordination that are required to manage co-habitation in the rubber apartment; the challenge of managing long, physically demanding or repetitive shift-work in patterns that messed with one's circadian rhythm; figuring out the patterns of the metro system and the commute; the monthly demands of payments to landlords (or their proxies) and often, too, to the local neighbourhood policemen who provided a formalized-informal system of protection against unplanned raids on rubber apartments.

Finding the pulse

Anthropologists of labour have highlighted the importance of rhythm and the capacity to rhythmize – to impose one's rhythm on work – to questions of agency and value. As Gregor Dobler (2016: 864) puts it, drawing on a distinction first introduced by E.P. Thompson "rhythm facilitates and provides the acquisition of skills; it forms a link between the exigencies of "clock time" and the experience of "task time"; and it mediates between plans and situated actions.": In his [ethnography of peasant work in northern Namibia](), Dobler explores how physically demanding and monotonous work is rendered both physically tolerable and socially meaningful through the production of coordinated rhythms of action (among women pounding millet for instance), and how the production of rhythmic movement becomes the measure of difference between the novice and the virtuoso.

But what happens when the rhythms that surround us – those of capitalism, most obviously, but those of political violence or states of emergency – constrain the possibility that we have to feel that we are able to structure or rhythmize our work: both in the sense of finding its inner pace or pulse, and in the possibility of coordinating it meaningfully with others' own actions and rhythms? For the conditions of possibility for being able to live and work in temporal harmony –

being synchronized with others, whether in the micro-dynamics of how we structure a working day or the durational questions of social reproduction – are profoundly political questions, in the sense that that capacity is unevenly distributed within society, and that such unevenness may be both systematic and intentional.

The "zero-hours" contract, for instance, can be a mechanism for limiting freedom precisely because one foundational aspect of rhythmization – the capacity to know whether one will have work on a given day – is undermined by the logic of just-in-time production. In the case of my informants, the possibility to rhythmize was undermined by excessively long shifts, by work patterns that undermined the capacity to plan, and by a quota system that meant that those who arrived late in the year to the job marked were forced to work off the books.

"I was an accountant", he reminded me. "I'd much rather go the legal route."

Take Adilet, for instance. Adilet was a former soldier and one-time accountant for the Batken branch of the Kyrgyzstan ministry of emergency situations, forced to leave for work in Russia after the costs of a funeral wake left him indebted beyond his capacity to repay. When I first met him in 2010 he was working as a brigade-leader for an informal construction team just outside Moscow, without an official work permit. He was one of several among my interlocutors who had found himself at that time in legal limbo, reliant upon 3-monthly trips to the Ukrainian border so as to make him appear a constant "new entrant" to the country, trapped by a quota system for work permits that made him unable to regularise his situation. In Moscow and Moscow region in 2010, the work permits issued by quota had run out in April, the very month in which Adilet had paid 15,000 roubles to a private firm that promised to mediate his access to a "clean" permit through the official government quota. "I was an accountant", he reminded me. "I'd much rather go the legal route." Five years later, Adilet found his name on the notorious Russian "black list": a vast digital register of non-citizens whose administrative violations meant that they were subject to prohibition on re-entry

were they to attempt to leave the Russian Federation. He was still making an existence outside Moscow on unregulated construction sites, unable to return to Kyrgyzstan to see the two-storey adobe home in which five years of remittances had been invested.

Failing time

My interlocutors often celebrated their virtuosity in managing to "trick" time (Ringel 2016) – by creating fictive acts of re-entry that allowed them to delay the need to regularise their situation; by juggling two jobs that each worked on a 48-hour rota; or by switching in for a friend or relative who had left temporarily for a visit home. But they also drew my attention to, and often remarked upon, the logics of necessary failure in which they were enmeshed – the ways in which 'failing time' may be built into certain systems of value extraction and intrinsic to the modes of subordination that they enact.

> *Papers are time-sensitive. A paper is only as valid as its date stamp; an authorization only holds if it has been obtained within the permitted temporal window.*

Attending to these labours of synchronization has implications for a broader comparative critique of the politics of irregularity in contemporary migration regimes. Migrant ir/regularity needs to be understood as constituted by a temporal political economy: a political economy of necessary asynchronicity. This is so in a double sense. First, the particular forms of labour vulnerability experienced by those whose presence the state deems "irregular" or unauthorized are constituted in part through particular forms of temporal indeterminacy and temporal inequality: from the insecurity institutionalized in the zero-hours contract to the bodily demands of the night-shift; from the pressure to work "to the last client" to the uncertainty of whether a job will exist tomorrow; from the denial of holidays through hiring "off the books" to the gruelling endurance of

month-long shifts on construction sites.

