

## PART II

## PHYSICAL OBJECTS

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## Relocating Innovation

### *Postcards from Three Edges*

This chapter is based on a research project titled “Relocating Innovation: Places and Material Practices of Future Making” that we undertook between 2008 and 2010 (Suchman, Dányi, and Watts 2008). We were working across three diverse, seemingly incomparable field sites: a nascent renewable energy industry in the islands of Orkney, Scotland; the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest; and the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center in the Silicon Valley region of California. We knew that our project was held together through our shared interest in questioning narratives of innovation based in geographies of center and periphery. But how could we produce generative connections between our ethnographic research materials, which seemed so disconnected? How could we compare, and what should we compare, when comparison is not random juxtaposition but thoughtful work that must cut strategically in order to produce conversations and openings across continents and time zones (Niewöhner and Scheffer 2010; Jensen et al. 2011; Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličkova 2016)? One answer for us was a collaboration technique that involved making, sharing, and comparing ethnographic postcards.<sup>1</sup>

Our chapter offers a demonstration and discussion of three of those postcards exchanged between our “edgy” future-making field sites. We draw on archaeologist Michael Shanks’s notion of katachresis, a forcible juxtaposition designed to produce frictions (2004, 152), suggested to us as an empirical strategy during a project workshop. In what follows we show how to make postcards from moments with “ethnographic effect,” how to use those postcards to create katachresis across field sites, and how postcards

helped us both to think differently about field sites and to re-specify what we could mean by innovation and future-making.

#### THE INITIAL IDEA

The idea of making postcards came early on, while we were preparing for a workshop with the Anthropology Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2009. The aim was to engage workshop participants in thinking about how our field sites could generate interesting, unexpected connections. During our research we had sailed away, over the curve of the Earth, at different times and to different parts of the planet. Perhaps it was that sense of distance and difference, not just geographical but also experiential, that inspired us. On Laura's shelf was an old, much-loved book, *Postcards from the Planets* (Drew 1992). In its beautiful pages, a future tourist had sent back to Earth a series of postcards from the planets in the solar system. The postcards rendered each planet as a human experience, one the reader could imagine and inhabit—a mixture of both evidence and somewhat florid interpretation. In a similar way, we thought we could send postcards from our distant field sites to make them more accessible for ourselves and for each other, and to make them travel. More prosaically, because at that point we had not visited each other's field sites, the postcards would share both our experiences of places unknown to the others, and specific empirical evidence from those places. Postcards could render moments from our ethnographic field sites and make pieces of places that could travel.<sup>2</sup>

In practical terms, the internet (a blogging platform, to be more precise) was our initial postal service; we each “posted” an image and a related paragraph.<sup>3</sup> We were sporadic, with the upcoming workshop providing impetus. But it was still a conversation, a blog thread, where one person made a postcard or two, and another responded with their postcards. Now, almost a decade later, we have returned to reflect on this process. Let us remember: How did we make each postcard? How did we cut out a field site fragment, as an image and some text?

