MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

Essay

Tripod: Performance, Media, Cybernetics

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In March 1976, Steward Brand interviewed Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson at Bateson's home near Santa Cruz, California. Brand, best known as one of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters and editor of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, is a nodal figure in the countercultural and cybercultural milieus of personal and networked computing that gave rise through the internet to new imaginaries and practices of mediated communication that have since proliferated in everyday life across much of the globe (Castells 1996, 2001; Turner 2008). Brand had been "wowed … out of [his] shoes" (Bateson and Mead 1976, 33) by Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and opened the interview asking about the Macy conferences on cybernetics. He recorded the conversation and published the transcript in *The CoEvolution Quarterly* (Bateson and Mead 1976). Cybernetics was the topic that made the conversation of two septuagenarian anthropologists relevant to Brand's readers.

In 1977, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* published a three-page excerpt (from the much longer transcript that Brand had published) as "Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on the Use of the Camera in Anthropology" (Mead and Bateson 1977). In this excerpt, Mead (then age seventy-five) and Bateson (then seventy-two) discuss their use of still and motion photography in Bali, where they worked as newlyweds from 1936 to 1939. This dialogue quickly became a classic in visual anthropology (then formalizing as a subdiscipline), appealing for the endearing way the formerly married anthropologists argue. Its power as a mythic text, however, lies in the binary of science versus art, a polarity that recurs with fractal regularity in the history of the field and that Mead and Bateson came to personify to later generations of visual anthropologists. While Mead doggedly advocates for the scientific potential of the camera, the use of tripods, and long takes, Bateson cantankerously refuses such limitations, insisting that the camera should be "off the tripod" and "the photographic record should be an art form" (Bateson and Mead 1976, 19).

In 2015, my colleague Christian Hammons and I turned to the published transcripts of this Mead-Bateson conversation as the basis for a performance documentary. Our thought was to build out from this text to explore the documentary possibilities of performance and the performative entanglements of media. Although we called the project *Tripod* in reference to the debate about the use of the camera, we quickly realized that the longer conversation, which illuminates anthropology's early role in cybernetics, offers far more to contemporary discourse on anthropological media. That larger conversation is a trialog among Mead, Bateson, and Brand, each voice a leg on which it stands, another resonance for the tripartite theme. Given that the tripod is a multivalent, polyvocal symbol (Ortner 1973), it is no surprise that other triads were found good to think throughout the project. The way the *Tripod* project links anthropology, cybernetics, and media through performance is one.

The impetus to performance that shaped the *Tripod* project came from many directions, only three of which were articulated from the start. First, we knew we wanted to work on something we could approach more playfully and experimentally than a paper or film. Second, we wanted to bring live and mediated performance into a single frame. And third, we aimed to combine scholarly and paraethnographic knowledge and media in a staged production. As teaching faculty, performance is part of our daily routine of lecturing and screening media, yet its dramaturgic and ritual dimensions are usually obscured. We chose to foreground these in the *Tripod* project to explore their power to engage live audiences, both in the classroom and in a more collaborative and public-facing anthropology.

The decision to script and stage a live performance of the Mead-Bateson-Brand conversation with layers and spaces of mediation yielded insight into intersections of documentary, performance, and media theory and their complex mutualities and entanglements in practice. In the process, I came to see the view that has Mead arguing a positivist position and Bateson an artistic one as a diminished reading that misses the more nuanced, sophisticated understandings of media that emerge in their talk of anthropology's formative role in cybernetics. Approaching their words as dialogue to be memorized and enacted highlights the ways Mead, Bateson, and Brand perform knowledge and demonstrates how they move among its causes and effects. Mead's interchanges with Bateson throughout are far more inclusive and reparative than agonistic. Again and again, she turns the conversation to Bateson and talks up his role as photographer and cinematographer in their Balinese research.

Our experiments in performance and documentary also resonate with the broad shifts to public and collaborative

anthropology referenced in the invitation to multimodality with which the Visual Anthropology section of *American Anthropologist* was recently reframed and renamed (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017). In an era where media production is common in the everyday lives of anthropologists as well as the people they work with—in the field, university, and a variety of publics—the *Tripod* project articulates a way of working without adopting a techno-centric approach, nor setting media production apart from the general practice of anthropology. But this is jumping ahead. These connections and insights might have been immanent in the choice to stage the Mead-Bateson-Brand conversation, but they were only articulated in the long and layered processes of writing and production. Only by realizing the project in practice did we realize (in the cognitive sense) the deeper resonances between anthropological reflexivity and the cybernetic approach of treating "organism-plus-environment" as "a single circuit" that includes researchers in the systems they study (Bateson). Let me start, therefore, with a description of what the *Tripod* project entailed before turning to reflect on how the project speaks to the performative dimensions of anthropological knowledge across multiple media, as well as contemporary turns to participatory and collaborative methods and public engagement. *Tripod* was an experiment (or series of experiments), so it is fitting to set forth the steps and process undertaken before turning to findings and analysis.