Second, ethnographic specificity shows how migrant "illegality" and deportability often emerge precisely from the gaps between different, asynchronous temporal orders. A failure to obtain a document, permission, stamp or signature within a specified temporal window can jeopardize the other documents that the first document authorizes, such as the migration card that enables the temporary residence registration that in turn authorizes the application for a work permit. Papers are systematically and hierarchically linked; and they are time-sensitive. A paper is only as valid as its date stamp; an authorization only holds if it has been obtained within the permitted temporal window. An expired document becomes, quite literally, not worth the paper it is written on.

In conditions of vulnerability, that capacity to find and maintain rhythm can be profoundly constrained.

As anthropologists we can benefit, I think, from a critical interrogation of the ways that precarity is constituted precisely through the abrogation, extension, usurpation and denial of individual and collective rhythms of life. Time is both a category of bureaucratic abstraction and a site of human desire, agency, and experimentation. We can find and look for rhythm in work, as in life, as Dobler suggests. We can trick and work it to our advantage. But in conditions of vulnerability, that capacity to find and maintain rhythm can be profoundly constrained. The current crisis reveals starkly how the violence of temporal disjuncture falls unequally, [magnifying inequalities](#) and differential vulnerability to epidemic threat. As I write, dozens of migrant workers find themselves [trapped for days](#) in the 'neutral zone' of Moscow airports, unable to re-enter Russia, nor to fly to home states that have closed their borders. Delhi's thousands of migrant workers were given just four hours to leave the city, with no privilege to maintain 'social distance' as they [sought to leave the city](#) on over-crowded buses. In such a situation, to understand what endures *when things don't hold,* as the organisers of this thematic section invite us to do, we might want to look, less to grand

stories of hope-in adversity than to little acts of maintenance through which we seek to suture discordant temporal regimes, and the labours *in* time and labours *on* time on which these acts depend.

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Featured Image

"Out of Synch" by Dave Edens (found on flickr, resized in square format; CC BY-NC 2.0)

Call for reviews: Anthropology of Death and Mourning

Allegra
October, 2020

The global pandemic has brought death uncomfortably close for many of us. The way our governments, economists, scientists, and fellow citizens have reacted and tried to govern over life to keep death at bay over the past few months has emphasized how, as societies and as individuals, we relate to death and life. As the months went by, we had to collectively ponder complex ethical questions: what is the price of life? Who decides what kind of life is worth living? Can one be protected from death against one's will, and if so, whose task is it? What are we willing to give up for life?

At Allegra Lab, we thought it was time to take a step back, and make use of the anthropological lens to consider how our societies' relationships to death and life have changed and have been shaped across times and space.

Our book selection therefore gets to grips with a host of death-related questions,

often from an interdisciplinary perspective.

How does our relationship with the dead hold society together? What roles do the dead play in state-building processes in Timor-Leste? What can beliefs of zombies and vampires tell medical and scientific institutions about the best way to meet their communities' health needs? How do ritual commemorations of fallen soldiers in the Pakistani army participate in convincing men to give their lives to the nation? How can studying cells allow us to understand the interconnectedness of life and death? How are food and death interlinked? Why and how does one end up aspiring to death? How do the dead live on and are integrated into our social lives? And so many more…

The books gathered here challenge our perspectives on these questions. If you are interested in reviewing one of them, do get in touch!

How to Proceed:

As we receive many requests for reviews, please send an email to reviews@allegralaboratory.net indicating which book you would like to review, your postal address, and 2-3 sentences explaining why you should be reviewing the book. Please explain how the book relates to your own research or interests. We will get back to you once we have selected the reviewers.
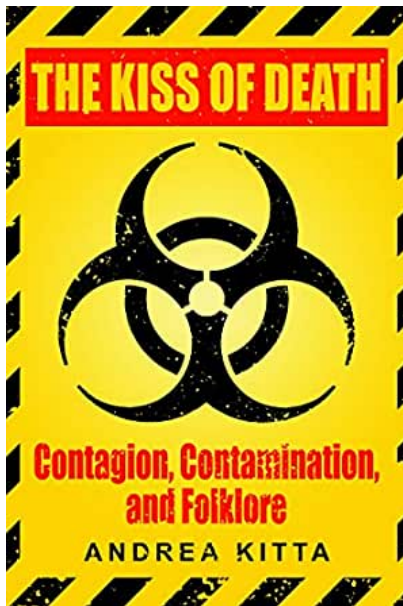
Andrea Kitta, 2019. *Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*. **Utah State University Press.**

