

Introduction

Galen Murton

Centered around the theme of labor, the contributions to this second issue of *Roadsides* are artistically creative and prioritize the visual, the aural, and the aesthetic. Utilizing labor as a common conceptual device, the authors approach roadwork through a rich variety of media, including illustrated cartoons, photo essays, watercolors, etching aquatint paintings, and audio-visual recordings. Experimenting with hybrids of textual and non-textual forms of knowledge representation, the articles illustrate a range of practices whereby infrastructures and mobilities are made, used, maintained, and contested. Driven by imagery and complemented by ethnographic essays that, at times, ride in the back seat, the stories examine and untangle how infrastructures shape and are shaped by social relations of work and employment.

From bulldozers and rock crushers to financial transactions and electoral maneuvering, labor gets things done. Recognizing that road construction and other infrastructural developments are rarely simple and straightforward projects – and much more than just technical expertise translated into material objects – this collection attends to both conspicuous and invisible forms of work that constitute the development of roads, dams, camps, bridges, bureaucratic alliances, political divisions, and other

social and material technologies of transportation. That is, while building a road is always a political project, attention to labor illuminates both the connections and the gaps between the popular aspirations for progress and the inevitably uneven impacts of infrastructure development across the world. By looking closely at the ways in which people, materials, landscapes, and ideologies intersect in everyday forms of work, attention to labor reveals infrastructures not only as things that move other things, but as dynamic processes that both disrupt and reinscribe social positions across a range of scales, locations, and demographics. Following such socio-material pathways, the articles collectively provide views of and into life on the road and in so doing advance understandings of infrastructural work that might otherwise be constrained by the written word.



Throughout *Roadsides* collection no. 002, the authors approach labor and infrastructure both temporally and spatially. Whether waiting for the delayed delivery of massive hydropower instruments in Nepal ([Pigg](#)) or a government's inadequate commitment to complete a "road to nowhere" for indigenous communities in Paraguay ([Correia](#)), the anticipation of promised infrastructure is shown to be routinely deferred by the inevitable frustrations of postponement, both deliberate and environmental. Moving from the challenges presented to pedestrian mobility in London under the state's constant efforts of planned improvement ([van Duppen](#)), the stories take the reader to Sudanese metalsmiths displaying skills of "sonic labor" to transform decades-old British Bedford lorries into desert-capable vehicles with rhythmic and percussive synergy ([Hänsch](#)). Labor migration and exploitation are depicted as durable and

A clear and cracked view ahead. Central Kyrgyzstan.

Photo: Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, 2018.

intransigent things, reflected by seasonal road builders traveling today from the Gangetic Plains to the Himalayan highlands of Ladakh India ([Sabhlok and Sharma](#)) as well as historical efforts in Rana-era Nepal to control terrain and secure the state through perverse techniques of corvée labor along non-existent roads ([Plachta and Tamang](#)). The everydayness of what it takes to build a road or make a living along it are further expressed autoethnographically, in one instance through participation with Buddhist nuns constructing motorable paths to a remote monastery in Zaskar India ([Normington](#)) and in another by sitting with Sri Lankan rickshaw drivers in urban Jaffna reflecting existentially on one's lot in life while patiently waiting for a mid-day fare ([dillon](#)). State-led efforts to assemble borderland infrastructures in northeast India and thereby mobilize defenses against China ([Boyle and Rahman](#)) are countered affectively by manual laborers in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor endeavoring to help realize national interests of closer Sino-Afghan connectivity ([Marschall and Mostowlansky](#)). Viewed across a global landscape of works and dreams, the pathways of this collection are consistently affective, expressed through the divergent experiences of labor and experienced by a range of road constituencies – builders, drivers, users, and abusers, alike.

There is also a significant effort of labor behind the colorful and provocative contributions that have enabled this issue to come together. As the editor of the collection, I would like to thank the exceptional reviewers who agreed – on short notice and with little or no advance warning – to lend a hand in the peer-review process. These individuals were instrumental in making this project into what it has become: Majed Akhter, Penelope Anthias, Bob Beazley, Mason Brown, Swargajyoti Gohain, Radhika Gupta, Tina Harris, Frank Heidemann, Amen Jaffer, Mark Liechty, Austin Lord, Tim Oakes, Aditi Saraf, and Anna-Maria Walter. Furthermore, debts of gratitude are also owed to David Hawkins, Chantal Hinni, and Antoni Kwiatkowski for their exceptional efforts in the editorial, design, layout, and production stages of this unusual and labor intensive collection. Finally, extra thanks to Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, for bringing forth the initial vision of *Roadsides* as well as her ongoing commitment to studious and rigorous publication practices in the spirit of open-source access.

Roadsides is intended to be – and has quickly become – an innovative and alternative-format journal that examines and explores “life on and beside the road” in a variety of ways. Inspired to be short, pithy, and experimental, this thematic issue employs labor in an effort to provide a new space for engaging the “infrastructural turn” across the social sciences. Aesthetically beautiful and grounded in the everyday, *Roadsides* endeavors to offer a new outlet for considering and understanding the infrastructural impacts of technological intervention in both historical and contemporary moments and places. We hope that you enjoy this journey down the road ahead.

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Galen Murton is Assistant Professor of Geographic Science in the School of Integrated Sciences at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia (USA). Curious about the ways in which power operates spatially through material things like roads, rails, fences, and dams, he studies the processes and effects of infrastructure, investment, and other development dynamics in mountainous border regions of Highland Asia and, more recently, in the United States as well. In addition to teaching courses on cultural geography, critical cartography, development studies, and the history of geography, Galen also enjoys conducting fieldwork with his students in the mountain ranges of Asia and the Americas. The idea for this special issue on labor came about while riding a motorcycle along a really rough road in Nepal.

Roadsides is an open access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social life of infrastructure.



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