THE TRIPOD PROJECT

The *Tripod* project encompasses two staged performances, one in Minneapolis, one in Boulder; two scripts, both drawn from the "For God's Sake, Margaret" conversation, the second revised to include excerpts from Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972)[1]; video projection within the performances; video documenting each performance; this essay; and *Tripod: Feedback* (2019), the short film that accompanies this essay.[2] We began work on the script for *Tripod* in 2015 and planned to stage the Mead-Bateson-Brand conversation as a conventional academic session. The script included video projection (illustrating and commenting on the dialogue) and a section for live performances of Balinese dance and music by artists local to the conference city. The aim was to situate the conversation alongside contemporary performances of the Balinese arts that feature prominently in Mead's and Bateson's film and photographic work in Bali.[3]

We proposed staging the production at the 2016 American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual meeting in Minneapolis, with local actors playing Mead, Bateson, and Brand. Though we had no luck finding actors, we were fortunate in connecting with Minneapolis-based musicians and dancers who were interested in collaborating on the project. For lack of time and budget, we ended up performing the Mead (Cool) and Bateson (Hammons) roles ourselves and were again fortunate in enlisting a colleague who already planned to attend the AAA meeting to play Stewart Brand (Matthew Durington).

Our barebones production of *Tripod: Or, Nobody's Talking about That, Margaret* at the 2016 AAA meetings included live performances by Sumunar, a Minneapolis-area Indonesian music and dance troupe; video projection (a silent visual track of *Trance and Dance in Bali* projected forward and then backward); and about thirty minutes of audience discussion. The event culminated in a lively dialogue across the fourth wall. Audience members who had known Mead or Bateson bantered with the actors in these roles, who sometimes answered in character and sometimes as themselves (ourselves). Among those who spoke was Bennetta Jules-Rosette, whose work explores the layering of performance and the subjective experience of performers in a reflexive approach to ethnographic film (Jules-Rosette, McVey, and Arbitrario 2002). She recounted that Mead had given her the very camera Bateson used in Bali, and she still had it. Anthropologist Elizabeth Chin asked the Sumunar performers what it was like to perform a culture not their own and several spoke insightfully about cross-cultural performance of embodied knowledge, such as music and dance. Despite a few muddled lines and complaints from the neighboring room about the volume of the gamelan music, the production exceeded our expectations, especially the audience contribution,[4] which our local collaborators and audience clearly enjoyed. Staging *Tripod* as an ordinary conference panel created a thin fourth wall that Durington, improvising in his role as Brand, invited the audience and actors to cross in the Q&A. This they did playfully, seriously, and with gusto.

In April 2017, we staged a second production, *Tripod: Mead, Bateson, Bali*, at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in the vintage theater of Old Main, the oldest campus building. The production was a collaboration with Gamelan Tunas Mekar, a Denver-based gamelan orchestra and dance company of about two-dozen members. This larger, more theatrical production,[5] with lighting design, stage, and curtain, was based on a new script, revised to include metalogues—staged excerpts of Bateson's conversations with his daughter Nora from *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972). Hammons and I reprised our roles as Bateson and Mead, respectively, and his ten-year-old daughter, Sophia Hammons, played Nora Bateson. Once again, the dramatization of the Mead-Bateson-Brand conversation was staged with Balinese music and dance and ambient video projection, designed by Hammons and Rebecca Zimmer, his colleague at UC Boulder. Audience Q&A, moderated by Brand from a podium at stage left, was incorporated before the final metalogue, which was introduced by Nora Bateson responding from stage right to Brand's final call for questions from the audience.

The printed program distributed at the Minneapolis performance contained a diagram that was published in the 1976 *The CoEvolution Quarterly* piece. In Boulder, it was projected on-screen. The diagram reproduces a sketch that Bateson presumably drew during the conversation to illustrate the "essence of [Norbert] Wiener's cybernetics"
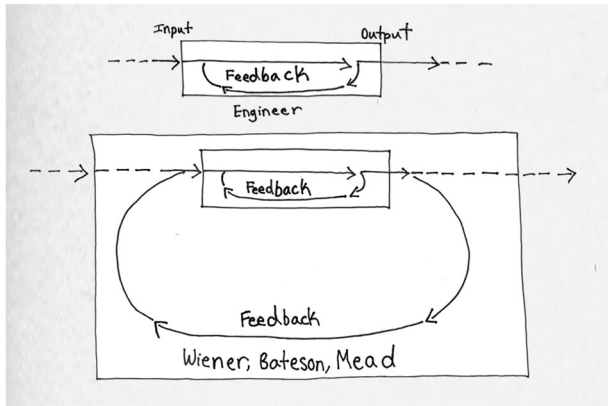
FIGURE 1. *Diagram from "For God's Sake, Margaret"(Bateson and Mead 1976). (Reproduced with the permission of the Bateson Idea Group)*

and liken it to the way he and Mead worked as anthropologists (Figure 1).

While engineers and computer scientists are concerned with "input-output," cyberneticians and anthropologists, Bateson explains, adopt a more ecological conception, treating "organism-plus-environment" as "a single circuit" that includes researchers in the systems they study. Drawing on this principle, the *Tripod* project lays out the circuit to include the audience as well as the cultural knowledge, such as dance and music, instantiated in live performance and documented in various media (Bateson and Mead 1976, 12–13).