Disease is a social issue, not just a medical issue. Using examples of specific legends and rumors, *The Kiss of Death* explores the beliefs and practices that permeate notions of contagion and contamination. Author Andrea Kitta offers new insight into the nature of vernacular conceptions of health and sickness and how medical and scientific institutions can use cultural literacy to better meet their communities' needs.

Using ethnographic, media, and narrative analysis, this book explores the vernacular explanatory models used in decisions concerning contagion to better understand the real fears, risks, concerns, and doubts of the public. Kitta explores immigration and patient zero, zombies and vampires, Slender Man, HPV, and the kiss of death legend, as well as systematic racism, homophobia, and misogyny in North American culture, to examine the nature of contagion and contamination.

Conversations about health and risk cannot take place without considering positionality and intersectionality. In *The Kiss of Death*, Kitta isolates areas that require better communication and greater cultural sensitivity in the handling of infectious disease, public health, and other health-related disciplines and industries.
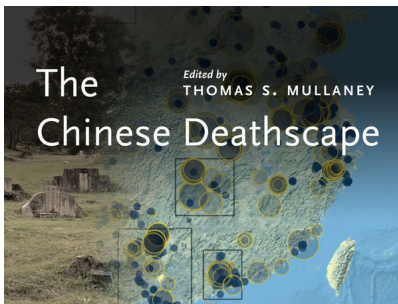
Mullaney, T. S., Henriot, C., Snyder-Reinke, J., McClure, D. W., & Worthey, G. (2019).*The Chinese Deathscape: Grave Reform in Modern China.* Stanford University Press.

*(This is part of the Stanford Digital Project series.)*

In the past decade alone, more than ten million corpses have been exhumed and reburied across the Chinese landscape. The campaign has transformed China's graveyards into sites of acute personal, social, political, and economic contestation.

In this digital volume, three historians of China, Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke, Christian Henriot, and Thomas S. Mullaney, chart out the history of China's rapidly shifting deathscape. Each essay grapples with a different dimension of grave relocation and burial reform in China over the past three centuries: from the phenomenon of "baby towers" in the Lower Yangzi region of late imperial China, to the histories of death in the city of Shanghai, and finally to the history of grave relocation during the contemporary period, examined by Mullaney, when both its scale and tempo increased dramatically. Rounding off these historical analyses, a colophon by platform developers David McClure and Glen Worthey speaks to new reading methodologies emerging from a format in which text and map move in concert to advance historical argumentation.
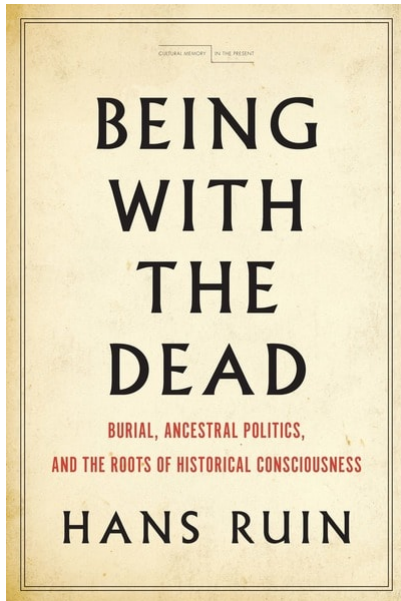
Ruin, H. (2019). *[Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness.](#)* **Stanford University Press.**

