

POSTCARDS FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Stine Alling Jacobsen
Susan Schuppli
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Belén Cerezo
Leila Armstrong
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The Political Geology of Two Thousand Square Metres

Adam Bobbette

A friend forwarded me a WhatsApp message from the volcano observatory. It said that in the past few days our local volcano had extruded half a million cubic metres of lava. For people who do not live on volcanoes, this is probably impressive. By local standards, it was enough for the authorities to raise a mild warning to stay "alert" and stay at least three kilometres away. It was business as usual for the one million people that live here.

Locals are kept up to date on activities in the caldera by way of government-operated social media accounts. There is also a live feed from inside the mouth, should anyone be interested in following grainy black and white footage of steam, rocks, and glowing lava streams, twenty-four hours a day. Newspapers also cover it; they bring to it the same enthusiasm as local celebrity gossip.

That same day, another friend sent me a photo of a *gubuk*, a small hut without walls that farmers use to get away from the sun. He finished constructing it on our property and it will be my home in the coming months. I will be preparing a small forested piece of land to become an experimental farm and research station. It is a few hundred metres from the border of the three-kilometre exclusion zone. Our intention is to make it a place to understand the relationship between politics and geology. This means spending time on edges.

The most obvious edge is the volcano. It has long been understood as a

portal to the inner earth. The inside leads into the crust, then the mantle – the layer that is more plastic and hotter than the crust. It is made largely of crystal.

The crust is what we inhabit, travel across, and build

[S]–1:1/3

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homes on.

Orthodox science about Mount Merapi, in the middle of Java, has developed here over the past 130 years. It has come to understand that the volcano is very young, born in the Middle Pleistocene, a mere hundred and seventy thousand years ago.¹ Merapi is younger than modern humans. The sister islands of Sumatra, Bali, and Lombok are all results of the slow collision of continental crust, lifting the sea floor into mountains in a tumultuous modern world history.

Three hundred and fifty kilometres south of Merapi, in the Indian Ocean, is an underwater range of mountains with gigantic foothill-like folds called the Sunda trench. This is where the volcano begins. The Australian plate and the Eurasian Plate are running into each other at around ten centimetres a year. The Australian plate is driving into and under the Eurasian plate and the gravitational pull and lateral force is so profound that it turns solid rock to liquid. Mountains fold into each other. As they gain weight, they sink into the viscous substrate. In less than two hundred thousand years, a subterranean braided river system of liquid and solid stone has emerged. Though not fully understood, because we still cannot access what is going on there, we are left to imagine the strange world of riverine magma conduits sloshing, rippling, and bursting, beneath us. The ground is not solid. We live on rivers of stone. Down there, the earth shifts as rocks cool and warm, speed up and slow down, rise and fall.

These magma rivers move through jaw dropping three-dimensional space. From the Indian Ocean to the mouth

of Merapi, the magma traverses five hundred horizontal kilometres, and nine vertical kilometres, one kilometre higher than Mount Everest. But the magma is not created on the ocean floor. In the late 1970s, when profiles of the trench were compiled by American geologist Warren Hamilton, it was understood that magma was created at up to thirty or forty kilometres below sea level.² It traverses a vertical distance equivalent to five or more Everests. This movement takes place over a distance not much further than between Edinburgh and London. The unfortunate tendency to imagine that land stops at sea level, based on inherited ideas about the separation between water and ground, means that understanding the continuity between earth surface and thick subterranean processes has been especially difficult.

Merapi is the result of this churning of sea into land. As seabed is crushed into mantle, it drags the ocean with it. Mud, sand, the detritus of dead animals and plants, are all beaten with ocean water, frothed and foamed as they move through the earth, then spew out the caldera as ash, lava, and rock. The *Rig Veda*, written more than three thousand years ago and a pillar of the Hindu classical literary cannon, describes how mountains were once used by gods as churning rods to transform the ocean into butter. One hymn describes how,

Enclosed in butter are sky and earth, beautiful in butter, gorged on butter, grown on butter.³

The model of plate tectonics is in some crucial ways a modern, technological conception of volcanoes as churning rods. They spin and froth the oceans. On Merapi,

1. Ralf Gertisser, Sylvain Charbonnier, and Jörg Keller, "The Geological Evolution of Merapi Volcano, Central Java, Indonesia", *Bulletin of Volcanology*, 74, no. 5 (2012), 1213–1233.

2. Warren Hamilton, *The Tectonics of the Indonesian Region* (U.S. Govt. Print. Off.: USGS Numbered Series, 1979), 1078.

3. Wendy Doniger, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). See also the *Mahabharata* for tales of Meru, the holy mountain as axis mundi and churning rod.

we are indeed surrounded by butter.

Even though the observatory counted half a million cubic litres of it, lava is the least impressive of Merapi's froth. Instead, there are the clouds of superheated gasses, ash, and pumice, that move a swift ten kilometres per hour through forests, villages, and towns. Trees explode. Roofs are separated and moved intact from their houses. Humans have been desiccated with their clothes still on, their organs turning to powder upon touch. Sometimes the clouds travel more than thirty kilometres. Some make it to the lower atmosphere. They mean that Merapi is a stratovolcano, a kind of mountain built by depositing one churned layer on top of another in a growing heap.

Scientists have long been fascinated by the volcano. Eruptions, as the Netherlands East Indies colonial scientist N. Wing Easton declared, with an unusually religious tone, are "emanations".⁴ They are signs from the deep interior that we have no access to. Our own fragile bodies mean we are stuck on the surface. Eruptions make present the invisible parts of the earth but we are bound to only understand them from a distance.

We cannot know the inside of a volcano or the earth without the mediation of instruments.