TRIPOD: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Our experiment aimed to explore the documentary possibilities of performance and the performative entanglements of media, and we discovered many of both. To start, performing the document—the Mead-Bateson-Brand transcript—entailed the usual questions of editing, condensing, and deciding how stylized or mimetic to be. As is often the case, time and budget constraints were fruitful limitations. Although we originally wanted to cast actors as Mead and Bateson, the fact that Hammons and I ended up playing these roles in both performances greatly enhanced what we learned from the experiment. Although the words and ideas of the Mead-Bateson dialogue resemble those we perform routinely as teaching faculty, by dressing in costume and makeup to play the historic figures ourselves, we gained greater understanding of performance and the performative as the substrate in which *Tripod* grew.

Performance, as the theories of Erving Goffman (1959, 2005), Richard Schechner (1985, 1988, 2002), and Judith Butler (1988, 1995) articulate, is not limited to professionals or the arts but is a discursive practice that constitutes all human subjects. This perspective encompasses performances of everyday life along with performances of ritual, theater, dance, and music. It also speaks to old questions of representation and authenticity from angles that give more insight into the mediated qualities of both everyday life and the documents or documentary that are made of and from

it. "When a documentary camera represents a human being, it is representing a performance; a consciously and unconsciously maintained 'act' composed of gestures, attitudes and characteristics which the subject did not author itself" (Rennie 2012, 1). Cultural identities and systems are not "stable objects which yield themselves for the representational practices of the filmmaker" or anthropologist (Rennie 2012, 1). Performativity is a dimension of the circuit entire. It extends to the subjects of study, researchers, and research itself. From the vantage of this understanding, questions of epistemology or authenticity move from the smaller pond of visual anthropology to join the seas of discourse on representation, knowledge/power, and epistemic diversity in the human sciences.

The dance-play performances seen in *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1951) serve to illustrate the kinds of questions illuminated by a focus on performance. As Ira Jacknis (1988) has detailed in his rigorous examination of Mead's and Bateson's photographic and film work in Bali, the ritual shown in the film was neither traditional nor ancient but "created during the period of their fieldwork." Moreover, they influenced the performance, suggesting "the dancing club … should include in their performance some women with krisses" (Bateson and Mead in Jacknis 1988, 168). The "bulk of the footage that went into *Trance and Dance* was filmed at a commissioned performance on 16 December 1937, Mead's 36th birthday," and dances usually performed at night were staged during the day for the camera (due to limited light sensitivity of lenses and film stock). "Bateson and Mead justified their payment for such performances by citing the normal Balinese practice of cultural patronage" (167).

Mead and Bateson took a similarly pragmatic approach to selection and intersubjectivity in their film and photographic work, as documented in extensive fieldnotes in a notation system Bateson devised that included abbreviations to indicate whether subjects were posed or not or were conscious of being photographed, as well as notes on distance (from subject to camera) and "the publishable quality of the image" (165). In the context of treating cameras as primary recording devices, these notes and the notation system might be read as procedures to contain the researchers' intrusions that betray a positivist orientation. However, in the wider context of Mead's and Bateson's work, these efforts reflect the cybernetic perspective that knowledge is attained through a "disciplined subjectivity" that explicitly includes the role of the observer in the investigation, rather than an objectivity that ignores it (171).

At the outset of the *Tripod* project, I held the conventional and vaguely mythic view of Mead advocating for science and Bateson for art in their conversation with Brand. I now regard that view as muddled. Mead's attention to embodied practice (in discussion of a comparative study of family groups reading together versus watching television) and to reception (in discussion of the way trivial and significant news arrive without distinction via radio) reveals a much more profound and nuanced approach to media.

My turnaround was tied directly to the embodiment and enactment that performance entails. Memorizing Mead's dialogue, repeating it in rehearsals, and attending to the interpersonal dynamics and flow of conversation, I came to inhabit her words in ways that yielded more nuanced appreciation of her commonalities with Bateson and a more reparative reading of their disagreements. While the two argue, interrupt, and correct each other and are, at times, impatient and pointed in their exchanges, Mead prompts and promotes Bateson throughout the conversation. She often sets the scene and then turns conversation over to him to populate with stories and examples, while also providing many of her own. The routine and experience of memorizing and performing these interchanges had surprising power to bring about a more complex understanding of their positions on the use of photography and film in anthropology.

Recognizing the transformative power of performing an argument that I initially found disagreeable led me to consider the educational value of such documentary role-playing. If students created scripts from texts they struggled with (in whatever way, from disagreement to incomprehension) and performed them as the authors, engaged in debate with students performing as other authors, they, too, might benefit from the instructive power of embodied performance. Connections between performance and pedagogy were further highlighted in the Q&A exchanges that took place between audience and performers at both *Tripod* performances. In Minneapolis, Elizabeth Chin asked the performers, "What do you learn by embodying rather than talking about, or writing about, or making a film" about a culture not your own? Dancer, Aimee Thostenson responded with an illuminating account of learning Javanese and Balinese dance as "a different way of learning a language."[6] She praised her teacher—Tri Sutrisno, who performed the dance solo in the Minneapolis production—for being cross-culturally adept. Sutrisno, Thostenson explained, was able to accommodate the learning style of dancers trained to fit movement to an eight-beat structure, even though "that's not really the way you would learn it in the native culture." In the Boulder performance of *Tripod*, musician Jordan Hayes spoke of gamelan as an "oral tradition … with no notation, where everything is learned from your teacher." Coming from a Western context in which musicians spend a lot of time alone in practice rooms, he found this refreshing and explained, "You can't really practice gamelan alone.… Your part doesn't make any musical sense without, at least, your partner."[7]

