

Arrested Infrastructure: Roadwork, Rights, Racialized Geographies

Joel E. Correia

When construction of an access road began in 2016, the promise of leaving the margin of the Pozo Colorado-Concepción highway felt imminent. Indeed, the Yakye Axa Indigenous community has worked for over twenty years to secure rights to their ancestral lands — the absence of an access road is the last thing standing in the way of their reoccupation. Yakye Axa community members were, therefore, excited to see that the Paraguayan Ministry of Public Works and Communication (MOPC) had finally started building a twenty-four kilometer dirt road that would enable them to leave the margin of the highway where they had lived since initiating their land claims in the early 1990s.¹ Yakye Axa gained land rights in 2012, seven years after the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) found the Paraguayan state responsible for human rights violations against the community for failing to ensure Yakye Axa's constitutional rights to land. Although, to satisfy the IACtHR, the Paraguayan state purchased land for Yakye Axa, the property is surrounded by private ranches, which deny community members the free access to their lands.



Construction of a public access road is crucial for the community, calling attention to the role infrastructure plays in social justice and the production of racialized geographies. Larkin (2013) suggests that infrastructure provides an important analytical site to understand how power and affect operate through material practices. Murton et al. (2016) build from this approach to consider the (geo)political, social, and ecological ‘work’ done by infrastructure. Meanwhile, Gordillo (2014) demonstrates that infrastructure works in social memories and political imaginaries even after its destruction, decay, or decadence. Yet aside from Gupta (2015), few scholars consider the work done by infrastructure that has been left in a suspended state, what I call arrested infrastructure. Drawing from ethnographic research I have conducted since 2013 with Enxet-Sur Indigenous communities in Paraguay’s Chaco region,² including Yakye Axa, I ask two related questions: 1) What different forms of labor drive infrastructure projects? 2) How are arrested infrastructures related to the (re) production of racialized geographies and injustice?

MOPC working on the Yakye Axa access road.
Photo: Joel E. Correia, 2016.

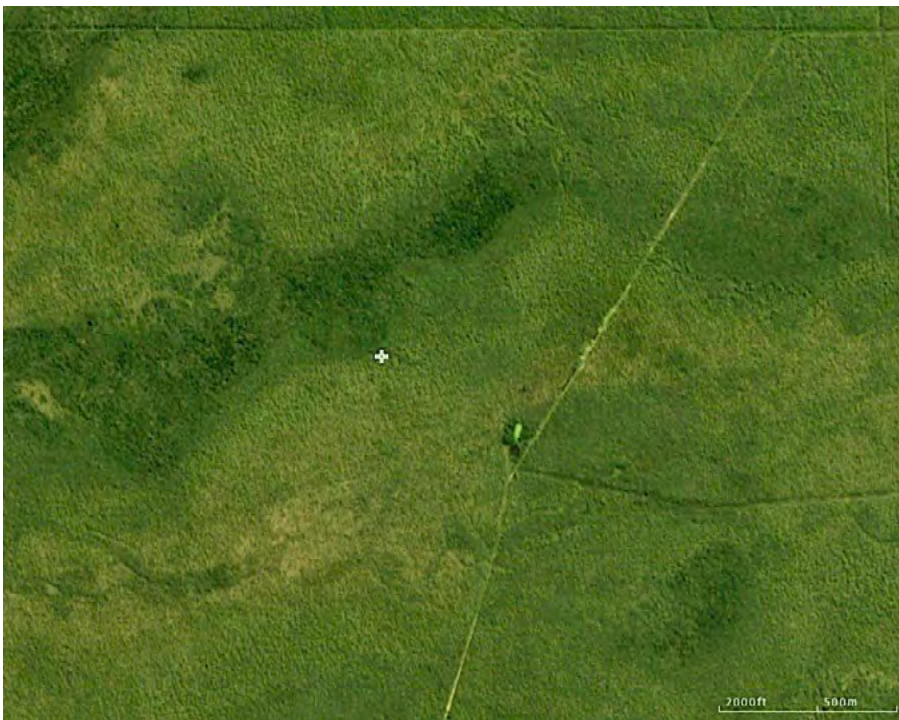
The promise of a road

Infrastructure is inextricably related to promise (Hetherington 2014; Anand et al. 2018). Within the broad elements that create the underlying features of system organization (Star 1999), the road is, perhaps, the quintessential infrastructure through which the power and promises of citizenship rights circulate and through which people come to know the state (Harvey and Knox 2015). When roads are built, they tie both people

and place together in new ways. When roads do not exist or are rendered impassable, people are often disconnected from crucial services. Such disconnections expose tenuous relations between different social groups and the states in which they reside, revealing much about how infrastructural development, or the lack thereof, is related to racialized inequalities and violence (see also Rodgers and O'Neill 2012).

Road development in Paraguay's western Chaco region is geared at facilitating agricultural production and commodity exports. To date, state officials have prioritized either major road construction projects that allow Mennonite ranchers and cooperatives in the Central Chaco to access (inter)national markets or dirt, toll roads that are joint ventures between private ranching consortia and MOPC.³ Most Indigenous communities, on the other hand, are only accessible by small dirt roads vulnerable to disrepair or privately owned by non-Indigenous landowners, such as the case with Yakye Axa's land. A chronic lack of access to reliable roads or means of transport ensures that the rights of many Indigenous communities in the region are undermined, as is access to markets and sources of political power. For these reasons, the Yakye Axa community refused to occupy its territory until MOPC completes the promised access road — otherwise they will likely be trapped on that land without ability to leave (Correia 2018).

