Ground-Level Travel for a Non-Flying Baltic States Anthropologist from Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT
This auto-ethnographic/biographical account deals with the experiences that a non-flying Northern-Ireland-born anthropologist living in the Baltic States has of mobility, infrastructure and connectedness, in particular with reference to academic and personal life. The article considers the movements which a career as an academic anthropologist requires, as well as the difficulties and intricacies that being located in Eastern Europe has for such land travel. Based on years of experience, it questions travel time and cost with particular reference to the seeming need to travel towards Western Europe in order to remain connected to the discipline’s main ‘movements’. The article also examines solutions such as the Via Baltica, and looks forward to improvements that new infrastructure (such as high-speed railways) can bring.

KEYWORDS
infrastructure, mobility, Rail Baltica, terrestrial transport, Via Baltica, Suwałki Gap

Before giving the first version of this article at EASA 2018 in Stockholm, where I had travelled by land and sea from my original ‘home’ in Northern Ireland (where I had been visiting my parents), I came across a National Geographic article showing how a new supercontinent linking basically all the continents together would eventually form (Chwastyk 2018). My initial ‘unthinking’ reaction was to imagine how handy this would be. It might be 250 million years in the future, but as a non-flyer my mind jumped into action to visualise this bright horizon for land travel. Now it appears that, for anthropological purposes, a further trip ‘home’ might be required. Once again, the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) is involved, with its upcoming conference in 2022 in Belfast.

This particular biographical vignette opens up an issue which has been long part of both my academic and non-academic lives (which seem heavily entwined), namely how to get to places for academic and
other purposes. It shows, first, how in, now, nearly twenty years of not flying my mind has become attuned to thinking of getting places without it – for example travelling between Latvia (the Baltic state where I have been an assistant professor and researcher since 2012) and Northern Ireland, or for conferences elsewhere, amongst other things. Second, it introduces the question of searching for solutions in a world, be it ‘normal’ or academic, that has seemed to be heavily reliant on air travel for people who might be like me. One of the issues that I face is time.

One relevant point here is the idea of the future of the climate and the dreadful effects of climate change caused by carbon emissions, to which aerial travel is a significant contributor. Indeed, one of the railway companies I have been a regular customer of, ÖBB, the Austrian state railway company, notes on its tickets CO₂ savings in kilogram form.¹ To a non-natural scientist who cannot easily visualise this weight of gas easily, this appears a little as ‘quantification rhetoric’ (Potter et al. 1991). It verges on enabling potential ‘virtue signalling’ – the highlighting of one’s own high moral quality – even if those same ÖBB tickets call train passengers ‘climate heroes’. This suggests that there is an ethical dimension to thinking of non-flying in those who encourage it. I will return to this idea below, since it is related to travel in general and academic travel in particular. To be clear though, I do not claim to be heroic in any way. For me, however, this time issue is principally that of travel time and related comfort, and how this relates to questions of infrastructural development in the past and the future, especially for travel to and from Latvia, as an example of a post-Soviet society. There are also linkages to travel I have done before and to my research and to my biography, academic and non-academic, as it were.

Surrounded by other post-Soviet/state socialist countries, I highlight some of the particularities that Latvia brings in the effort to travel without flying and why this travel often appears to go in a particular westbound direction, despite where my parents reside.² I will point to the fact that it might be easier to keep at low altitudes if the infrastructural development of one’s state of residence is perceived as high. In so doing, I will focus on both the route and the conveyances that ply that route, because, as Mari Korpela (2016: 113) notes, ‘infrastructures provide the framework within which people can, or cannot, move’ – in this sense (one hopes) a train or bus can only follow the tracks and roads provided, respectively, and this relies on their existence and their condition. One’s biography, including academic
biography, and its important connection in being located in a certain place, can be rather influential on one’s ability to meet the pressures of keeping on land, and to find ways to do so.

Beginning the (Terrestrial) Journey

I have never really considered the question of my own life as a topic for analysis until now. But of course, it is something we are encouraged to think about nowadays. This part of my biography is academic, and these discussions have also reached academia. However, there is clearly growing general interest in the topic highlighted by the travels of Greta Thunberg (the Swedish school student starter of the Climate Strike movement) and her complaints about the damage caused by flying. For me, this is not so much a question of ‘flight-shame’ in particular. And I cannot easily track all my travels like Stefan Gössling (2019) has for famous celebrities, and like sectors of the press do at times for celebrities to critique their claims to be environmentalists (by showing that they actually fly on private jets) (see, for example, Gant and Jewell 2019). We may not like to be seen as peculiar, and in my past experience, one might be seen eccentric or foolish by friends or family for not flying. This was bad enough, but mentioning to other academics that I did not fly caused reactions of often great confusion and incredulity. Things have changed in certain contexts at least. The Times Higher Education notes that universities encourage staff to fly less, for example, and share more of their conference experiences when they get back from events (Bothwell 2019), and UK universities have set up a Climate Commission in order to reduce their emissions to net-zero (McKie 2019). Accounts of academic non-flying have also appeared in the press. Shaun Hendy (2019), a physics professor at the University of Auckland, in an article in The Guardian, points out the risk of being accused of virtue signalling even when one has dramatically reduced their carbon footprint – in his case, he saved nineteen tonnes of CO2 in just one year.

