

Interactive comment on “Just passing through: the risky mobilities of hazardous materials transport” by J. Cidell

J. Cidell

jcidell@illinois.edu

Received and published: 15 March 2012

I appreciated the referee's comments on this paper, particularly their suggestions for future research. It would be interesting to compare the spatialities of climate change risk and point-source pollution to the mobile risks of hazardous materials. One of the reasons the case studies of proposed rail travel fascinated me was the seeming contradiction between the fixed infrastructure of the rails and the highly intermittent nature of the risk carried along those rails. The constant presence of the train tracks could and does serve as a reminder to adjacent residents that any train at any time could pose a risk to them, even though most of the time, there is no risk at all because nothing hazardous is present. Other phenomena like climate change or oil spills are certainly unevenly distributed over space, but I am not certain that the same binary

C12

notion of absent/present risk exists: for example, oil is always present in wells, even if it only spills on occasion.

The materiality of the hazardous materials would be another aspect to consider in future work. Here, the two case studies would offer quite the contrast, since concerns about spent nuclear materials in the Yucca Mountain DEIS were much more vague than comments about specific liquids spilling into water supplies. Part of this is due to CN opponents having actual, documented incidents to draw on in terms of what has spilled in the past, along with official Canadian reports on CN's response. But the difference is also due to our fears around nuclear material in general: not as clearly understood in terms of its physical makeup, but nevertheless potentially posing a more widespread and longer-term threat.

I particularly liked the comment that "mobile risk cannot be rendered simply as a probability within policy spaces, since it involves a material commitment to possible environmental futures." To me, this material commitment is the strongest argument against nuclear power in general. But it is also particularly relevant to any mobile risk, which by the nature of its mobility becomes distributed so broadly across space that it is all but invisible in any one space-time. Nevertheless, as the referee notes, enough accumulations of actual accidents over time can solidify that risk in a variety of places, making the absent present.

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 8, 1, 2012.

C13