Philosophy, Socrates declared, is the art of dying. This book underscores that it is also the art of learning to live and share the earth with those who have come before us. Burial, with its surrounding rituals, is the most ancient documented cultural-symbolic practice: all humans have developed techniques of caring for and communicating with the dead. The premise of *Being with the Dead* is that we can explore our lives with the dead as a cross-cultural existential a priori out of which the basic forms of historical consciousness emerge. Care for the dead is not just about the symbolic handling of mortal remains; it also points to a necropolitics, the social bond between the dead and living that holds societies together—a shared space or polis where the dead are maintained among the living. Moving from mortuary rituals to literary representations, from the problem of ancestrality to technologies of survival and intergenerational communication, Hans Ruin explores the epistemological, ethical, and ontological dimensions of what it means to be *with* the dead. His phenomenological approach to key sources in a range of fields gives us a new perspective on the human sciences as a whole.
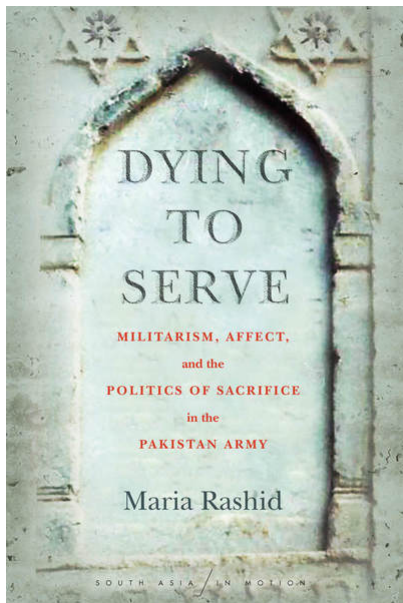
Rashid, M. (2020). *Dying to Serve: Militarism, Affect, and the Politics of Sacrifice in the Pakistan Army.* **Stanford University Press.**

The Pakistan Army is a uniquely powerful and influential institution, with vast landholdings and resources. It has deep roots in the colonial armed forces and relies heavily on certain regions to supply its soldiers, especially parts of rural Punjab, where men have served in the army for generations. These men, their wives and mothers, and the military culture surrounding them are the focus of Maria Rashid's *Dying to Serve*, which innovatively and sensitively addresses the question: how does the military thrive when so much of its work results in injury, debility, and death? Taking ritual commemorations of fallen soldiers as one critical site of study, Rashid argues that these "spectacles of mourning" are careful manipulations of affect, gendered and structured by the military to reinforce its omnipotence in the lives of its subjects. Grounding her study in the famed martial district of Chakwal, Rashid finds affect similarly deployed in recruitment and training practices, as well as management of death and compensation to families. She contends that understanding these affective technologies is crucial to challenging the appeal of the military institution globally.
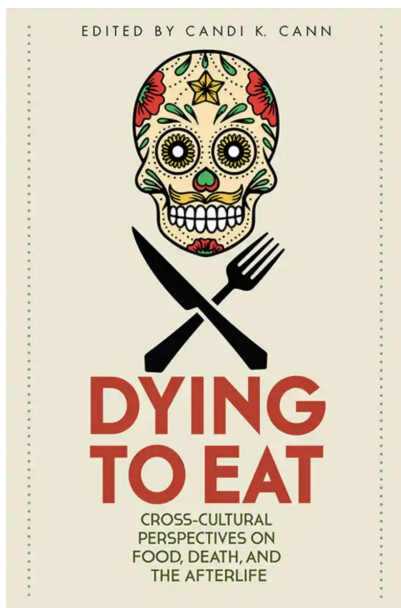
Wu, E., Park, J. E. S., Graham, J., Crocker, L. K., Fuller, G., Oualaalou, D., Shusko, C. & Ntsimane, R. (2018). *[Dying to Eat: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife.](#)* **University Press of Kentucky.**

Food has played a major role in funerary and memorial practices since the dawn of the human race. In the ancient Roman world, for example, it was common practice to build channels from the tops of graves into the crypts themselves, and mourners would regularly pour offerings of food and drink into these conduits to nourish the dead while they waited for the afterlife. Funeral cookies wrapped with printed prayers and poems meant to comfort mourners became popular in Victorian England; while in China, Japan, and Korea, it is customary to offer food not only to the bereaved, but to the deceased, with ritual dishes prepared and served to the dead.

Dying to Eat is the first interdisciplinary book to examine the role of food in death, bereavement, and the afterlife. The contributors explore the phenomenon across cultures and religions, investigating topics including tombstone rituals in Buddhism, Catholicism, and Shamanism; the role of death in the Moroccan approach to food; and the role of funeral casseroles and church cookbooks in the Southern United States. This innovative collection not only offers food for thought regarding the theories and methods behind these practices but also provides recipes that allow the reader to connect to the argument through material experience. Illuminating how cooking and corpses both transform and construct social rituals, *Dying to Eat* serves as a fascinating exploration of the foodways of