These insights on learning and teaching as embodied, discursive practices flow from the decisions:

(1)   To include in the *Tripod* script (Hammons and Cool, 2017) a period for discussion across the fourth wall[8] to connect actors, dancers, musicians, and audience in a single circuit, so to speak. Q&A ran for forty minutes at the AAA meetings in Minneapolis, where we expected many in the audience to speak, and for twenty-five minutes in Boulder, where theater size, distance from the stage to audience seating, and more general composition of that audience (not mostly anthropologists) led us to program a shorter period; and

(2)   To collaborate with local artists to incorporate other ways of knowing Balinese cultural forms alongside the representations of Bali and the Balinese that Mead and Bateson make in the script, as well as in their film and photographic work.

Both were choices to experiment with multivocal forms of engagement and methods associated with collaborative and participatory ethnography (Cefkin 2009; Darrouzet et al. 2009; Lassiter 2005) and also with notions of para-ethnography, working with "other sorts of experts" (Marcus 2000), "people in field settings or host communities who possess an ethnographic consciousness or analytical framework" (Darrouzet et al. 2009, 64). The quality and quantity of para-ethnographic knowledge we encountered over the course of the project were major findings. Our collaborators and audiences in Minneapolis and Boulder possessed insights we could not have anticipated. Their contributions closed the circuit of performance and reception and yielded insight into the cross-cultural translation of body knowledge and broader social codes and contexts (e.g., notation) of dance and music pedagogy and social reproduction.

These findings suggest performance documentary as a fruitful approach for collaborative, public, and pedagogic engagement. Yet, *Tripod* also aimed to explore the performative entanglements of media. As a performance based on a conversation that was audiotaped, transcribed, and published in print, the project is inherently intertextual and intermedia, and juxtaposes multiple media forms (theater, film, music, and dance), layering reenactment, replay (screening), and live performance. Yet, what I mean by *performative entanglements*, an allusion to quantum entanglement, is that performance and media are linked at a distance, as secret sharers. These entanglements are obscured in ordinary language oppositions, such as "live vs. recorded," conventional notions of live performance as unmediated, and of media as material and technological. Such conceptions of media are the fulcrum on which analysis of the *Tripod* experiment pivots to speak to the current multimodal moment in visual anthropology. Before moving to that argument, however, allow me a short detour via art and media theory to give a deeper sense of the *performative entanglements of media* and the particular importance of attending to them at this juncture.

In his classic *Languages of Art* ([1968] 1976), philosopher Nelson Goodman distinguished between one-stage and two-stage arts. While painting or taking a Polaroid photograph is a one-stage process, music is often a two-stage process of composition followed by performance, as are photographic negatives or etched plates and the subsequent prints made from each. Goodman further distinguishes autographic arts (which can be either one- or two-stage) from allographic arts (two-stage). Autographic works, such as paintings, are unique and must be the work of—or authorized[9] by—the

artist's own hand to be genuine. Allographic works, such as musical scores, in contrast, can be copied and performed as genuine instances of a work because they are "in a definite notation" that "provides the means for distinguishing the properties constitutive of the work from all contingent properties—that is, for fixing the required features and the limits of permissible variation in each" (116).

Specifications for allographic works consist of protocols for notation (encoding) and performance (decoding) that trace a continuity from analog works, such as the script of a play, to digital ones, such as the color model for an image display. William Mitchell (1992, 51) draws out this continuity in his collection of essays on "visual truth in the post-photographic era," writing:

> A musical work is instantiated in a performance that faithfully follows the score, a play is instantiated in a performance that faithfully follows the script, a digital image is instantiated in a display or print that faithfully follows the tones or colors specified in the image file. Instances of the same work can vary … but must display the required features in order to count as instances. Thus, musical and theatrical performers are free, to some extent, to interpret a work—and indeed, we may place a high value on unusual and innovative interpretations that reveal hitherto unexpected dimensions of the work. Similarly, a computer may mechanically interpret a work in different ways, using different algorithms and devices, to produce significantly differing instances.

Mitchell's explanation highlights instantiation in performance as a necessary second stage of allographic works, whether music, theater, or digital images. He puts the focus on interpretation: the interplay of fidelity and permissible variation points to both the social conventions of notation and the social contexts of reception, in which "unusual and innovative interpretations" of a work might be highly valued. With this mention of value, he brings an audience onto the scene, one that does not simply receive a performance but whose responses feed back into cultural conventions and practice.

Mitchell contends, "the specification of an allographic work consists of digital information" because one copy of a play script, musical score, or image file "is as good as another" (50). Calling both "digital" elides differences between scripts interpreted by performers and scripts interpreted mechanically or algorithmically. Yet, I find Mitchell tremendously helpful for illuminating the ways that notation—stage one of allographic works—bridges analog and digital forms and for extending that commonality to stage two in the recognition that digital media, too, are instantiated in performance or display.