Here, I deal with my European travel. Not part of a planned research project, it is a by-product of academic life, but is also related to my autobiography. It is what Judith Okely (2010) calls ‘free passage’ (a term apt for travel) where one research project (here, just one aspect of academic life, fitting into life in general) leads to another idea completely. Further, this perhaps represents an example of ‘mobility as method’ (e.g. Büscher and Urry 2009; Büscher et al. 2011; Elliot et al. 2011; and others).
2017a), in the sense that data is gathered while in motion, despite the fact that it occurs outside a formal research project situation but in academic life. It is also auto-ethnographic, but with good chances to observe travel to and from the Baltic States since 2012. In terms of auto-ethnography within mobility studies, Alice Elliot and colleagues note this as a possible method for studying mobility ‘with its own advantages and draw-backs’ (2017b: 9), which likely is an issue in general with this approach more broadly. Here, however, I cannot draw on a larger sample other than myself and only observe what occurs while I travel: first, note the above-mentioned confusion from people who live here when I say I do not fly. I am yet to find an anthropologist colleague from the region who does similar, but perhaps this is to do with travel being in a certain direction and with the time it takes to do so.3

This does not mean that I, writing here often about my own experiences, am not a good informant or observer of these matters. I might recall, for example, overhearing some anthropologists on a train heading towards a conference, as, for example, hearing Germans sitting happily chatting with colleagues while on the train from Zürich on the way to EASA 2016 in Milan. Yet, this being somewhat further on one’s way, on the sixth of seven means of conveyance from home, alone, makes one feel rather lonely not only on the train but also in not flying as a concept. So, where Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat suggest ‘if writing ourselves into our texts is a trope, we need to address the epistemological questions arising from it’ (2010: 16), I can only say that this is an account of mixed timelines and experiences that I could not present except from my own experiential autobiography (Okely 1992). In some senses, I chose not to fly and face the effects. It does not mean, however, there are no negative sides to be discussed.

**Changing Mode**

In ending the previous section with something that sounds like pathos, I do not wish to make it sound like travel is something I dislike. Is it even supposed to be easy? Taking something from my biography (the study of Old French when a student of modern languages), the etymology of the English word ‘travel’, borrowed from Old French *traveillier*, recalls the difficulties of travelling, and perhaps of medieval lays and quests such as Perceval’s in search of the *graal* (Chrétien de Troyes
1993) – or Ulrich von Lichtenstein’s *Frauendienst* journey to provide service to his ‘lady’ (Spechtler 1987) on which I once wrote a master’s dissertation. These travails generally are supposed to bring moral and status-based improvement. Is this the same for an academic? Being a modern and medieval linguist before an anthropologist, concerned once with such journeys, one of the first texts I read in anthropology chimed Perceval or Ulrich and their travails, when Evans-Pritchard wrote of the pre-mass-flight era, when ‘stormy weather prevented [his] luggage from joining [him] at Marseilles’ (1940: 10): my imagination of how one would do the journey today was rather piqued. This was from my experience of travelling academically even before becoming an anthropologist, when I had already become quite proficient at terrestrial travel with some help from Mark Smith, the eponymous author of the (highly recommended) ‘Man in Seat 61’ website, either from his guides or personal correspondence. My undergraduate degree had required a year spent abroad to improve my language skills. It was during this time that I stopped flying.

I spent a year teaching in an Austrian school, going to summer university courses in France, and then going back to Austria after graduating, before coming back to do a master’s degree (number one) in medieval and Renaissance studies. That was a period of discovering new things about the world, and much was done on rail. Compared to the highly limited and dilapidated-feeling Northern Ireland railway network, it was a revelation that long distances could be travelled easily. And short distances could be covered very regularly due to timetables that seemed indulgent compared to Northern Ireland. It was on the way to a summer course in France from Northern Ireland that I decided to fly no more. I first flew when six months old in order to visit relatives across the Irish Sea; at age 21, I stopped. This came after a year of eleven flight segments, mostly for ‘pleasure’. This came generally from a realisation that this mode of travel was highly unpleasant: going to airports stressed me, as did post-9/11 security. I do worry about security, but this also applies on land. Although the airport security Mark Maguire (2014) describes is also partly there in major train stations, I feel the pressure less. I am not a great fan of rough seas either (I stick to land in this article on account of avoiding the sea as much as possible from rough experiences) and do not like air turbulence, which also puts me off flying. Coming to this discipline was for me something which seemed to be described as involving a promise of travel – which as a modern linguist I was used to, having been involved in what Alison Phipps (2010) calls ‘languaging’, which
is akin to ethnographic learning. This involved talking to people and finding out things when doing so (all for academic purposes), and that seemed like a ‘good’ and exciting thing. While anthropologists seem(ed) to be doing this a great deal, the question of travelling as necessity or the reasons it is done does go beyond our discipline, however, and is rather problematised.

