

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

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The paper provides a reader with an interesting study on spatial relations between mobile objects and immobile places and gives a valuable contribution to growing geographical literature discussing the topological spatialities developed within science, technology and society (STS) studies. Drawing on the concepts of fire space and mobility the author presents two empirical cases; conflict over the increasing freight traffic of hazardous materials through the suburbs of Chicago and plans to transport nuclear waste to a repository in Nevada. In both cases, the empirical focus is on examining the varying risk estimations, calculations and perceptions of stakeholders which enables the author to draw interesting conclusions concerning the relational spatialities of risk construction and (more implicitly) also place formation and experience. The mobility

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of hazardous objects through the places along the transport routes creates a distinct form of risk which is present in the localities but which depends on materials that are absent and only passing through occasionally. The risk also depends on incidents (accidents) which have taken place in other sites and times. In other words, the properties of present situations and risks embedded in the studied spaces depend on various distributed others that are absent from the sites in question.

The topological understandings of space have inspired a multitude of human geographers during the past couple of decades. The multi-topological approach of Law and Mol dates back to mid 1990s and has been widely cited ever since. Originally, their topologies included more conventional ideas of regional and network spaces and were completed by fluid space where objects were mutable mobiles gradually changing shape in order to maintain their identity. Later, they added fire topology as a response to criticism which accused ANT/STS studies of neglecting the Other. Fire space referred to spatiality where presence depends on absence, i.e. objects consist of patterns of presences and absences. Thus, fire topology/space is a helpful concept for a study of a mobile object's spatialities and especially well it suits to this study which focuses on mobility and spatial connections of mobile risky objects.

I found the article very inspiring, and especially its empirical cases clarified and extended my thoughts about the content and utility of the concept of fire space. It is a bit odd to me that geographers have not deployed the concept of fire space much yet although it would provide us with helpful insights into various research topics. One reason for this might be its rather abstract terminology. Law and Moll use – among others – such terms as “absent presence”, “flickering” “conjoined alterity” or “abrupt change” in their discussion which might sound somewhat paradoxical and obscure making it difficult to take the hold of the concept. However, I have found the fire metaphor very helpful for grasping the fragile, unpredictable and sometimes abruptly changing relationship of objects, places or people with countless Others that are not present but whose presence is felt and materialized in various ways. I hope (and am pretty sure)

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that the article at hand concretizes for its readers the unconventional and sometimes ambiguous terminology of the multi-topological approach.

The article also opens up fresh perspectives for looking at political spaces of risk. The author points skillfully out that the political structures are stuck in the 'territorial trap' and blind to the 'absent presences' of fire space. The policy implications are still left somewhat open in this article but hopefully will be further developed in future studies. There is a constant need to widen and deepen the relational understanding of politics and develop the studies of political spatialities in more topological directions which maintain the interest in the territorial and network shapes of political entities and powers but recognize simultaneously other spatialities which bring incidents and processes from other spaces and times to the present situations and places. I believe that the concept and imagery of fire space (and the multi-topological approach in general) has much to offer for such research.

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