What I aim to demonstrate by detour into theories of the allographic are processes of notation and performance that cross analog and digital forms. Such circuits can be traced in the iterative processes through which *Tripod* was scripted, rehearsed, produced, and performed with local dancers, musicians, and crews in Minneapolis and Boulder. The Q&A at both performances, which was the impetus for the film *Tripod: Feedback* (2019), foregrounded these processes in accounts of learning and practicing dance and music—Sutrisno's eight-beat translation of Balinese and Javanese dances for her Minneapolis students, Hayes's comments on gamelan music as an embodied social practice. Attention to these processes draws focus to the social contexts in which all forms of media—old and new—are produced and received within particular systems, protocols, norms, and "permissible variations." This approach, which frames text, theater, music, dance, and photographic elements alike as media, echoes media historian Lisa Gitelman's (2006, 7) definition of media as:

> socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.

By including cultural practice in her definition and highlighting the social, symbolic, and performative, Gitelman makes clear that media are more than their technological forms. They entail a host of cultural assumptions and practices, "a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus" (7). This quantum comparison—of social norms to electron clouds orbiting technological nuclei—posits media as neither divisible from, nor reducible to, the material conditons of their technical supports. It also speaks to the quantum entanglements of media evoked in this analysis of the *Tripod* project.

As an anthropologist, I find Gitelman's definition extraordinarily powerful as a model of media because it is extensible across analog and digital forms and because it scales from subatomic to planetary in multiple dimensions—spatially, temporally, cross-culturally. Further, it can be seen as ecological in the sense that it describes a set of relationships between a complex system and its environment, just as Bateson's "organism plus environment" diagram. I have worked in my analysis of *Tripod* to fuse an ecological conception of media with the reflexive cybernetics of Bateson and Mead by making three analytic moves: (1) foregrounding the interplay of structure and process on multiple scales; (2) looking at *Tripod* performances and audience Q&A sessions alike in terms of stages of notation and performance; and (3) glossing these as circuits of production and reception that feed back into the larger systems of which they are a part. Drawing out the performative entanglements of media explored in *Tripod* was the initial aim, yet the ecological conception of media developed in the analysis has broader relevance and application. Before making that case in the final section of this essay, let me issue a brief caution. Ecological metaphors have many and various precedents in scholarly discourse on media (McLuhan 1962, 1964; Ong 1982; Postman 1970, 2000) and information technologies (Nardi and O'Day 2000). My use of the concept here invokes none of these. Rather, it draws on the bricolage of art/media theory and reflexive cybernetics deployed in the analysis of *Tripod* to propose that such ecological models

afford valuable ways to see and think about media at a time when their proliferation in everyday life around much of the globe has become central to both popular and scholarly understandings of the contemporary world.

ECOLOGIES OF MEDIA: A CALL TO THEORY-MAKING

Even before the multimodal turn, visual anthropology contained multitudes—multiple forms and genres, the making of media, and the study of media. This multiplicity is deftly encompassed in the Society for Visual Anthropology mission statement as:

> the use of images for the description, analysis, communication, and interpretation of human (and sometimes nonhuman) behavior … [interest] in visual aspects of culture, visual ideologies, applied visual anthropology, indigenous media, gesture, dance, sign language, art, architecture, and material culture" [and] the creation of image and auditory media—multimedia, still photography, film, video, and non-camera generated images—in the depiction of ethnographic, archaeological, and other anthropological enterprises. (VAR 2019)

The recent turn to multimodality adds to the multiplicity and reframes it around "the centrality of media production to the everyday life of both anthropologists and our interlocuters" (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017, 1). Multimodality broadens the field by making explicit its extension beyond the visual and engaging in collaborative methods and public anthropology. Yet, the centrality of media production on multiple scales is the headline.

People today make and share media in multiple forms, not because they are visual or multimodal anthropologists but because they live in the twenty-first century. New forms and practices of mediated communication are integral to the economic and social transformations that define contemporary society (Bell 1973; Castells 1996; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1984, 1991). Elsewhere, I have argued that these shifts constitute new media ecologies for the production, distribution, and reception of all forms of media, including scholarly works (Cool 2014). Here, I propose that ecological models and metaphors: (1) elucidate the embodied, processual, and performative entanglements of media and, thus, are integral to understanding media anthropologically; and (2) are ideally suited to the broadened multiplicity of media forms and practices subsumed in the multimodal framework.

Ecological metaphors afford ways to conceptualize media holistically within the larger social systems that constitute them, rather than in narrow technological terms. As such, they serve to counter digital exceptionalism, my term for the bucketing of media into digital/not digital, new/traditional, that figures centrally in popular and scholarly language. Categorizing media as "digital" or "new" defines and periodizes them technologically—that is, in Gitelman's metaphor, around the technological nuclei alone. Digital exceptionalism refers to ways of speaking and habits of mind that serve as useful shorthand yet tend to reproduce dominant, techno-centric assumptions.[10] A reflexive, ecological approach resists digital exceptionalism by conceptualizing models for media that scale cross-culturally and historically across analog and digital and foreground the complex and layered interplay of structures and processes.