**Valorising Travel – Quantitative Pressures on Both Sides**

Gössling and colleagues (2019) found that international students at Sweden’s Lund University flew most for pleasure. For employed academics, a blog entry talking about ‘flying less’ makes us think of reducing our ‘carbon footprint’, while an article on the LSE’s *Impact Blog* asks us whether ‘the best academics fly more’. I am not convinced that a good answer is provided, but its author does point to the pressures on younger academics to physically travel to conferences and job interviews. I was Skype-interviewed for my current position more out of a lack of money available in those pre-pandemic times to pay applicants to attend in person. The LSE blog points to guidance by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research’s ‘travel strategy’ containing a flow chart to help their members to decide which mode of transport to take. If travel cannot be done virtually or avoided, then one can take this advice: if one is in the United Kingdom, one should go by train; if one is outside Europe, flying is the only realistic choice. But ‘for many journeys in Europe, the train is a feasible alternative to flying’, it claims, offering the Loco2 (now Rail Europe) travel booking site and Seat 61 as information sources. There follows some rather draconian-sounding monitoring using a mathematical formula with which researchers should record their monthly travel. It includes factoring in the time of the journey, but does so multiplied by emissions. This is then multiplied by another figure related to the importance of the travel to produce a ‘score’. Members are then monitored, and supposed to commit to reducing their score.

While this ‘audit culture’-infused (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2015; Strathern 2000) example might seem something anthropologists might criticise as unnecessarily bureaucratic, it does highlight the issue that the choice of conveyance will naturally affect the score. With different means of transport giving a carbon production amount per hour, the idea is then to score as low as possible. I do feel this rather takes the pleasure of travel away. However, there is, in comparison
to this example, another interesting quantitative valorisation at play, in the opposite ‘direction’: scoring as highly as possible. It applies to flying in particular, but other modes of transport also take part in similar schemes. I know which of them seems more conducive and persuasive to me.

One of the unexpected results of my PhD fieldwork was studying those giving customers ‘free’ things to get them to spend more – promoters handing out ‘mass-gifts’ (Hamilton 2012). Simultaneously, I had managed to master the Deutsche Bahn (DB) ticket system – even earning frequent traveller status via another form of such mass-gifting, that being frequent traveller point collecting. This is quite widespread amongst European railways, but most schemes are for airlines and hotels. There are many examples on the Internet of sites advising people how to maximise their points, or YouTube videos showing how far one can go with cleverly collected miles. This is only one subset of travel-related material on display. Yet these former examples show that the idea of travelling more seems good – the more one travels, especially with one organisation, the better treatment one gets as member of some elite in-group with access to lounges, upgrades and metallic-coloured membership cards. The *travails* of travel are there to be made less severe. Conversely, with travelling on land and not flying, spending more nights in hotels on a trip that might need none by air, I have been both a gold and silver member of the Accor Hotels’ ‘All’ programme. The free upgraded room and welcome drink are welcome indeed. This situation, in which you have the Tyndall idea of numericising anti-flying on the one hand and airlines’ idea of numericising (in points) positive flying on the other, is like having a cartoon devil and angel sitting on the shoulders of the traveller, pushing and pulling the latter in two ethical directions, except that these are expressed in figures. In some senses, it is beautiful; in others, it is diabolical, with numbers helping to make ethical decisions in full audit culture ‘Technicolor’.

### The Need to Travel

There are other audit culture aspects to this question of travelling. Certainly, anthropologists know the value of kinship and relatedness, and I am sure my parents keep a firm count on how often I get to visit Northern Ireland. Other friends often ask me how many years it has been since we have seen each other. However, I focus here mostly on
more academic examples. The first that comes to mind is the likewise ‘audity’ league-table-based counting of research outputs. To get the data for those outputs, traditionally we gain ethnographic data. Are we anthropologists not supposed, as anthropologists, to go and see things, traditionally, like Evans-Pritchard and Bronislaw Malinowski? Or at least travel away from our own countries for fieldwork (Hann 2005)? In any case, being on the move is something anthropologists have traditionally been associated with. Hendy, the physicist who stopped flying, is not doing fieldwork, and his travel is mainly to be in a place where he can work in a laboratory or office. Ours traditionally, for better or for worse, has often required large distances that would today likely be done by aeroplane rather than by ship or bus.

Due to a chance meeting at a research event, I rather unexpectedly became a member of a local Rotary Club, and I am even now its president. Travel is something that is often discussed at club lunches. With mostly businesspersons and diplomats as members (who earn a great deal more than me), the discussion often is of exotic holidays and business trips via airports. Discussion of the best airlines and airports forms part of these discussions. While in this ‘ex-patriate’ world of travelling first class (Amit 2007) I can hold my own with the unexpected membership in Accor’s frequent traveller scheme as a result of not flying, it feels like I am describing a different world when I talk of trains or busses, as it cuts down on the ‘exotic’ destinations in easy reach. What can I share? All of the travel I have done for academic purposes whether as an undergraduate, a postgraduate or a staff member has been in Europe, and all the travel I have done for ‘business’ purposes has been in Western and Central Europe – up until being employed in Latvia, a topic to which I will soon turn. There were holidays in Eastern Europe, all done by train or bus. However, these were more leisurely affairs without time pressures and were self-funded. The academic situation often requires more of a sprint than a stroll.

