

## **The Maintainer as Exotic Other**

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I am a maintainer, but I am also an anthropologist, perhaps a reflexive maintainer; but then, what does that mean, and how do I justify such claims? I suppose part of it is the very practical fact that I have been trained in both fields, and then paid to labor within each of them. And this is who I have become: on the one hand there is the dirty, dim, invisible, grunt, and on the other, a competitor for the accolades of smartness in this meritocracy. But as I play these separate roles, I struggle to draw the line between their identities. The American blue collar in me wants to see the maintainer get his due! But the anthropologist in me is wary of intellectuals like myself being in charge of that! Thus I offer myself as maintainer, rather than presenting to you a maintainer as exotic other. I hope that as I push this line around and play with these positions, I am able to critically highlight the contingency of our disciplinary knowledges, and the need to interrogate the power relations that shape our roles and identities as researchers, thinkers, and maintainers.

In the US Air Force I worked on the marvel-of-maintenance known as the “Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker.” As many of you likely know, this is an aerial refueling jet built in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and upgraded extensively over these many decades to remain in service today. As an “aerospace maintenance technician,” I held the obsolete title of “Crew Chief” - its legendary past was often invoked by flight line mechanics, nostalgic for a time when “Crew Chiefs” weren’t simply generalists, but were an embodiment of respect and authority. This wasn’t a job, but a calling, with rank and position earned through years of wrenching. The ‘birds’ you worked were ‘yours!’ This was a time when the experience of hardened sergeants and the practical realities of war trumped workforce rationalization. -These were the legends anyway, dripping as they did with romantic pining for a past when maintainers were kings! Of course, I left the service (honorably discharged, by the way), and now it’s just satisfying (and cheaper) to fix my own stuff. And doing it helps me understand it. So now I’ve been reduced to things like spending my last spring break putting a clutch in my car. Or, spending my last Sunday listening to a fellow competitor in a vintage off-road motorcycle series, tell me and several other riders, one at a time, about his zip-tie fix for a bolt that went missing from his gas tank, leaving the thing slapping around between his legs. He was proud of that quick fix, but of course, other riders offered their ideas for more permanent solutions.

I am also trained as an ethnographer, and as such I have immersed myself the building and fixing of motorcycles, searching for a way to translate, situate, and describe how that matters. As I argued last year at The Maintainers Conference, “part of understanding how maintenance

matters, [must] include appreciating how maintainers come to care about something, how *they* create meaning in what *they* do.” Something else I have struggled with, particularly as I read the call for papers this year, was the need to both value and utilize the important, diverse epistemologies of expertise regarding maintenance and repair, *and* retain a sensitivity to the power relations that organize our understandings, and shape the social roles we utilize to do this. Linked as anthropology is, to the colonial encounter, I believe it can help with this struggle, reminding us as we sing the praises of maintenance, to remain attentive to the power differentials perpetuated by distinctions between us and them, researchers and researched, maintainers and innovators, laborers and entrepreneurs, savages and civilized.

Part of what anthropologists have struggled with in this discipline is its complicity in the construction of exotic others. From filling the late 19th Century midways of international fairs and expositions with the ‘actual natives’ of Africa, China, Java and Japan, purported to be living evidence of evolutionary stages, re-presented alongside the technological progress of civilized society, to filling “the savage slot” in higher education, the history of the discipline is steeped in producing the exotic other. But concurrently, anthropologists have long utilized this history to problematize their discipline’s knowledge and actions. And one central method for critique of relationships of power has been the notion of reflexivity. Though often dismissed as post-modern navel-gazing, reflexivity is actually much older and more integrated into the social sciences than this dismissal allows. Anthropologist Dominic Boyer has described reflexivity as “recognition of the importance of biographical, social, historical and cultural conditions for the pluralization of human ways of knowing and forms of knowledge.” (Boyer 2015, 93) This recognition of “epistemic contingency,” or the “the contingent (often historical) constitution of social and cultural knowledge” is deeply integrated into anthropology, and has become particularly useful in ethnographies of expertise, furthering Ulf Hannerz’ proposal to “study sideways,” decentering the authority of expertise while benefiting from the intellectual practices of its multiple communities.

It is for this reason that I am particularly encouraged by the success of the maintainers conference, because it presents an opportunity to think and talk about maintenance, repair, broken worlds, infrastructure, things, innovation and hegemony in diverse ways, potentially highlighting the epistemic contingency of each of our fields of expertise, and providing us with opportunities to inform each other’s understandings. I therefore hope that the anthropological experience with reflexivity can be instructive as we ponder why maintenance and repair are so marginalized in relation to innovation and entrepreneurialism, or to other hegemonic discourses of professional elites. I hope we can think through not only maintenance as infrastructure, as ontology, or as design, but also maintenance as experienced, as identity, and as loved. I hope too that we remember to consider the role of power, not only in the lives and worlds of our research subjects, but in our own efforts to render those worlds and people to critical analysis. I hope that as we recognize the significance of maintenance, and try to bring it out of the intellectual shadows, make it visible, or sing its praises, that we are careful to not facilitate another noble savage, or an uncouth uncivilized “other” - an “other” for our our sharp, new, heroic-entre-

innovator, fueled as he is by the imperative to make a lot of money really fast, and supersede maintenance as the art of civilization. —Thank you!

#### Works Cited

Boyer, Dominic. 2015. "Reflexivity Reloaded: From Anthropology of Intellectuals to Critique of Method for Studying Sideways." In *Anthropology Now and Next: Essays in Honor of Ulf Hannerz*, edited by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Christina Garsten, and Shalini Randeria, 91-110. New York: Berghahn Books.