Anthropologists today come to media-making along a great variety of paths. Some are trained in production and visual anthropology, some in other media practices (journalism, art, design); for others, making media emerges from vernacular practices. The multimodal framework affords a big tent to encompass such diversity. Prescriptively, the multimodal turn works to move media-making out of the enclave of visual anthropology and reposition it within the discipline as a general research and knowledge-production practice. In this regard, the invitation to multimodality (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017) parallels a call Faye Ginsburg (1998, 177) issued over twenty years ago "for the reintegration of visual anthropology into its parent-field of anthropology." Ginsburg argued that if the subdiscipline is to challenge its "chronic marginality," visual anthropologists "need to establish a more substantial relationship to the discipline in our theory, practice, and pedagogy" (177–78). The same need for theory, practice, and pedagogy engaged in the discourse of the "parent-field" faces the multimodal framework if it is to reposition visual anthropology—and its reflexive, collaborative approach to media—within the general practice of anthropology. I suggest that a reflexive, ecological approach to media contributes to that project as a generative way of modeling phenomenal and epistemological complexity, thinking about intra- and interrelationships in contexts of multiplicity and hybridity, and mapping common ground. Although unfamiliar to me when Hammons and I undertook the *Tripod* project in 2015, recent discourse around multimodality (e.g., Chin 2017; Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; Takaragawa et al. 2019) has enabled me to see our experiments in performance documentary as participating in a broader groundswell of multimodal work. In turn, as multimodal work, *Tripod* serves to demonstrate that multimodality is not merely about "a more diverse methodological and technological toolkit" (Takaragawa et al. 2019, 517) but offers a generative framework for engaging a world in which the production and circulation of media play such a pervasive and formative role.

NOTES

1. See Hammons and Cool (2017). Available here: http://www.americananthropologist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Tripod-Script-Boulder.pdf.
2. *Tripod Feedback*: https://youtu.be/LnxZTfRNpcY.
3. *Balinese Character* (1942) and *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1951).
4. These are the focus of the video *Tripod: Feedback*.
5. Sponsored by the Department of Anthropology; Center for Asian Studies; College of Media, Communication and Information; Center for Documentary and Ethnographic Media; and Department of Critical Media Practices at UC Boulder.
6. This exchange can be seen in Tripod: Feeback (2019), starting about seven minutes into the film.

7. Hayes's comments can be heard in Tripod: Feeback (2019), starting about ten minutes into the film.

8. These feedback sessions are the subject of the film, Tripod: Feedback (2019).

9. I use "authorized" to include telematic arts and a slew of artworks that have challenged materiality and authorship since László Moholy-Nagy made his Telephone Pictures in 1923, if not before.

10. Cf. the "problem of bad habitus" (Takaragawa et al. 2019).

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Essay

Multimodal Ethnography in/of/as Postcards

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INTRODUCTION

As ephemera, postcards are often dismissed as unworthy objects for scholarship. For anthropologists, historians, and other scholars, they have long been considered "low" culture and insignificant, lacking the effective trendsetting status of newspapers, being an unreliable systematic source of data (due to their dispersive nature), or being written off as a personal and individualized form of communication with no larger social ramifications (Ferguson 2005; Peterson 1985). Yet, this neglected status of postcards has undermined a medium that in fact offers creative openings for ethnographic work.

In this essay, we expand upon existing literature on postcards' multimodal virtues (Andriotis and Mavrič 2013; Hall and Gillen 2007; Rogan 2005) in a more systematic way to highlight engagement with a mundane, though no less complex, colonial medium. Bringing together multimodal approaches in anthropology (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019; Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey 2006; Powis 2017) with the idiom of ethnographic work in/of/as open systems (Fortun 2003), we offer a theoretical elaboration on this visual and tactile medium by attending to the focus (of), context (in), and method (as) of postcards (Fortun 2003, 172). Based on an open call for postcards,[1] this essay also relates to the online special section "Multimodal Postcards" that presents seven projects using postcards in innovative ways. This special section (Schor and Gugganig 2020) includes contributions by (in alphabetical order): Mascha Gugganig (2020), Anna Harris and colleagues (2020), Charisma K. Lepcha (2020), Nicola Levell (2020), Tony and Gareth Page (2020), Sophie Schor (2020), and Martina Volfová (2020).

This essay offers a brief summary of the origin of postcards and their role as research subjects. We go on to elaborate how ethnography in/of/as open systems resonates with multimodal approaches in anthropology. Subsequently, we introduce multimodal ethnography in/of/as postcards and conclude with a discussion of how such approaches may encourage scholars to open up spaces for more experimental formats.

ORIGIN OF, AND RESEARCH ON, POSTCARDS

Postcards have served many functions over time—as souvenirs, mementos, methods of communication, modes of domination, or avenues of resistance. During the Golden Age of postcards (1900–1914), at the height of their popularity, two hundred billion to three hundred billion postcards were produced and sold, turning into a widely used communication medium before the use of the telephone (see Ferguson 2005, 170; Rogan 2005, 18). In tandem with an emerging global tourism industry, the Golden Age turned the picture postcard into a tool of consumer culture (Goldsworthy 2010; Urry 1990), which also perpetuated exoticizing, and at times racist, depictions of faraway places and people (Albers and James 1988; Alloula 1986; Waitt and Head 2002). Postcards in fact served colonial ends by both providing a physical souvenir that traversed between the colony and the metropole and by disseminating images of the Other as seen by the colonizer.