In terms of things that need to be done, there are some obvious things including conferences and fieldwork (as mentioned above). The furthest away conference in time terms from Latvia for me was in Bucharest in Romania, and this meant transit via Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova on quite slow busses and trains (plus long border-crossing stops). Trips like this one affect teaching. Delivering five or six courses/modules per semester requires presence, especially if one of these alone requires sixteen one-and-a-half-hour sessions (legally thirty-two, if no virtual learning environment work is provided). Time absent must be made up for, and I support that wholeheartedly, as
students deserve it and either they or the state have paid for it. Yet this can bring complexity into the timetable with disruptions that thankfully the presence of flexible students helps mitigate. To return to the question of time, here the idea of ‘pacing’ suggested by Vered Amit and Noel Salazar, which helps to explain ‘the dynamic relationships between people, space and time’ in mobility studies is useful, as it ‘plac[es] a deliberate emphasis on interrogating the momentum for and temporal composition of mobility, the rate at which people may seek to enact or deploy their movements’ (2020: 2). This nexus of time and mobility is visible in this case of non-flying from a Latvian perspective. It has become something built into my life experience too as a result of not flying.

Anthropologists Amit and Salazar (2020: 3) point to the situation described by Tim Aldrich (2005), who notes that life at speed is important while also highlighting that people feel that their life is in ‘overdrive’. In academic life, we likely feel great pressure to produce, and not to waste time. However, travelling by land in my Eastern European experience is not always conducive to feeling high speeds and quick transit is involved. I mentioned above the distance to Bucharest as being that which took the longest time, but perhaps that is just the sensation of sitting on coaches, long border stops and the need for recuperation after long stretches on one single conveyance. A journey which is longer ‘as the crow flies’ (e.g. to London) seems quicker to some extent. With the design of the conveyances, there is also what feels like more of an ability to get things done in terms of academic work. While not as extreme as the position of the car drivers working while driving, as Eric Laurier (2005) describes – a coach passenger can leave that to others while, however, observing the process while sat at the front, as can be done on some DB trains with transparent windows to the driver’s cab – some work can be done while travelling. The slower travel and longer travel time of this slowed-down pace might also give us a chance to work even more while moving, like the 46 per cent of Norwegian business commuters Mattias Gripsrud and Randi Hjorthol (2012) found do. However, from trying this, the conveyance affects this ability. Seat tables on a train are better for such work than on a bus, where the seats are sometimes compulsorily reclined once the steward declares it is the time for sleep. In terms of mobility as method, this may give the chance to observe more as the laptop may have to stay stowed in one’s bag. With the lights off, however, this is not easy.

If attention returns, though, to the Tyndall Centre’s advice, the situation for those in the United Kingdom sounds quite practical. They
point their people towards the highly useful Seat 61 website. There, trains sound practical, and indeed would be for UK travellers to most of the mainland of Europe. Travelling to Germany from the United Kingdom is quite easy by rail and speedy on many high-speed lines. It is also not extremely expensive in Western European terms, especially if one has some research funding to enable travel. DB offers saver tickets integrated with a Eurostar Channel Tunnel transit. Despite the (apparently technically related and hopefully temporary) removal of these tickets, at the time of writing I tried to book a second-class ticket to London from Salzburg (a border station DB shares with ÖBB) two months ahead, and the price was €69.8. Compared to a single Eurostar ticket, this is very good value when departing from Austria, transiting a good portion of western Germany, then Belgium, northern France and Kent. If one were to live in London, according to DB’s timetable online, it would take approximately nine hours to get to Berlin, and booked well in advance the price is similar. This example is simple – I suggest both in practical terms and in comparison to the travel I do. Though the Seat 61 website is quite useful for travel further eastwards than Berlin, it does begin to sound more complicated. Connections increase, chances of missing these multiply, and the lack of later running services brings warnings from Smith to either stay overnight or leave long gaps between connections. This is, from experience, good advice.

Complicated Connections – Where to Travel

In the previous decade, anthropology and related discipline departments from five universities in the Baltic States (including mine) received a Wenner-Gren Institutional Development Grant to develop a joint doctoral programme. During the time of this grant, conference- or workshop-like events were held, and due to the presence of our partners mostly being in Western Europe – which was due to the need for strong support in gaining a Wenner-Gren grant in the first place – their professors received invites to come and talk in Riga or Kaunas. This was alongside other academics who could contribute to the situation, or shine bright lights from shining stars upon certain situations. People were glad to have the chance to be able to easily afford to invite ‘big names’ (whose contributions were excellent), and they made a sincere effort to do so. Where were these ‘big names’ located? The majority were in Western Europe, and specifically the
Ground-Level Travel for a non-Flying Baltic States Anthropologist

United Kingdom. I was in charge of overseeing the travel arrangements for two of the events in Riga. All speakers coming from the United Kingdom came by aeroplane. I doubt I could have persuaded people, or would even have dared to try, to travel by land and take a three-day journey when a less-than-three-hour journey by air was the alternative.