#### SAMPLE POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGES

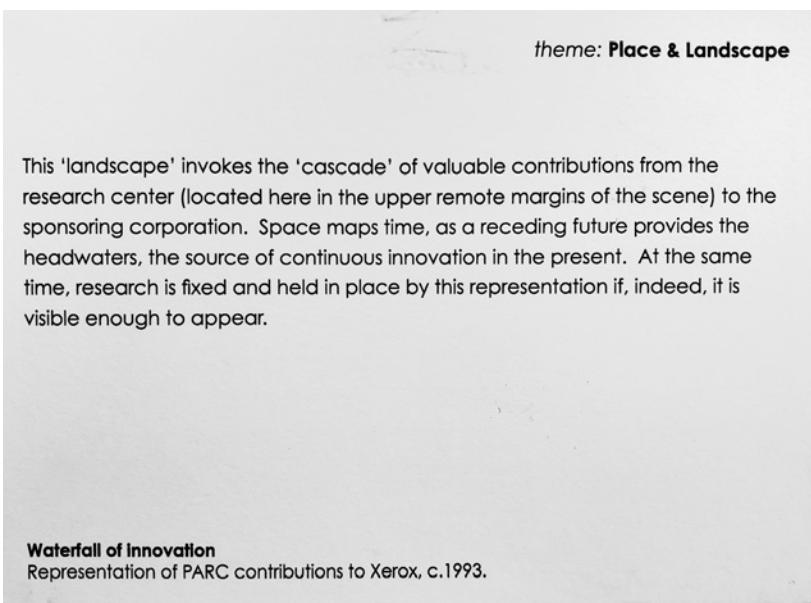
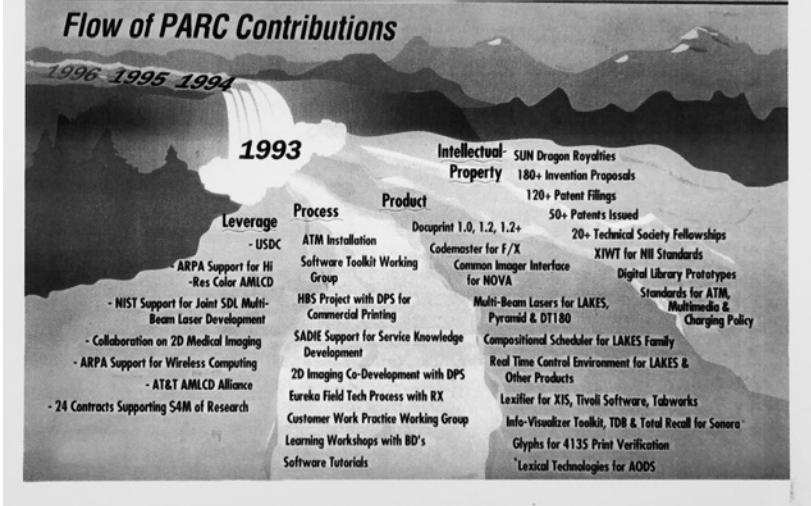
From Silicon Valley: The project takes me back to materials collected over a twenty-year period, roughly from 1980 to 2000. The materials exist primarily as paper files, items kept on the hunch that something interest-

ing might be said about them later, in some future when I would have the time to engage them. The call to make postcards suggests a particular pass through the files, a hunt most obviously for photographs but also other visual images, or fragments of text that might be framed as an image. Most of these are images generated from within the everyday life of my field site rather than from my own photography. Among the former are multiple instances of a particular genre, a variety of modes of mapping one's work in a way that indicates a history of productive labor and a promise of future returns on investment. Among these I'm struck by one titled "Flow of PARC Contributions" (figures 5.1 and 5.2).<sup>4</sup>

In a trope reminiscent of the "waterfall model" of product development but rendered pastoral, the image pictures a torrent flowing from the upper left corner of the frame, falling as a broad cascade that dominates the view. Two clearly unnatural elements mark the picture's iconography. The first is a reversal of time, as the future recedes upstream. The second is a structural fixing of the cascade's flow, as time stops in a freeze frame of the year 1993, and the waters divide into four distinct streams labeled "Leverage," "Process," "Product," and "Intellectual Property." Onto each stream is affixed a label that in turn translates activity into an enumerable entity (Verran 2010), a project. Time is mapped to a space of intervals between a present moment and a projected future. If maps have politics, this map is a technology of accountability to a narrative of product(ivity). Not having a place on the map indicates the uncertainty of one's own future. The fact that our own research group barely shows up is a portent of troubles to come. As our themes developed (of which more below), this postcard became an example of the theme "Place and Landscape."

From Budapest: My postcards included several images of the Hungarian Parliament as a monument, a tourist attraction, a complex organization, a theater-like arena for political debates, and a backdrop of mass demonstrations. I also had a few images of politicians and one related to Hungary's socialist past. The image on one of my postcards is a photo that I took in the so-called Statue Park—a private collection of dozens of socialist statues that were removed from public squares and almost destroyed after 1989 (figures 5.3 and 5.4).

The postcard shows the negative image of a socialist scene in one statue: the march of soldiers in uniform, rifles in hand, moving from left to right under the guidance of the Red Star. The soldiers, who used to be metal figures, have been removed, and the Red Star is completely missing. All that is left is a star-shaped hole in the concrete.



FIGURES 5.1 AND 5.2 "Waterfall of Innovation," courtesy of PARC, a Xerox company.



**theme: Newness**

'Annus Mirabilis' –this is how 1989 is usually remembered, the miraculous year when state socialism collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the same year marks the disappearance of yet another dreamworld of modernity, that of a unified, homogeneous West. 'Against the often-repeated story of the West's winning the Cold War and capitalism's historical triumph over socialism,' Susan Buck-Morss argues that 'the historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.' Susan Buck-Morss: *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, 2002, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. xii.