Rethinking labor–infrastructure relations



The unfinished access road cuts diagonally through the forest, as seen on Google Earth Engine (2019). maps.google.com, 2019.

Construction of the Yakye Axa access road has slowly advanced since beginning in 2016. At the time of this writing, approximately twelve kilometers have been constructed, while more than half the road remains unfinished. Nevertheless, the Yakye Axa community and their allies have been laboring to build the road since gaining land rights in 2012. The years of effort invested by members of Yakye Axa to lobby Paraguayan state officials, maintain communications with the IACTHR, and launch public awareness campaigns are forms of labor just as critical as the non-Indigenous laborers paid by MOPC to construct the access road. The roadwork, though still incomplete, would arguably never have begun without ongoing community efforts to pressure MOPC, thus highlighting the often-unseen collective labor that many actors invest to spur infrastructure development. While such labor is generally mundane, at times it can be spectacular, as when a special IACTHR delegation investigated the stalled construction in November 2017 in an effort to impel the Paraguayan state to complete the road.

Investigating the incomplete road construction.

Photo: Tierraviva a los Pueblos Indígenas del Chaco www.tierraviva.org.py.



Despite constant work by Yakye Axa and allies to ensure the road is built, the Paraguayan state effort has been anemic at best. MOPC roadwork stalled in 2017 because state officials never secured easements for a public right-of-way to construct the access road along the property lines of private cattle ranches that surround the Yakye Axa lands. Securing the right-of-way requires voluntary compliance by area ranchers or a legislative act to expropriate the easement. Ranchers remain in opposition and state officials have failed to muster the necessary political will, despite the clear legal basis for the road and the minimal impact it will have on the ranchers' properties. I suggest that this arrested roadwork highlights the enduring power of settler colonialism that maintains Indigenous exclusions in the Chaco.



Paraguayan officials have not dedicated the necessary legislative and material labor to ensure the access road is well constructed and completed in a timely manner. The incomplete road project works in pernicious ways on Yakye Axa and other Indigenous communities in the area of influence. Indeed, the Payseyamexempa'a and Kelyenmagategma Exnet-Sur communities that border Yakye Axa's land also stand to benefit from the future access road. Both communities eagerly await the new road because the annual rainy season regularly floods this part of the Chaco, isolating them and cutting off access to necessary state services. In the recent past, numerous people from Payseyamexempa'a have died because they could not secure basic medical attention

Existing sections of the incomplete access road regularly flood due to poor construction, rendering it unusable.
Photo: Joel E. Correia, 2019.

Three years of
intermittent labor
and twelve kilometers
of 'constructed' road
are easily eroded by
floodwaters.
Photo: Joel E. Correia,
2019.

due to the absence of passable roads during the rainy season (Chaco Sin Fronteras 2019). On the margin of the highway, similar acts of violence have befallen the Yakye Axa community due to the perils of vehicular traffic and the precarious conditions of roadside life (Correia 2018).

As a man from Yakye Axa told me: “They [state officials] bought us land but never built a road. We watch them drive by on the highway all of the time while we are here on the side of the road ... One thing that we have learned is that they do not care about the poor or the Indigenous, if they did they would have built the road a long time ago.” That the Paraguayan state has not dedicated the resources necessary to complete the road knowing full well that lives are literally at stake is not merely an issue of bureaucratic malfeasance, it is a form of pedagogy with a clear lesson: Indigenous lives matter less to the state than the political economy of cattle ranching and export-oriented development that many other roads in the Chaco facilitate. The resulting reiterated forms of violence disproportionately exacted on Indigenous peoples draw attention to how infrastructures intersect with a biopolitics of making live and letting die (see also Li 2010, 2018). In other words, arrested infrastructure works to constrain Enxet-Sur lives through racialized, structural violence.



Numerous people from Yakye Axa have died and been buried on Ruta Cinco's margin, while waiting to occupy their lands.

Photo: Tierraviva, 2017.



MOPC working to construct a new bi-oceanic highway to facilitate transcontinental trade of agro-export commodities.
Photo: Joel E. Correia, 2019.



The end of the road, for now.
Photo: Joel E. Correia, 2017.

The 2019 initiation of work on a new bi-oceanic highway that will bisect Paraguay's Chaco and facilitate transnational soy and cattle exports reinforces the fact that the Yakye Axa road is not a state priority. Construction of the bi-oceanic highway is being done around the clock with much fanfare, while the Yakye Axa access road is arrested by a lack of political will to complete the roadwork. The two road projects point toward different forms of labor invested in infrastructure, from large-scale investments, machinery, and hundreds of workers in the case of the bi-oceanic highway, to leveraging international human rights law and political lobbying in the case of Yakye Axa. The differences between the two road projects move beyond labor, however, to show that infrastructure development in the Paraguayan Chaco is a process that reproduces exclusionary regimes of resource access predicated on racialized geographies of power.

Despite the arrested infrastructure, members of Yakye Axa continue their daily labor of pressuring the state to finish the access road. As one community leader told me, with a slight grin, in June 2019: "We have worked hard to get here. I am hopeful that they [MOPC] will finish the road once [the ground] dries out and that we will be able to go to our land this year. We are hopeful."

Notes:

¹ See Correia (2018) for a detailed analysis and explanation.

² I follow the writing practices of many Indigenous and Native scholars who capitalize the words Indigenous, Native, Aboriginal, American Indian, etc. for two reasons: 1) as a sign of respect; 2) because the term is used as a proper noun to signify a people, not as an adjective (see Yellow Bird 1999: 2).

³ See <https://www.mopc.gov.py/mopcweb/index.php/red-vial>.

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