

Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality (Strebel, Bovet, and Sormani, eds)

Kristin Otto¹

New Mexico State University

¹Department of Anthropology
University Museum MSC 3564
New Mexico State University
P.O. Box 30001
Las Cruces, NM 88003-8001 United States

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Abstract

This work is a book review considering the title *Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality* edited by Ignaz Strebel, Alain Bovet and Philippe Sormani.

Keywords

repairing; material culture; method; theory. Topical keywords are drawn from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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For editorial inquiries, e-mail: mar1@indiana.edu

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Abstract: This work is a book review considering the title *Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality* edited by Ignaz Strebel, Alain Bovet and Philippe Sormani.

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The contributors to *Repair Work Ethnographies* seek to add new ethnographic perspectives to the conversations surrounding the renewed interest in repair, while also situating repair as an essential, everyday practice for science and technology studies (STS). In their introduction, editors Phillippe Sormani, Alain Bovet, and Ignaz Strebel argue that repair is an overlooked process that links materials, practice, human and non-human agencies, and contexts. The editors argue that predominate approaches to materials in STS have recognized the complexity of material interactions in assemblages, but have not yet closely examined the in-situ interactions between humans and materials. Drawing from the examples of classic ethnographies of repair such as Douglas Harper's (1987) study of a mechanic's repair shop in *Working Knowledge*, or Julian Orr's (1996) *Talking About Machines* focused on photocopier technicians, the editors advocate for approaching the topic of repair through attention to these situated actions. In doing so, they frame repair as an everyday, ordinary practice embedded in, and in dialogue with, networks of people and things.

The editors divide the volume into three parts according to how the authors place repair in relation to surround conversations of networks, assemblages, and politics. Part I—Settings provides the most micro-level approach, and includes a series of in-depth case studies that pay attention to the practicalities of repair and meaning in very specific settings. For example, Cornelius Schubert's chapter examines repair processes inside the medical setting of a surgery operating theater through a series of ethnographic vignettes. Schubert argues that in this setting repair includes processes of inquiry and improvisation as doctors, nurses, and patients interact with machines and their environments, describing repair as “a situational re-adjustment of actors and artefacts” (p. 35). As an example of the wide variety of ethnographic settings, in contrast Moritz F. Fürst's context of repair is the Austrian National Library. From

shadowing librarians, Fürst learned of the challenges and compromises that must take place to conserve objects such as books that are available for regular public use, and the ways in which digitization is a transformative process. Alain Bovet and Ignaz Strebel return and employ video ethnography methodologies to contribute a chapter on apartment caretakers. They focus on the “closing” of repair, and argue that the caretaker does not simply restore the object for the tenant, but rather modifies the relationship to the object.

Part II—Networks extends the situated focus on repair to include wider connected assemblages, while still focusing on specific locations. Lara Houston examines the circulations of repair knowledge among mobile phone repairmen in Kampala, Uganda. The contrasts between “authorized” sites and independent technicians, and the ways these people use relationships and online resources to access necessary knowledge, illustrates how knowledge is embedded in practice and environments. Jérôme Denis and David Pontille continue the attention to urban environments with their ethnography of the repair practices surrounding the subway wayfinding systems in Paris. Denis and Pontille argue that the cycles of assemblage and disassemblage are evidence of the active, continuous process of repair and maintenance and the precarity of materials. Finally, Martin Tironi’s chapter also illustrates repair as a central process in urban networks by focusing on how repairing of bicycles in a public bicycle sharing system in Paris sustains urban mobility. In a slight departure from the intense urban focus, Christophe Lejeune examines the restoration of steam locomotives in a heritage railway, and the importance of internal and external social networking for this volunteer-based maintenance.

Part III—Politics further extends the scope of analysis and turns to how processes of repair can become politicized. Christopher Henke’s chapter departs from the focus on particular contexts to more broadly define repair as “a practice for negotiating order in contexts where heterogeneous elements come together to create complex social and technical systems” (p. 257). Henke argues that ethnography is a particularly appropriate method for analyzing the processes that maintain these complex systems. Tim Dant returns to a more specific focus, but on a much more distributed platform of online DIY videos. He argues that these repair videos for bicycles help the viewer to understand the object more than the typical user. Finally, Meg Young and Daniela K. Rosner analyze the dynamics of gender informing the Fixers Collective in Seattle, a collective of volunteer repair consultants. Fixers Collectives, and other organizations like it, have arisen in other cities, highlighting the renewed public attention to repair mentioned by the editors.

In his conclusion, Steven J. Jackson says that “taking repair seriously can help us towards more timely, materialized, and hopeful ways of thinking, making and fixing the worlds around us” (p. 346). The contributions of the above authors have certainly taken repair seriously by calling attention to the often-overlooked processes that combat daily breakdown. Through their situated approaches, they emphasize the importance of skill, improvisation, and networks in the relationships between people, things, and their environment. In considering the editor’s goals set out in the introduction, this volume certainly situates repair as an importance process worthy of investigation in science and technology studies. Although not explicit through all contributions, it also responds to theories linking humans, objects, and their environments, such as actor-network-theory, by advocating a closer study of lived relationships. Overall, one of the most significant contributions of *Repair Work Ethnographies* is to bring together all these perspectives on repair embedded in daily life through the methodologies

of ethnography. These analyses can help us to rethink our relationships with urban environments and commodities. In order to more fully see how repair is an essential process in daily life, it would be useful to see the contexts of focus expanded outside the urban environments that dominate the majority of these contributions. Furthermore, as repair is not only closely tied with the environment, but also with time, this volume opens up opportunities to link repair with historical practices and temporality, a topic already picked up by some others (i.e. Jones and Yarrow 2013; Oberhofer 2018). Therefore, *Repair Work Ethnographies* is an important contribution to the studies of repair emerging in a variety of fields, one that can be picked up and expanded upon by not only scholars of science and technology studies, but also anthropology, material culture studies, sociology, and anyone engaged in the interactions between people, things, environments, and assemblages. ■

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Kristin Otto is Curator of the University Museum at New Mexico State University where she is affiliated with the Department of Anthropology. She has curated two museum exhibitions. *Shapes of the Ancestors: Bodies, Animals, Art, and Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins* was presented in 2018 at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, while *Extending Lives: Repair and Damage in African Arts* was featured at the Eskenazi Museum of Art in 2017. She has published work in *Teaching Sociology* and *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*. Her recently completed dissertation focused on questions of maintenance and repair in material culture.