**Disappearing dreamworlds**

Buda Volunteers Regiment Memorial, Statue Park, Budapest.

**FIGURES 5.3 AND 5.4** "Disappearing Dreamworlds."

These are traces of iconoclasm, or iconoclash, to use Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel's (2002) term. For the statue park is a record, not only of attempts to destroy the icons of the past, but also of the grotesque effect generated by the relocation of those icons. Stalin's gigantic boots overshadow the stone figures of Marx and Engels, who stare at Lenin addressing a group of peasants. Socialism is easy to ridicule—it stands for a future that has somehow expired or lost its credibility. The back side of the postcard is a reflection on exactly this sentiment. It is a quote by Susan Buck-Morss (2002), who has suggested that 1989 marked the end not only of the East but also of the West. Socialism was a “convenient other” to capitalism, the latter of which was gradually exported to Central and Eastern Europe as the only viable future—see the oft-cited fantasy about the end of history (Fukuyama 1992). This postcard became an example of the theme “Newness.”

From Orkney: At the time, I was just beginning what would become a decade of extended fieldwork (Watts 2019), taking field notes each day and keeping a photo record. But there were always moments—little stories told, pieces of places—that snagged and caught my attention, a glow suffusing particular parts of my memory and notes (these were inseparable). The requirement to make postcards was akin to wielding a craft knife: it made me cut out those glowing moments and turn them into bounded pieces of a story. Sometimes the words led directly from my field notes, and then I found a photograph as accompaniment. Sometimes the place led the story, and I began with a photograph and then sought to find the words for the postcard. Sometimes it all came together as a tangle, and I had to unravel and cut out the precise words and the precise photograph. The story, the moment, never existed before. Looking back, I feel ambivalent about the solidification and smoothing work that the postcards, as a method, did to my ethnography. I cannot evade or ever lose those stories. They rattle around like ball bearings whenever I reflect on my field site in retrospect. Making stories always has consequences.

This postcard began with a quote that I do remember—from a conversation with a colleague and collaborator over tea and a sandwich in Orkney (figures 5.5 and 5.6).

He talked about how the islands had held an international conference for renewable energy back in 2002, one of the first such conferences in the world, and how this history of taking a leading role in innovation was never remembered in metropolitan political centers—hence this postcard became an example of the theme “(Non)histories.” I also knew how the is-



**theme: (Non)histories**

There is an archaeology of the future here on Orkney. It's place where futures happen first, but then cannot be moved, and are abandoned at the edge. Long forgotten state-funded future for a UK wind energy industry rot as concrete platforms in the ground, a derelict visitor's centre. When futures cannot move, they get re-invented as new elsewhere. Who remembers when Orkney is first? All remember when London is first. "We see problems and feedback quickly... we can move quickly, but when it [finally] happens in a big metropolitan city, with its money and location, you cannot compete..." explains a local academic.

**Future Archaeologies**

Remnants of the UK's first large-scale wind turbine, installed in 1986.

**FIGURES 5.5 AND 5.6 "Future Archaeologies."**

lands had been the test site for the UK's burgeoning wind energy industry in the early 1980s. I had visited the remains of that wind energy test site, taking a photograph of the great concrete base, still there on the hilltop. This entangled evidence was smoothed into some text for the postcard, to make an empirical point, and my photo of the concrete archaeology of the long-gone wind turbine was attached. I labeled the photograph "Future Archaeologies," a concept that I had been exploring in a previous project (Watts 2012b, 2014a). There are no neat edges between projects; ideas overflow, previous thoughts helping to shape others. I posted this all to the blog.

Returning to this postcard now, its story may roll around with hard edges, but it remains pertinent. Interestingly, the conversations with the other two postcards now make me retell this story in new ways. It is not as hardened as I had perhaps imagined—although this should not be surprising, given that stories are rehearsed, performed, and that within those moments there is always the potential for accounts to be made otherwise. We can always read against the grain, for example. Making a postcard is only the first part of the method. Reading a postcard is the next move, with its own located-ness and politics. We are as implicated in our reading as in our making. "One story is not as good as another," as Donna Haraway (1989, 331) puts it, reflecting on the politics reproduced by our choice of stories. Similarly, one reading is not as good as another.