death and bereavement.
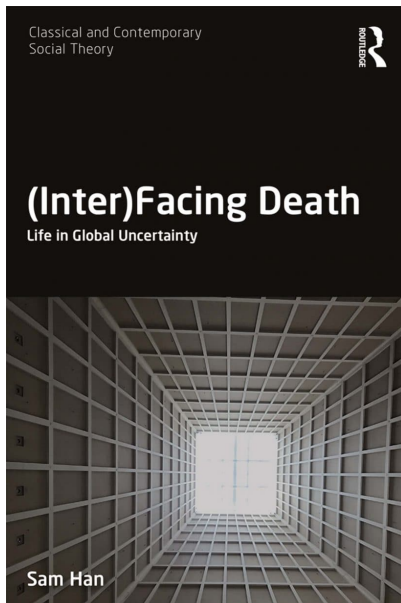
Han, S. (2019). *(Inter) facing Death: Life in Global Uncertainty.* **Routledge.**
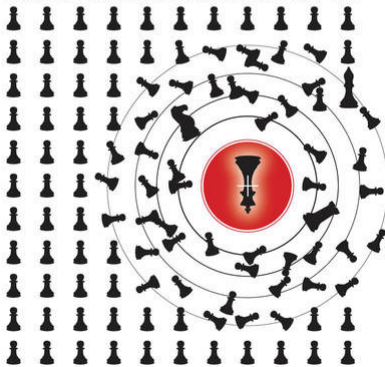
In modern times, death is understood to have undergone a transformation not unlike religion. Whereas in the past it was out in the open, it now resides mostly in specialized spaces of sequestration—funeral homes, hospitals and other medical facilities. A mainstay in so-called traditional societies in the form of ritual practices, death was usually messy but meaningful, with the questions of what happens to the dead or where they go lying at the heart of traditional culture and religion. In modernity, however, we are said to have effectively sanitized it, embalmed it and packaged it—but it seems that death is back. In the current era marked by economic, political and social uncertainty, we see it on television, on the Internet; we see it almost everywhere. *(Inter)Facing Death* analyzes the nexus of death and digital culture in the contemporary moment in the context of recent developments in social, cultural and political theory. It argues that death today can be thought of as "interfaced," that is mediated and expressed, in various aspects of contemporary life rather than put to the side or overcome, as many narratives of modernity have suggested. Employing concepts from anthropology, sociology, media studies and communications, *(Inter)Facing Death* examines

diverse phenomena where death and digital culture meet, including art, online suicide pacts, the mourning of celebrity deaths, terrorist beheadings and selfies. Providing new lines of thinking about one of the oldest questions facing the human and social sciences, this book will appeal to scholars and students of social and political theory, anthropology, sociology and cultural and media studies with interests in death.

Levy, Y. (2019). *[Whose Life is Worth More?: Hierarchies of Risk and Death in Contemporary Wars.](#)* **Stanford University Press.**

Modern democracies face tough life-and-death choices in armed conflicts. Chief among them is how to weigh the value of soldiers' lives against those of civilians on both sides. The first of its kind, *Whose Life Is Worth More?* reveals that how these decisions are made is much more nuanced than conventional wisdom suggests. When these states are entangled in prolonged conflicts, hierarchies emerge and evolve to weigh the value of human life.

Yagil Levy delves into a wealth of contemporary conflicts, including the drone war in Pakistan, the Kosovo war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the US and UK wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cultural narratives about the nature and necessity of war, public rhetoric about external threats facing the nation, antiwar movements, and democratic values all contribute to the perceived validity of

civilian and soldier deaths. By looking beyond the military to the cultural and political factors that shape policies, this book provides tools to understand how democracies really decide whose life is worth more.
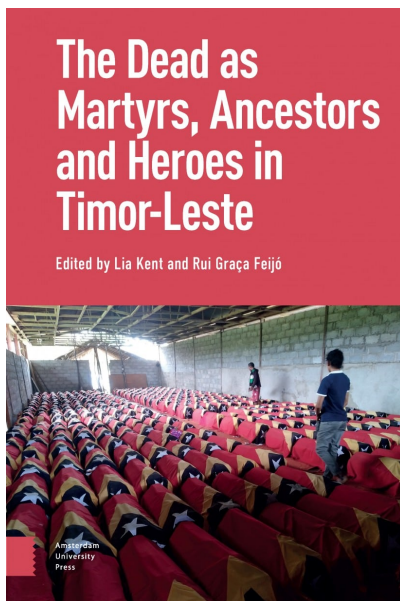