Academics have long held a prejudice against postcards, for two main reasons. First, the postcard was considered a banal expression of popular culture (Ferguson 2005). Only in the postmodern era, when (visual) representation became a prime focus of research, did scholars start to pay more attention to postcards' depictions and underlying messages (Ferguson 2005; Moors and Machlin 1987; Peterson 1985). Ever since, scholars have attended to the social (Fraser 1980), colonial (Albers and James 1988), economic (Kohn 2003), linguistic (Östman 2004), aesthetic (Kelly 2004), and cultural (Rogan 2005) cosmos that postcards are both embedded in and reflect. For instance, through a compiled "album" (and critique) of French postcards of Algerian women, highlighting their colonial and gendered gaze, Alloula (1986, 4) illustrates that the colonial postcard "marks out the peregrinations of the tourist, the successive postings of the soldier, the territorial spread of the colonist." Goldsworthy's (2010, 165) postcolonial critique of Moroccan postcards demonstrates how postcards were also spaces of resistance and ambiguity, such as when racist depictions were combined with "anti-colonial messages." Second, and related to this, the postcard gained little interest with its status as an "unclear genre" that seemed difficult to analyze: people's written messages (the content) often did not "match" the postcard image (the visual representations of a place, people, or a subject) (Andriotis and Mavrič 2013, 31; Ferguson 2005; Rogan 2005, 8; Schor 2020). As a result, researchers focused on one modality only, mostly the image, and thereby often mimicked their research subjects' proclivity—for example, postcard collectors—who paid less attention to written messages (Baldwin 1988; Hall and Gillen 2007).

Yet even in the Golden Age, postcards were popular exactly because of their enmeshed functions as collectible, ritual communication, and (visual) gift exchange, making them objects entangled in relationships, which formed around these diverse uses (Rogan 2005, 18). In fact, the purportedly messy virtue of postcards—as data, as medium, as dispersed material object, as methodological tool—shows that they are a "meeting place for a variety of cultural phenomena"

(Östman 2004, 427). Descriptions of postcards as the "incredible chameleon," with their "chimeric nature" (Ferguson 2005, 168, 183) and "enmeshed functions" (Rogan 2005, 1), indicate a shift in academic research toward an analysis of postcards as documentary image, correspondence, photographic print, advertisement, or ephemera—that is, as "multifaceted objects" (Andriotis and Mavrič 2013, 35).

This interplay between printed words and images, handwritten messages, stamps, and the overall context of postcard use as personal communiqués, items shared among collectors, or virtual artifacts (Gillen 2013; Gillen and Hall 2011; Hall and Gillen 2007; Östman 2004) encompasses the rich multifaceted and multimodal dimensions of postcards that this essay expands upon. There have been a few experimental engagements with postcards as research method (Adjin-Tettey et al. 2008; Allen and Rumbold 2004),[2] and in another publication (Gugganig and Schor 2020) we detail the pedagogical possibilities of teaching with postcards. In the following, we provide a theoretical and methodological elaboration on the visual and tactile media of postcards by connecting the idiom of ethnographic work in/of/as open systems (Fortun 2003) with multimodal anthropological approaches (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019; Powis 2017).

MULTIMODAL ETHNOGRAPHY IN/OF/AS OPEN SYSTEMS

Taking up the legacy of the reflexive turn in the 1980s (Marcus and Fischer [1986] 1999), Kim Fortun (2003, 172) attests that anthropology is best understood as "operating *within* an open system, *as* an open system, and as the study and production *of* open systems" (emphasis in original), pointing to the context, focus, and method of anthropological work. The ethnographer "recognizes that because she operates *in* an open system, the experimental system that she designs for her research must itself produce the object of her study. That object, in turn, is not stabilized at the outset. It gathers contours, turns in on itself, mutates into something unexpected" (187; emphasis in original).

Anthropology is always situated *inside* a complex world, which demands an ethic of openness: by acting *as* openly as our social lived-in worlds in order to produce work *of* that complex world (see also Pandian 2018). There are thus several parallels to scholarship on multimodal anthropology (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). First, there is a recognition that complexity and an ethic of openness condition each other, in that the former demands the latter, and the latter allows for comprehending the former. Despite rigid definitions of ethics, such as institutional settings replete with ethical dilemmas (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017, 142), or closed publishing infrastructures (Pandian 2018), an ethic of openness in anthropology implies recognizing the complexity of ethnographers' lived-in worlds (Fortun 2003, 172;

Pandian 2018). Multimodal approaches capture this ethic of openness by transgressing institutional and discursive boundaries within and beyond academia and (neo)colonial orders.

Second, ethnographies in/of/as open systems show that "results" of research studies "can feed back into the larger system within which the study is carried out, provoking shifts and displacements" (Fortun 2003, 176). This resonates with multimodal approaches that focus on the "afterlife of anthropologically intended media [that implicate] the relationships between anthropologists and networked publics formed through dissemination, as well as the discussions and debates the media engender" (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017, 142). In other words, both concepts recognize the inherent need for open(-ended)ness of ethnographic practice, as is evident in the increase in various media practices by contemporary anthropologists.