#### THEMATIZING THE POSTCARDS

But there are more steps to the method. We did not end with the online versions, as they were blog posts and not postcards as we had intended—the interactions are very different between these technologies. We took the posts and turned them into physical form, printed as draft postcards on paper. In total, we made thirty-five postcards, around ten postcards each (though we weren't counting). Turning them into physical form was a crucial step because it meant we could spend some time working with them on a large table, sorting them, discussing the connections, exploring them as a set. Out of this first workshop we finalized groups of themes.

The themes ran across our project, and some we had already begun discussing during the project proposal. But they were ongoing conversations, and the postcards enabled us to enrich our critique and discussion of them, to explore what they might say, how our field sites informed and deepened these themes and gave them shape. Most postcards could fit under several

themes, and our discussions focused less on choosing a theme than on the insights we could gain from reading the postcards together under different themes. In short, the point of the workshop was not to solve the problem of fitting a postcard to the best theme, but to open up the themes by using the postcards as evidence to explore our comparisons and construct our arguments. Our list of themes developed into these five: Place and Landscape, (Non)histories, Newness, Distributed-Centered Subjects/Objects (with thanks to Miallet [2012]), and Centers/Peripheries. Once the themes were made and agreed between us (although the list could have



FIGURE 5.7 Postcards.

gone on), we made the final sets of postcards, printed on stiff card stock. Each set was enclosed and packaged in a DVD case (figure 5.7).

Design skills and attention to detail were required in order to construct the aesthetic we wanted (the font, the layout). Each postcard image included its short description (placed beside it in the blog postings) on the back, following the typical format of postcards. We did not include the conceit of an address, because that was not important for us (though it might be for others). Having this collection of cards was akin to having our project in a box. It helped allow our project to travel as a whole, beyond just the three of us. We then took the postcards to the workshop with colleagues and students at MIT. There we asked them to help us reread and reflect further on the postcards. One participant, Chris Witmore, was particularly helpful: he suggested that the method we had been effectively following was a form of “katachresis”—how Michael Shanks (2004) referred to the forceful (artificial?) juxtaposition of things and places that don’t normally go together.

#### READING THE POSTCARDS AS KATACHRESIS

Lucy’s image of the eternal flow of innovation shows what was supposed to come after the end of the Cold War—the end of history, not only in Central and Eastern Europe but also everywhere else. We associate this image with the kind of neoliberal program that has generated so much frustration in the former East, to the extent that today, for most people there, Vladimir Putin’s Russia and Viktor Orbán’s Hungary seem more attractive than any future with well-functioning parliaments.

Laura’s image of a hill in Orkney shows, in the foreground, a concrete spot that marks the absence of a large wind turbine erected there in 1986. The turbine was subsequently disassembled and removed, for back then the UK government did not consider wind energy to be a viable source of energy. Just how wrong this assessment was is clearly demonstrated by the row of newer wind turbines (manufactured in Denmark) in the background. The concrete spot reminds us of various attempts—socialist and capitalist alike—to fix the future: to make it, in all senses, concrete. Is Laura’s image the counterpoint of Lucy’s? A sign of hope? Some kind of socialist version of capitalism? If so, it is also a counterpoint to Endre’s postcard, as it suggests something other than nostalgia, other than a return to a past that never was.

Reading the “Waterfall of Innovation” against “Future Archaeologies” and “Disappearing Dreamworlds” indexes the folding of futures into pasts (a katachresis of futures, perhaps). The landscape of “Future Archaeologies” is one of futures produced through wind, rather than water as in the “Waterfall of Innovation.” But, like the water upstream, the future recedes here into the line of turbines, subsequently raised. The lost opportunity of the abandoned prototype is underscored by the line of now commercially available working wind turbines, not invented here. The “miraculous year” of collapse inverts the trope of future productivity to one of creative destruction, the necessity of ending to make space for beginning. Then, the flatness of the cement pad, all that remains of the first wind turbine, echoes that of the absences in “Disappearing Dreamworlds.” But the ending, it turns out, as we march from left to right, is not just of the past of socialism but also its constitutive outside, the future of capitalism. That future flows uphill in PARC’s contributions to the profit margins of its corporate parent, immersed in the intensifying competition and consolidation of the tech industry to come.