Lia Kent, Rui Feijo (2020) *[The Dead as Ancestors, Martyrs, and Heroes in Timor-Leste.](#)* **Amsterdam University Press.**

During the 24-year Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste, thousands of people died or were killed in circumstances that did not allow the required death rituals to be performed at the time. Since the country attained independence in 1999, families have consequently devoted significant time, effort and resources to fulfilling their obligations to the dead. These obligations are accorded particular significance due to the fact that the dead are ascribed agency and can play a benevolent or malevolent role in the lives of the living. Such grassroots initiatives run in parallel with, and reveal a range of different attitudes towards, official initiatives that seek to transform particular dead bodies into public symbols of heroism, sacrifice and nationhood. This book focuses on the dynamic interplay between the potent presence of the dead in everyday life and their symbolic usefulness in wider processes of state and nation formation.

Cuttitta, P., & Last, T. (2019). *[Border deaths: Causes, dynamics and consequences of migration-related mortality.](#)* **Amsterdam University Press.**
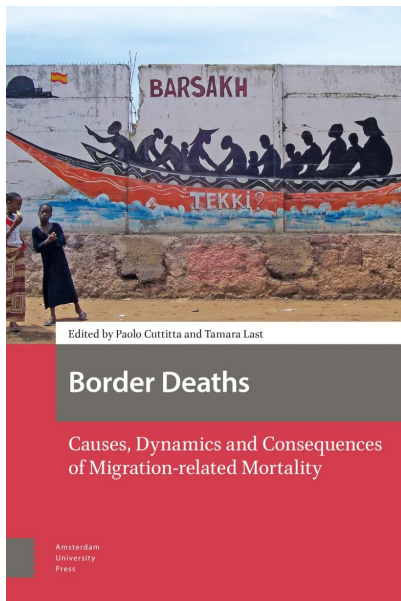
Border deaths are a result of dynamics involving diverse actors, and can be interpreted and represented in various ways. Critical voices from civil society (including academia) hold states responsible for making safe journeys impossible for large parts of the world population. Meanwhile, policy-makers argue that border deaths demonstrate the need for restrictive border policies. Statistics are widely (mis)used to support different readings of border deaths. However, the way data is collected, analysed, and disseminated remains largely unquestioned. Similarly, little is known about how bodies are treated, and about the different ways in which the dead – also including the missing and the unidentified – are mourned by familiars and strangers. New concepts and perspectives contribute to highlighting the political nature of border deaths and finding ways to move forward. The chapters of this collection, co-authored by researchers and practitioners, provide the first interdisciplinary overview of this contested field.
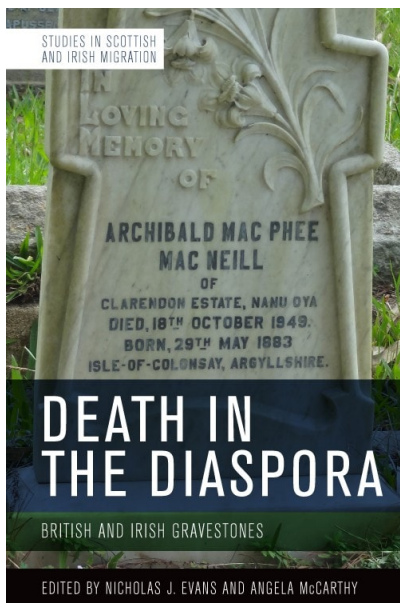
Evans, N., McCarthy, A. (editors) (2020). [Death in the Diaspora: British and Irish Gravestones.](#) Edinburgh University Press.

(To be released in October 2020)

A pioneering comparative study of migrant death markers across the British and Irish worlds and what they can tell us about notions of 'home'

- Sets out an innovative agenda for comparative analysis of death markers in different parts of the formal and informal British Empire
- Provides analyses based on hundreds of thousands of gravestones and memorial markers in the UK and Ireland, Australasia, Asia, Africa and the Americas
- Investigates the effects of religious identities in death and how they differ between memorials in Britain and Ireland