But what of travel in the other direction? It is of course good that our collaborators on this project were so incredibly helpful. But on a broader level of the discipline itself, this direction looking westwards for academic inspiration has been problematised in anthropology in general under the broad banner of ‘citational politics’, a phenomenon broadly represented by writers such as Catherine Lutz (1990), Faye Harrison (1995) and Lynne Bolles (2013), amongst others. In terms of post-socialist anthropology, this issue was hashed out in the debate between Michał Buchowski (2004, 2005) and Chris Hann (Buchowski 2004; Buchowski 2005; Hann 2005) on who better writes the anthropology of the area (those from the countries involved or the West). To this the question arises of where one goes to hear the latest developments. Maybe it is my UK birthplace and education, but, beyond EASA’s conferences and network events, there is also the ASA and its conferences. There is a sensation that travel westwards is rather important to remain in the loop, or be perhaps consigned to being an eastern Other.

Going in the other direction, when I applied for my current job, and once again joined the ranks of ‘Global Ireland’ (Wilson and Donnan 2006: 3), such as the relatives I flew to at six-months were, I had not really thought much about the travel arrangements of getting to the Baltic States. I would definitely have still taken the job had I known more about the transport issues (and who is not glad to take an assistant professor position a few weeks after graduation from doctoral studies?). I am not complaining about this, but I think it is instructive in its complexity. Each portion requires a new ticket, and if something were to go wrong, each individual ticket is a contract and rail operators are required to help no further than the end destination noted under ‘CIV’ rules (an international agreement between rail operators monitored by the CIT, the International Rail Transport Committee). Even if DB offers a saver to Warsaw, getting to Riga from the United Kingdom, or Germany or Austria or in fact anywhere when not transiting via Riga Airport, is not particularly easy. Smith of Seat 61 actually advises travelling from Germany, onwards to Scandinavia, and then by ferry to Riga as the first option rather than the overland
route, via Warsaw, which means ‘a cramped 9-hour bus journey from Warsaw to Vilnius, either all day or overnight in a bus seat’. For me, there exists after this an extra four hours to Riga.

Whether cramped or not, there is not much choice and whether one has wireless Internet, or a media screen playing films or perhaps a more luxurious seat in a more spacious ‘lounge’ at the back of the bus like Lux Express conveyances do, such amenities do not seem to add much to Smith’s impression of them. Indeed, in my experience, even in the ‘lounge’ a reclining seat can leave no space for laptop usage, or much personal space at all. This four-hour journey was indeed described to me as ‘very long’ by an unhappy tourist, after she had nearly knocked my laptop off the little seat-back table – showing again that working on a coach is not always easy. Smith suggests that taking these coaches was ‘not something that was necessary in communist times, when a good train service operated!’. Indeed even before the Soviet period – that is, in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a regular through sleeper coach from Riga to Paris.\textsuperscript{11} For at least until the next decade, the busses are for me the only option.

**Gaps and Routes**

It appears that one of the routes these through trains took could not easily operate today by rail, or bus, either because of a lack of rail connections or because of the need for visas for EU citizens such as I am. This is via what was Königsberg,\textsuperscript{12} the erstwhile Prussian city which is now Kaliningrad in the eponymous Russian oblast. Rather, the busses take a different route. This is the E67 road. This is also called the Via Baltica, I suppose recognising where it ends up. It runs from Prague to Helsinki, but transverses Poland and the Baltic States in doing so. Once again, due to the vagaries of bus transport, if I travel with the Estonian company Lux Express,\textsuperscript{13} I am diverted off it via Vilnius, adding a great deal of time to the journey which requires changing busses. Most journeys I take outside the Baltic States (i.e. not visiting Belarus or Russia for leisure travel) require transiting Warsaw via the Polish city of Suwałki. Figure 1 shows the geographical situation of Lux’s route map. Suwałki is somewhat (in)famous in defence terms, having the ‘Suwałki Gap’ named after it, something created as the result of the presence of the Kaliningrad oblast. The Baltic States are connected hereby to the rest of the European Union only by a gap of approximately 65 kilometres from relevant tri-point to tri-point
(Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Belarus), which means that all traffic today which wishes to remain in the Schengen area must be funnelled through this area, and road links are therefore not aplenty due to limited space. This is described in a melancholy article in the US military

**Figure 1.** Lux Express route map taken from *Direction*, the company’s quarterly in-seat magazine © Lux Express.
newspaper *Stars and Stripes* as ‘a vulnerable corridor along NATO’s eastern flank regarded by military planners as today’s version of the Cold War’s Fulda Gap’ (Vandiver 2018: 1). The Fulda Gap (Faringdon 1989: 375–378) is defunct. During fieldwork in Germany, I always felt quite relieved changing trains in the eponymous central German station, as it was reassuring that more peaceful times had arrived in Germany and the rest of the continent. This was particularly relevant when studying in Eastern Germany about the changes it and its people were undergoing. This new gap is also symbolic, in that it mingles isolation with connection to the rest of the European Union: a physical manifestation of geopolitical realities, hosting NATO troops to reassure the people of the Baltic States who fear Russian aggression and being ‘cut off’ from the rest of NATO territory, and who have memories of fifty years of Soviet occupation. And right now, they are wary of the events unfolding in Ukraine.