All three postcards are about absences: the absence of past innovations. The great experiment that was socialism in Central and Eastern Europe came to an end in the late 1980s. Around the same time, the great experiment that was wind energy in the UK also came to an end. Both ended as a result of shifts in national and international politics. Both left monumental, concrete residues in the landscape. The image from Xerox’s PARC does not show, but is haunted by, its history as the place credited with inventing the personal computer. The image can be thought of as the residue of that former time of innovation and experiment. Innovation does have an afterlife: it does not end but has ongoing consequences. It haunts places and people, long into the future, by its absence as much as its presence.

In all three cases you could wonder whether they are failed projects by some measure. Did socialism fail in Hungary? Did wind energy fail in the UK? Did Xerox’s PARC fail? The quick answer in all three cases might, in retrospect, be yes. Hungary is a democracy. The UK does not have a wind turbine manufacturing industry. PARC is no longer a research organization within Xerox. But look closer. Hungary has a complicated relationship with democracy and its socialist past—it is not quite an unmarked, same-same European country. The photograph from Orkney shows a line of wind turbines on the hilltop, so wind energy *is* being generated—in fact, the islands now produce more than 100% of their electricity from renewable energy,

largely from their wind turbines. PARC is still around, and still doing much of its research for Xerox, which remains a large customer. The afterlife of innovation continues, and the story shifts.

Finally, as we look at these three postcards now, we see monuments to innovation being made. This is most obvious in the Statue Park memorial, which is a monument to socialism itself. The absent wind turbine seems monumental from its concrete infrastructure on the Orkney hilltop. The PARC slide shows a waterfall of innovation, a geological feature, also intended to endure. All three marks of innovation inscribe a permanence. Despite much discourse about speed and change in innovation, it seems that, in these cases, innovation holds still, is memorialized; its monuments remain as an afterlife.

#### **POSTSCRIPT: AFTERLIFE OF A PROJECT**

But ethnographic research also has an *afterlife*. What we have briefly shown here is the afterlife of a method of collaboration that does not presuppose the production of a singular account as its outcome, but rather each of the accounts that are generated are enriched by the opportunity to think these multiple projects, times, and places together.<sup>5</sup> The connecting circuit of our research and collaboration was a shared analytic commitment to contingency, the openness of our endeavor, which did not need closure and categorization. Postcards as a medium for katachresis—for thought-generating juxtaposition across disparate locations—helped us to think together, to find the resonance among our research sites while also articulating their differences. Our method of writing, sending, and rereading postcards was a practical way of communicating across the three empirical cases, supporting the creation of connecting themes informed by the incomparability of their specific enactments.

#### **PROTOCOL**

- Convene a collaboration of two or more researchers with an interest in reading across multiple research sites as katachresis.
- Develop an initial set of analytic themes. (This step is optional.)
- Have each collaborator assemble a corpus of heterogeneous materials and inspect it for provocative/generative instances, either visual or textual. A short commentary, along the format of the front and back of a postcard, should accompany each example.

- Post examples generated in above step on a shared website, in a postcard format (i.e., showing “front” and “back” side by side).
- Print some or all postcards on paper (for ease of juxtaposition).
- Reprint some or all postcards on high-quality card stock and package them in an appropriate box. (This step is optional.)
- Hold a workshop to develop themes and readings across postcards.
- Write, either together or separately.
- Repeat the Protocol, informed by each last round, for as long as it seems generative to do so.

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#### **NOTES**

1. Postcards as a mechanism for comparing data have also been explored through the data visualization project “Dear Data” (Posavec and Lupi 2016). For recent invitations to write postcards as a form of ethnographic method, see Gugganig (2017); Gugganig and Schor (2020).

2. “Pieces of places” is how archaeologist Richard Bradley (2000) has described the technology of Neolithic stone axes, which are manufactured in dramatic mountain locations and then travel, a material-semiotic device (akin to a postcard, in our thinking) that allows those mountain places to travel with them.

3. The full set of postcards is available for download through “Relocating innovation: places and material practices of future-making,” available at <http://sand14.com/archive/relocatinginnovation/download/>.

4. PARC is the acronym for Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center, founded in 1970 to stake out the corporation’s claim to the future of computing. For further accounts of the twenty-year residence during which these materials were collected, see Suchman (2011, 2013).

5. The outcomes of our research have been published as a PhD thesis, journal articles, a book, and several poems. See Dányi 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018; Suchman 2011, 2013; Watts 2012a, 2014b, 2019.