As British and Irish migrants sought new lives in the Caribbean, Asia, North America and Australasia, they left a trail of physical remains where settlement occurred. Between the 17th and 20th centuries, gravestones and elaborate epitaphs documented identity and attachment to their old and new worlds. This book expands upon earlier examination of cultural imperialism to reveal how individuals, kinship groups and occupational connections identified with place and space over time.
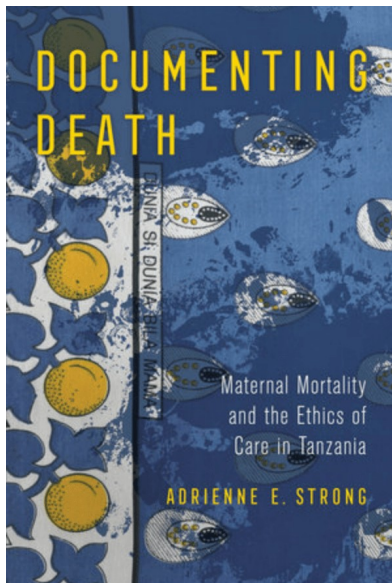
Strong, Adrienne E. (2020). *[DOCUMENTING DEATH: Maternal Mortality and the Ethics of Care in Tanzania.](#)* **University of California Press.**

(To be released in November 2020)

Documenting Death is a gripping ethnographic account of the deaths of pregnant women in a hospital in a low-resource setting in Tanzania. Through an exploration of everyday ethics and care practices on a local maternity ward, anthropologist Adrienne E. Strong untangles the reasons Tanzania has achieved so little sustainable success in reducing maternal mortality rates, despite global development support. Growing administrative pressures to document good care serve to preclude good care in practice while placing frontline healthcare workers in moral and ethical peril. Maternal health emergencies expose the precarity of hospital social relations and accountability systems, which, together, continue to lead to the deaths of pregnant women.
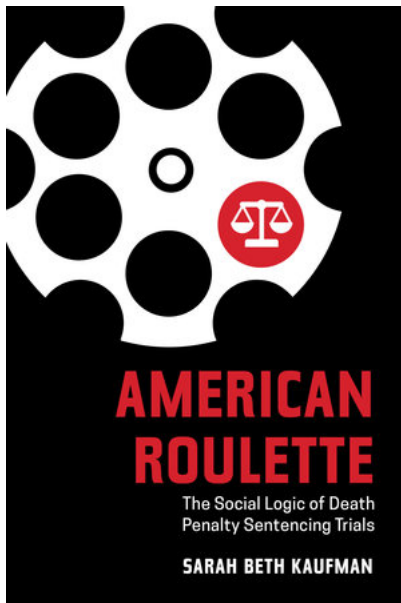
Kaufman, S. B. (2020). *American Roulette: The Social Logic of Death Penalty Sentencing Trials.* **University of California Press.**

As the death penalty clings to life in many states and dies off in others, this first-of-its-kind ethnography takes readers inside capital trials across the United States. Sarah Beth Kaufman draws on years of ethnographic and documentary research, including hundreds of hours of courtroom observation in seven states, interviews with participants, and analyses of newspaper coverage to reveal how the American justice system decides who deserves the most extreme punishment. The "super due process" accorded capital sentencing by the United States Supreme Court is the system's best attempt at individuated sentencing. Resources not seen in most other parts of the criminal justice system, such as jurors and psychological experts, are required in capital trials, yet even these cannot create the conditions of morality or justice. Kaufman demonstrates that capital trials ultimately depend on performance and politics, resulting in the enactment of deep biases and utter capriciousness. *American Roulette* contends that the liberal, democratic ideals of criminal punishment cannot be enacted in the current criminal justice system, even under the most controlled circumstances.
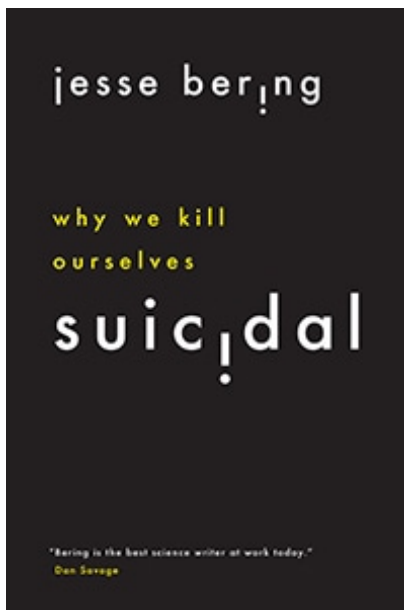
Bering, J. (2018). [Suicidal: Why we kill ourselves](). University of Chicago Press.

For much of his thirties, Jesse Bering thought he was probably going to kill himself. He was a successful psychologist and writer, with books to his name and bylines in major magazines. But none of that mattered. The impulse to take his own life remained. At times it felt all but inescapable.