Geological science on Merapi, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, has always been in dialogue with myth and religion. It makes no sense to separate the two. Modernist geological science has adopted myth and religion into it.

Their edges are on the move. This is partly the result of the social history of volcanoes in Java.

In the medieval period, they were places of refuge for dissidents resisting incorporation into mediaeval Hindu, Buddhist, and then Islamic empires. In the fifth through the tenth centuries, these slopes were

dotted with Buddhist scribes who copied texts from India and China. During the period of European colonialism, upland people were a persistent nuisance because they were always out of reach from plantation owners who wanted to use their labour. When the European empires began to fall after the Second World War, these slopes harboured nationalist guerrillas who toppled the government. There is still a fondness in remote villages for the optimistic early days of Indonesian socialism. It is common to see portraits of Soekarno, the revolutionary socialist nationalist leader and first president (who then became its first dictator).

This has resulted in parallel but related social histories between upland volcano and lowland urban cultures. People who have called these dangerous slopes their homes for centuries are at the edge of the urban Indonesian state. Villagers here are often disparaged as uneducated peasants stuck in the past. They have strong accents and stereotypes emphasise that some of them cannot even speak the national language. Urban snobbish elites are embarrassed by what they see as a stubborn adherence to superstition. They make the modernising, modish, developed world of Indonesia seem as if it was still "third world".

Yet from the view of these villages, the state is associated with corruption, greed, and violence. In the 1970s, the military would kill anyone they associated with Communism. The police cannot be trusted to protect people. Corrupt local politicians turn a blind eye to illegal mining that destroys forests and riverbeds. Today, there is the threat of an increasingly conservative monotheistic Islam coming from the lowlands that

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4. Nicolaas Wing Easton, "Volcanic Science in Past and Present", *Science in the Netherlands East Indies*, (Batavia: Pacific Science Congress, 1929), 80–101.

intersects with the modernist scientific geology in government observatories. State volcano scientists in the lowlands are, in the majority, Muslims. Observatories contain *musallas* for daily prayers between duties operating seismological instruments. As the state tries yet again to encroach on villages, they bring together modern science and monotheism.

Remote farmers are trying to counter this by holding even more firmly to their “superstitious” unorthodox syncretic Islam. They fight for an animist Islam that insists that the volcano is human. Or, rather, that it is full of humans. This means that trees, rocks, and the caldera, harbour spirits newly dead and ancestral. It is not because of the plate tectonic action five hundred kilometres away under the sea that the volcano erupts but because those spirits have something to say. It is up to us to decipher what it is. This radical anthropomorphism means that when they look at the volcano, they look in the mirror: they see speaking, thinking, rational selves. This is incompatible with a strict monotheism that wants to abolish all spiritual powers except those of Allah.⁵

The practice of animism is a fight over how to live with the volcano. For state science and monotheism, it is a way to take control of reading and understanding the volcano away from backward farmers. It is a way to govern those who live there by folding them into state evacuation and hazard management policies. It is a way to indiscriminately exert public health management throughout the state. For the farmers, capitulating means giving in to the corruption and incompetence of state politicians and a civil service that never had their best interests as their priority.

It is also a struggle over geographic imaginaries. State-sanctioned Islam

situates the black cube of the Kaaba in Mecca as the spiritual centre of the world. State employees stop their work, face, and prostrate themselves in its direction five times a day. Imams remind their communities that heaven is in the sky above the earth. On the Merapi, plenty of people also pray facing Mecca. But the centre of their spiritual world is also the volcano. Spirits go there after they die. The nutrients that grow their food are given by the volcano. The social history of mountain culture is defined by this tug of war over the location of the centre of the world. Science, religion, and state politics, each have their hands in.

For those of us on this little piece of land with two thousand square metres, we are at the edge of the earth. We are pulled away from the slopes by the cities and modernisation. But our imagination is also pulled toward the volcano, through the lithosphere, into the liquid mantle, to the spiritual centre of Mecca, or through the forests; we are pulled from all sides. From this *gubuk* we hope we can make some sense of how to live with these forces. We are calling this political geology.



fig. 1

Mount Merapi, 1931. Courtesy of the Institute for the Development of Geological Hazard Technologies.

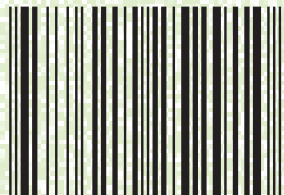
fig. 1

5. Christianity also has a history of negotiating rural animism. The recognition of the divine reality of the holy spirit by early Christians has been interpreted as an attempt to recognise and incorporate rural animist peasant deities into the church and subsume them under the more powerful, single deity of the Christian God.

This book includes various responses to the geopolitical conditions of our tangent times through collections of visual materials and theoretical explorations with critical positionings. The book expands on the Anthropocene theory by exploring its relations with the aesthetic concerns in contemporary representations through their geopolitical ramifications. We conceptualize postcards as documentary space-time snapshots, which convey complex assemblages of dynamic, non-linear, unpredictable, ad-hoc networks between interdependent and transcalar actors in deep time. The postcards we assemble raise questions about the ethical and political challenges of the dominant modes of technoscientific knowledge production, modes that are constituted through existing power relationships, subject positions, and differences, and that perpetuate current inequalities. They catalyse speculative and creative geopolitical imaginaries and collective subjectivities that recalibrate existing value systems and indicate alternatives.

This edited publishing project curates and presents submissions from significant scholars and practitioners across multiple disciplines in arts and humanities. In the emerging field of the Anthropocene aesthetics, the contributors investigate the possibilities of the postcard unfolding across diverse temporalities and enable complex associations between the present and the futures it constructs, both imagined and unimaginable.

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