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Preface

ISSUE 10 **CHOKEPOINTS**

MIGRANTS GATHER IN “JUNGLES” at the mouth of the Chunnel; Somali pirates attack ships queuing up at the Bab-el-Mandeb strait; a flash crash in the stock market triggers a digital “circuit breaker” that instantly shuts off trading; transcontinental internet connectivity is interrupted when a ship anchor severs undersea cables. These events highlight the vital importance of chokepoints—sites where the flows upon which contemporary life depends are constricted or “choked.”

Because they are difficult to bypass, one obvious way to think about chokepoints is as *obstacles*—logistical problems to be navigated, worked around, or otherwise resolved. But chokepoints can also be sites of *opportunity*. More than that, they are nodes where sociopolitical, financial, and ecological concerns are negotiated and power dynamics turn expectations upside down. Useful for enacting governmental or economic control, chokepoints are also sites where the dominant become vulnerable, connectivity becomes a liability, and marginalized voices and forms of agency are amplified. The longshore union that shuts down a port can send shock waves through the economy. A small community or social movement that blockades a key road grabs the attention of an otherwise inattentive government. What happens in and around chokepoints, then, is as critical as what circulates through them.

Limn 10 seeks to engage—and potentially upset—some taken-for-granted understandings about flow, function, and disruption. Approaching chokepoints as simultaneously geographical and deeply social phenomena, we find them at the heart of a range of contemporary challenges, from the distribution of energy, information, and cargo to debates about migration and climate change. Given that these problems are often described with reference to flows, networks, and systems, it is not surprising that the concept of chokepoints—and the threats to global order that they imply—is invoked to describe and reshape political and economic possibilities. Within this conjuncture, the chokepoint emerges as a useful analytical

entry point for understanding how networked geographies are conceptualized, governed, and “worked” to a variety of ends.

To examine chokepoints in this way is to interrogate networks and systems through their points of most acute vitality and vulnerability. Chokepoints, in this regard, are not simply discrete nodes along networks or components of systems. They can present obstacles or opportunities—often both at the same time—depending on which actors and concerns are foregrounded. For the city planner, traffic congestion is a problem. But for the smuggler, it is camouflage. And, for the roadside vendor, it creates a captive market. Constriction can be a mechanism of accumulation (for actors who control bridges, canals, and tunnels) but also surveillance (for regimes looking to regulate the movement of populations, resources, and information). Examining these critical points of passage, *Limn* 10 asks: To what overt, covert, and unexpected dynamics do chokepoints give rise? How are they—and might they be—conceptualized?

The term *chokepoint* seems to have originated in engineering around a century ago, where it was initially used to describe locations in a mechanical system where fluid could be controlled or choked. However, the English word “choke”—as in impeding respiration—is far older. Fittingly, given its functional (and life-threatening) connotations, the term was adopted into military use in the 20th century, particularly in the context of the World Wars and concomitant advent of the science of logistics (Cowen 2014). In military parlance, *chokepoints* came to denote vulnerable links in supply chains and key geographic locations where small numbers of men and machines could control access to broader territories. Today, however, the term has taken on a life far beyond its engineering and military roots. As modern life has become dependent on a multitude of flows that are vulnerable to disruption, the concept of the chokepoint has come to describe everything from megaports and pipelines to criminal justice operations. Consider

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The editors of this issue are members of the **chokepoints collective**, an interdisciplinary group of ethnographers examining chokepoints in a variety of forms around the world. This material is based upon work supported by a collaborative research grant from the National Science Foundation (“Chokepoints: A Comparative Global Ethnography”; NSF Award # BCS-1560531). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge John Rosenwinkel, who conducted research that contributed to this writing of this essay. Publication assistance also provided by the Research Cluster in Science, Technology and Society at the University of Southern California. More at <http://limn.it/>

a 2013 initiative by the US Department of Justice called “Operation Choke Point” that sought to regulate FDIC-insured bank loans to high-risk businesses, such as firearms dealers, payday loan sharks, and pornographers. Here, the term described choking the flow of federally insured cash to risky, illicit, and possibly illegal activities. In September 2017, *The Washington Post* gave the term a presidential dimension, describing Chief of Staff John Kelly as the “choke point” of the Trump administration—the regulator of information flows both to and from an increasingly erratic commander in chief.

The proliferation of chokepoints has coincided with the rise of a way of understanding modern life as dependent on the functioning of vital systems—themselves susceptible to catastrophic disruption (Collier and Lakoff 2015). The chokepoint thus crystallizes both the kinetic materialities of contemporary life and the anxieties that attend widespread connectivity. The imagination of the world as rife with potential blockages has brought into being a range of opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, governments, militaries, and firms remain intensely concerned with classical chokepoints such as straits, ports, and corridors. At once vital yet vulnerable, these sites render global systems susceptible to myriad forms of disruption. Because a malfunction, blockage, or takeover at, say, the Panama Canal or the Lincoln Tunnel would have widespread ripple effects, such passages elicit no shortage of scrutiny, security, and anxiety.

But emerging chokepoint formations are also giving rise to new obstacles and opportunities. Climate change opens up shipping channels previously choked with polar ice. A patent limits the delivery of cheap medicines to populations in need. An oil refinery’s workers go on strike, disrupting overseas markets. Battery capacity remains the x-factor impeding the shift to alternative energy systems. Some of these phenomena have been recognized as chokepoints; others have not. Like sites immediately recognizable as chokepoints, these emergent formations and

the dynamics they engender are sources of imminent concern. Yet many provocatively exceed the concepts at our disposal for understanding their operations, long-distance effects, and stakes. Chokepoints of all kinds consequently figure as a critical problem—and challenge.

Limn 10 brings together anthropologists, geographers, photographers, media scholars, sociologists, ecologists, and historians to think about the chokepoint as a site of inquiry and an analytic tool. Marshaling diverse conceptual and visual techniques of analysis, we want to explore—and perhaps rethink—what chokepoints are and what they do. As sites where big projects and systems turn on tight spaces, chokepoints are useful analytical entry points for making sense of extensive networks and global assemblages, yet their layered social dynamics and ripple effects also deserve scrutiny. Writ large and writ small, chokepoints demand that we pay closer attention to their form, their function, and the kinds of life to which they give rise.

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