However, there are less ominous aspects to this route, too, which point to time, including the future but also the past. When describing mobility in (post-)socialist Albania, Dimitris Dalakoglou (2017) shows the changes and continuities in road-building ideas in the socialist and post-socialist eras. I have heard Latvians say that Lithuania has good roads because they requested these in the Soviet Union, while the Latvian SSR asked for factories (but also got ethnic Russians to work in them, leading to complex ethnic questions today). Yet the present is when practical problems lie all along the Via Baltica. In terms of infrastructure, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox note that for roads in Peru ‘the problems were deemed to stem from the gaps and discontinuities in the infrastructural system’ (2015: 21). Although the Suwałki Gap is a different type of gap, the E67 road that goes through it shows the issues of qualitative lacunae which make the bus journeys longer than they could be. As the military sees this gap as vital, the European Union sees this route as a priority, forming part of TERN, the Trans-European Road Network, as part of TEN-T, the ‘Trans-European Transport Network’. Harvey and Knox’s Peruvian case also highlights the international aspect in building these pieces of road infrastructure. This example shows how, in this road chain with no alternative to the Suwałki Gap, the trade and also land passenger travel of three countries rely on multiple aspects of international co-operation – including EU investment and the building priorities of another country (i.e. Poland).

While the road is a major route for transit and trade, it is in large parts a single carriageway. A large Irizar-brand coach cannot overtake all that easily faced with heavy oncoming traffic where speed limits
are low. Even leaving Riga can take half an hour. The E67 inside Poland follows the 61 highway and also the S8 expressway. The latter is dualled now, and the 61 will eventually become the same, and just like the S61 there will be a new section built away from the current road. I do not want to appear as a Besserwessi (Berdahl 1999: 168), the name for Westerners (Germans) that Eastern Germans use for those that come and assume they know better than they do. Tauri Tuvikene (2018) argues for similarities in the sense of mobility in ‘East’ and ‘West’ related to modernity. There is an irony here, though. Anand and colleagues note that ‘new infrastructures are promises made in the present about our future’ (2018: 27). What type of future is envisaged? Not-flying can also mean being impatient for development, which may be seen by others (who may fly!) as environmentally damaging. Environmental concerns rightly did affect the route of the E67, but also slowed down its building. Yet this shows that these future promises can be contested and that the sense of promise might be ambivalent. Certainly, Riga Airport was booming pre-pandemic, which suggests air travel has no shortage of takers (TBT Staff 2020).

Despite this ambivalent position and interest in air, there is interest in the building of roads, even from lay people, and road-building has spectators. In Northern Ireland, Wesley Johnson’s Northern Ireland Roads Site15 tracks the development of road projects and their completion. Brian Larkin, in his magisterial review of the anthropology of infrastructure, notes that ‘roads and railways are not just technical objects then but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real’ (2013: 333). Further, Larkin notes ‘the way technologies come to represent the possibility of being modern, of having a future, or the foreclosing of that possibility and a resulting experience of abjection’ (2013: 333). In such a vein, Harvey and Knox write of the campaigns for roads in Peru and ‘the longings they express for modernity and progress’ (2015: 25; see also Harvey 2018), whereas, in the post-Soviet context of Kyrgyzstan Madeleine Reeves (2017) talks of ‘infrastructural hope’ that the construction of a road can bring. In a different post-socialist context, Stef Jansen (2015) analyses how people in Sarajevo measured the return of a sense of normality via the reintroduction of public transport infrastructure. Such yearnings for infrastructure are visible in online contexts as well.

I regularly pay attention to the ‘Highways and Autobahns’ section of the Skyscraper City Internet forum,16 and in particular the
threads on Poland (as well as Lithuania and Latvia) for updates where attention is towards this future development. Unlike the campaigners against, here there is much more positivity and Baltic States people comment on the Lithuanian and Polish sections. There are indeed individual fora for parts of the Via Baltica. In terms of Polish road construction in general, one of the contributors with the username of ‘IgorSel’ (via their Facebook page, where posts of updates get up to forty ‘likes’\(^\text{17}\)) produces a map showing the status of road-building and planning. It is too complex to reproduce here, but I have a link to the map in my browser bookmarks bar, and I feel I must look at it every day for news. This map uses colour to show the status of each project and section, and shows the vagaries of infrastructure-building in post-socialist states. In early writings on post-socialism in anthropology, the sense of transition talked of in other disciplines – the notion of a ‘normal’ future to which places would move – was highly critiqued, but this is visible still in the sense of infrastructural development in the European Union and the funding given to such projects as the Via Baltica, which are seen as critical for economic development and linking member states together. Northern Ireland has its own version of this. The ‘peace dividend’ of the paramilitary ceasefires and Good Friday Agreement included items such as Gordon Brown’s Chancellor’s Package of infrastructural improvements – useful if your road is upgraded to match the movement of your nearest emergency hospital miles along it. Normality and infrastructure got, however, entwined.