Bering survived. And in addition to relief, the fading of his suicidal thoughts brought curiosity. Where had they come from? Would they return? Is the suicidal impulse found in other animals? Or is our vulnerability to suicide a uniquely human evolutionary development? In *Suicidal*, Bering answers all these questions and more, taking us through the science and psychology of suicide, revealing its cognitive secrets and the subtle tricks our minds play on us when we're easy emotional prey. Scientific studies, personal stories, and remarkable cross-species comparisons come together to help readers critically analyze their own doomsday thoughts while gaining broad insight into a problem that, tragically, will most likely touch all of us at some point in our lives. But while the subject is certainly a heavy one, Bering's touch is light. Having been through this himself, he knows that sometimes the most effective response to our darkest moments is a gentle humor, one that, while not denying the seriousness of suffering, at the same time acknowledges our complicated, flawed, and yet precious existence.
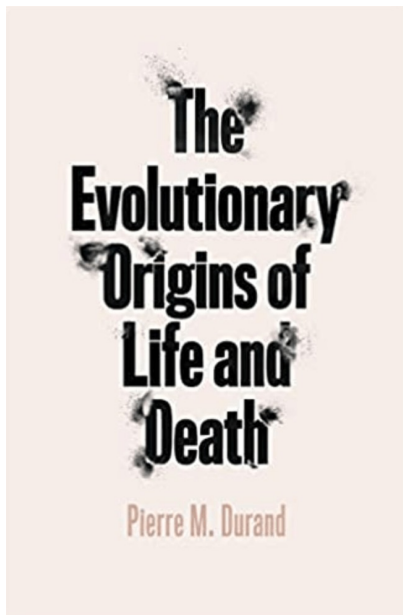
Durand, P. (2020). *[The Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death](#)*. University of Chicago Press.

(To be released soon)

The question of why an individual would actively kill itself has long been an evolutionary mystery. Pierre M. Durand's ambitious book answers this question through close inspection of life and death in the earliest cellular life. As Durand shows us, cell death is a fascinating lens through which to examine the interconnectedness, in evolutionary terms, of life and death. It is a truism to note that one does not exist without the other, but just how does this play out in evolutionary history?

These two processes have been studied from philosophical, theoretical, experimental, and genomic angles, but no one has yet integrated the information from these various disciplines. In this work, Durand synthesizes cellular studies of life and death looking at the origin of life and the evolutionary significance of programmed cellular death. The exciting and unexpected outcome of Durand's analysis is the realization that life and death exhibit features of coevolution. The evolution of more complex cellular life depended on the coadaptation between traits that promote life and those that promote death. In an ironic twist, it becomes clear that, in many circumstances, programmed cell death is essential for sustaining life.

Morton, L. (2020). *[Calling the Spirits: A History of Seances](#)*. **Reaktion Books.**

Calling the Spirits investigates the eerie history of our conversations with the dead, from necromancy in Homer's *Odyssey* to the emergence of Spiritualism, when Victorians were entranced by mediums and the seance was born. Among our cast are the Fox sisters, teenagers surrounded by "spirit rappings; " Daniel Dunglas Home, the "greatest medium of all time;" Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose unlikely friendship was forged, then riven, by the afterlife; and Helen Duncan, the medium whose trial in 1944 for witchcraft proved more popular to the public than news about the war. The book also considers Ouija boards, modern psychics and paranormal investigations, and is illustrated with engravings, fine art (from beyond), and photographs. A hugely entertaining contribution from the supernaturally adept Lisa Morton, *Calling the Spirits* begs the question: is anybody there . . . ?

Allegra [review guidelines](#):

All reviews should be completed within two months of the receipt of the book.

We use British English (i.e. use –ise and not –ize word endings). We encourage clear expression and simple sentence structures especially if English is not your first language.

Word limit: 750-1500 words.

Font: Times New Roman.

Size: 12.

Line Spacing: 1,5

No footnotes.

If you cite other authors, please reference their publication in the end.

When submitting the review, do not forget to include your name, (academic) affiliation (if any), a photograph of yourself and a short bio of 2-3 sentences.

Featured image: Photo (cropped) by [Steven Zucker](#), found on [Flickr](#). (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). The Weighting of the Heart with Annubis and Ammit, from Hunefer's Judgement in the presence of Osiris. Hunefer's Book of the Dead (c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt, now to be found at the British Museum)