Hannah Appel suggests that ‘infrastructure is the imagined materialization of this thing called an economy’ (2018: 49), pointing to the idea of ‘infrastructural time’. While the economies of Eastern Europe have ‘improved’, Daphne Berdahl, for example, points to the reversals in grand narratives of the ‘transitology’ of progress (2000: 1–2). Although time has passed since the Soviet/state socialist regimes, the successor states still face the issues that this past status has left them in in comparison to Western Europe, in particular in terms of wealth and tax revenues. Korpela notes that ‘states are key actors that exercise power through a variety of infrastructures related to people’s transnational mobility’ (2016: 113) and ‘have traditionally played a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of a large number of infrastructures’ (2016: 127). EU funding is being used here for such purposes to improve or build new infrastructure that might otherwise take much longer to achieve due to the lower sums available in individual post-socialist state budgets.

If there were to be a ‘transitology’ of road-building, there is progress towards some vision of a connected set of places, but the grand
narratives are likewise confused and replete with many reversals and pauses, which affect the lived experience of those who need to travel. The map road-line colours should progress from blue to green via others for planning and, most importantly, to red for construction. Yet some sections of the S61 (and other roads) have changed from red back to blue, and then, frustratingly, started the colour journey all over again. The Polish road authorities tried to get the cheapest deals, but the Western European companies who bid on parts of this route (and others) could not meet the low prices promised and had to be removed (e.g. Reuters Staff 2019). This seems to prolong the time of building, pushing things into the future. In this sense, the colour progression shown on the key at the foot of the map is like the short ‘story seeds’ Michael Carrithers (2009) mentions as unfolding longer narratives, where the red gives a sense of activity and progress, but blue creates a narrative of waiting and going through many stages to get to that point. The complexity added to the key to incorporate the backwards-and-forwards steps shows that these narratives are far from simple. The question of relying on others’ development appears starkly in this map, too. The blue lines (suggesting the earliest stage of planning) appear mostly in the east. This is understandable, as the Polish population lies mostly West of Warsaw, and thus might show where priorities lie, but the map shows how infrastructural time moves more slowly close to the Baltic States, Belarus, and Ukraine.

On Barak (2013) describes the difference between ‘European time’ and ‘Egyptian time’, and how infrastructure-building can affect perceptions of time itself, while Ina Dietzsch (2014) talks of the slowing of mobility in Eastern Germany. Here is an example of waiting for the development of a road, which also represents progression towards some form of European integration via infrastructure. There is not much choice for me but to wait; I have no influence over the matter. However, there is another aspect of having to wait and sit. From examining an old timetable posted on Twitter (see note 18), it appears that it was quicker to travel by train from Riga to Berlin in the 1930s than it is today by train. This question of having to endure time that feels extra to what would be needed had there been better infrastructure is a bit frustrating. I wondered when first moving around the Baltic States whether these long journeys seem quite fine in perhaps what might be called ‘post-socialist bus time’ (with journeys and the infrastructure they use being in poor condition), which may be related to the similarly long time Russian railway journeys can take. I think of the unhappy tourist mentioned above and the
length of this short journey on the bus. Yet, rows over this often occur on aeroplanes, according to the media. However, the issue was that this was apparently a ‘long’ journey which required reclining rest. For me, now, four hours seems short, but perhaps nearly twelve to Warsaw pushes the envelope of comfort. In any case, the Via Baltica cannot be completed soon enough. However, another Baltica-named development is at hand, which offers even more hope, even if in the future too.

**A Rail Solution?**

One of the ‘longish’ rail journeys involving Russia begins close to our faculty. If I happen to be teaching around 5:00 pm, my ears vibrate due to the leaving of the Latvijas Expresis train towards Moscow and St Petersburg. While the train situation through the Suwałki Gap is dire (two, very slow trains between Białystok and Kaunas per day but only on weekends with most sections having a maximum speed of 60–80 kilometres per hour),\(^1\) the broad-gauge network towards Russia still exists and carries much freight, and is thus symbolic of the connections of people and economies still existing from the Soviet period. This connection to Poland and onwards will improve via Rail Baltica, a new 250 kilometre per hour standard-gauge (thus, ‘European’) high-speed line being currently constructed to Warsaw and beginning in Tallinn. When teaching in person, I can see the future tracks from the window of the faculty, and also from a friend’s house. The works ironically cause traffic delays and polluting congestion. Outside the city, the railway has also caused environmental concerns. I was once told by a former railway management member that prices will be three times those of busses, thus weighing up speed and cost will not only apply to land versus air. It is such complexities – rail being ‘good’ but expensive, but also ‘bad’ like bus travel for the environment – that points to the various factors which mean making choices when travelling is certainly not as simple as it might appear in just deciding to be aviation-free. Indeed, bus users’ needs might well be allied with those of car drivers in terms of longing for road-building, even if their travelling by bus is a result of finding cars too polluting. Rail Baltica’s website\(^2\) paints a relatively happy picture for rail in the future, showing a journey time between Riga and Vilnius reduced from four hours to one hour and forty-two minutes, and ‘only’ a relative 52 per cent price increase to €38. Air travel might
be considerably shorter, according to the provided table, but the rail ticket is only 30.4 per cent of the airfare. This is according to them at least, and the actual price details remain a decade away.

The final point I wish to make here is about the movement of time, especially as I age. I did not mind ‘roughing it’ when younger, but twelve hours on a bus in one day encourages the bones to stiffen. Overnight in a bus seat is also often not conducive to rest. However, sleeper trains are enjoying a renaissance in Europe (Groendahl and Bosley 2019), with ÖBB even offering new capsule hotel-like individual berths (Railway Gazette International Staff 2019). This question of comfort is important if such journeys might take longer than flights. I sometimes book two seats on the bus instead of one, and this is generally inexpensive. I sometimes travel first class if on private travel, as at times the price difference between first and second class is minimal if the seats are booked far in advance. This is perhaps the final time issue, the spread of airline-style pricing to ground travel. Booking in advance makes the fares I quoted above seem cheap; however, this once again shows the issue of Eastern European land travel. I often feel that only advance purchase Western tickets are affordable to me on a Latvian wage. Attending a job interview in Western Europe at short notice reminded me of the high price of walk-up tickets. Thankfully, that university was paying! As mentioned above, there also is the issue of much of European anthropological activity seeming to be based in the West; this travel westwards means much sticklebrick ticketing with each adding on more cost, and I am not sure Rail Baltic will solve that. The presence of the Railteam alliance and voluntary Agreement for Journey Continuation can help if one risks being stranded: additional days added to a trip may be fine for one’s holidays, but not with time-sensitive arrival deadlines for conference presentations and return ones for teaching when one needs to travel at a high pace.

The Final Destination: A Conclusion

I do not wish to end on a negative note, and I certainly will not stop land travelling. If I were to decide to fly now (unlikely as it might be), I could go into my BA Executive Club account and purchase some mass-gifted inter-continental flights from points I get for online shopping. Perhaps these things might even encourage more to stay on land, reminding them of the air, with the accoutrements of business
travel existing on the ground as well as the air. It does show, however, the need to learn the new intricacies of the new systems if moving from air to land.

Having started with an example about EASA, another appears now in this conclusion. I tried to make change seem possible at the online EASA 2020 conference ‘in’ Lisbon, holding a workshop on considering how to practically make these changes and buy tickets. Attendance was not high, and I will not speculate on why this was the case any further than just to say that this was perhaps off people’s agendas in a pandemic, but it is something that at least got some interest under the circumstances, and one particularly keen contributor from Eastern Europe highlighted the difficulties faced in getting from the United Kingdom to their country. One thing I would have done, and began to do, was to blog on how I was going to get from Latvia to Portugal. The pandemic put paid to this, but I wished to show how it was possible and attempt to encourage more. If I can do it from here (Latvia, or Northern Ireland), then you can do it from there! I hope that the pandemic allows travel to Belfast easily for EASA 2022, and let it be terrestrial! In any case, these post-socialist structural difficulties with infrastructure are likely to improve over time, and with the movement to reduce flying, the railway companies’ effort to improve their offer, and public bodies encouraging staying terrestrial, many things could happen to make the situation better.

This reflection has reminded me of the strong effects that one choice can make on one’s biography, so much so that a great deal of what one does – professionally and personally – is moulded by and to this decision. Being in academia, this is amplified by the scarcity of jobs, but also where as a result we end up working and those places becoming part of our biography too. To return to the idea of rewards for travelling, I had never planned not to fly. Indeed, for a number of years I had earned Airmiles (now BA Executive Club Miles) for that modern language degree travel. They are still there, waiting to be used two decades later, and I continue to add to their balance through online shopping, because it seems a waste not to when they are available. This shows the unexpectedness of what can affect our lives, but the unexpired points show that timescales are also long, and who knows what might occur? As anthropologists, we often find ourselves co-inhabiting the life-worlds of others, not just in fieldwork and research, but also in just being academic anthropologists who have to get places in ways we did not expect or plan for. Our biographies are very hastily but also leisurely remouldable narratives.
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Notes

1. ÖBB = Österreichische Bundesbahnen.
2. This text was first prepared before the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is too early to decide what changes might be necessary in a post-pandemic world.
3. My colleague Patrick Laviolette might be an exception here, in that he has written about hitchhiking to academic events. He has also clocked many hours on LuxExpress, Ecolines, Flix and BlaBla busses.
7. See also Bird-David and Darr (2009a, 2009b) for more information on ‘mass-gifts’.
9. See also Kürti and Skalník (2009) and Cervinkova (2012).
13. Not wishing to sound like an advert, please note that other bus companies are available (e.g. Ecolines).
14. I take this as ethnographic data, but for a Lithuanian rendition of the infrastructure they received, see de Munck (2005: 227). I have also heard Latvians claim that Lithuania got good roads so tanks could travel to the Kaliningrad oblast.

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