Finally, there is a recognition that more experimental, inventive, collaborative, and reflexive work is needed. Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón (2019, 222) make clear that multimodality's openness is connected to scholars' willingness to innovate the production of knowledge—that is, the academic text—and to shatter exclusive forms of expertise. Indeed, the linear and singular format of an academic text hardly lends itself to epistemic diversity (for exceptions, see Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Fischer 1986; Paper Boat Collective 2017). If one thinks of a book as something similar to a newly built house, it is the architect rather than the demolition and construction crew that receives accolades—a professional distinction between end product and process that is inherent to academia, where "architectural" features (the final house/book/article) is given recognition (Gugganig 2011; see also Chio 2017).

We see the similarities between multimodality and openness to be an important part of interrogating knowledge-production methods and cultivating an ethnographic sensibility for reflexivity and ethics (see Pachirat 2017). Working with postcards ethnographically presents a material and discursive case for a multimodal anthropology in/of/as open systems (Fortun 2003).

THE OPEN SYSTEM IN/OF/AS POSTCARDS

Reconfiguring Fortun's quote above, the ethnographer

> recognizes that because she operates *in* an open system [of postcards], the experimental [postcard] system that she designs for her research must itself produce the object of her study [the postcard, and resultant postcarding]. That object, in turn, is not stabilized at the outset. It gathers contours, turns in on itself, mutates into something unexpected [e.g., a new postcard/new genre]. (Fortun 2003, 187)

The ethnographer may attend to one of these aspects while never losing sight of their interrelatedness: (1) the postcard as a focus of research; (2) the context of the postcard as open system, or the (material and discursive) openness of postcards before they became stabilized objects; and (3) the design or research methods that reflect this openness.

Since comprehending a complex world requires acting *as* openly to produce work *of* that complex world, we do not suggest that this is a linear process. Contemporary ethnographic engagements with postcards often reflect several of these categories. In the following, we reference the contributions to this special section (Schor and Gugganig 2020) as we elucidate the three parameters by Fortun (2003), which we adapt as ethnography *of* postcards (focus), ethnography *in* postcards (context), and ethnography *as* postcards (method).

ETHNOGRAPHY *OF* POSTCARDS (FOCUS)

Postcards have generally served as the focus of academic research, with scholars analyzing the image or the message. One way to engage in this work is by a seemingly simple analysis *of* postcards as objects. Yet the tactile experience of the multimodal virtues of the postcards—the chosen card, the stamps, the handwriting, the mobility, and the medium—also turns a written correspondence and personal memorabilia into a stage for ethnographic practices. In this way, engagement with postcards mirrors ethnographic work in its wider, open context. For instance, Martina Volfová's (2020) personal essay on her great-grandparents' correspondence is a story of postcards as wartime correspondence, yet it is also a story of a wartime love, a personal connection, and the tactile experience of the multimodal virtues of the postcards. The focus on the postcards provoked other revelations, such as Volfová's connection to her homeland and her role as ethnographer in a distant place, thus exemplifying an ethnography *of* postcards, and one *in* postcards, in its wider context.

Charisma Lepcha (2020) uses Indian postcards as a source of information, and thereby as an entry point to test the malfunctioning postal system and an opening to larger insights through a colonial analysis. Part of the same open system, the object of research, the postcard, becomes the probing point for understanding its structural context, the postal system; hence, ethnographic research *of* postcards is often interrelated to ethnographic research *in* postcards. Her critique of the contingent nature of the postal system is also an important counterpoint to our argument that postcards can be considered legitimate sources for ethnographic work due to their unreliable nature. Lost postcards trouble the linear processes of creation and circulation of knowledge: What happens when something is missing? Here, absence can be just as informative as presence. Such openness also serves as a symbolic reading of ethnographic research, where reliance on and access to data—be it postcards, a lost interview, sacred knowledge—are never a given but are part of the complex terrain of ethnography (see Gugganig 2020).

ETHNOGRAPHY *IN* POSTCARDS (CONTEXT)

Ethnography in postcards takes as a starting point the context, such as the postal system, communication practices—what Östman calls "postcarding" (2004)—or the material and discursive "opening up" of postcards by repurposing it for new modes of engagement. Harris et al.'s (2020) collaborative historic-ethnographic project "Making Clinical Sense" (Harris et al. 2019) engaged three ethnographers in different locations where postcards created a "meeting place" (Östman 2004, 427) to exchange reflections on their fieldwork. In a similar collaborative research project stretching over far distances, Endre Dányi, Lucy Suchman, and Laura Watts (forthcoming) created postcards that in later analytical stages formed props for *katachresis*, forcible juxtapositions of existing themes to generate new insights (n.d.; see also Ojala 2019). Indeed, the parallel between postcards and ethnography is evident in that both carry one world into another (Harris et al. 2020; Pandian and McLean 2017). In a similar way, the postcards that were sent in response to the call for postcards turned into tactile connections to colleagues in the distance, inspirations from conferences, and pieces of decoration (see Figure 1).

Another example of opening up postcards is a correspondence between the brothers Tony and Gareth Page (2020), who send postcards with messages in the dystopian style of English writer J. G. Ballard. In a multimodal sense, they combine the genres of literarature, ethnography, and tourist greetings on conventional postcards. They explore the multimodal nature of postcards by mobilizing touristic images and highlighting the interrelated effect of different writing tools, stamps, and other material traces of mail delivery (see Gillen 2013). Their postcards can be read like a fragmented yet cohesive novel, perhaps a genre of postcard-fictive ethnography. Creating new genres resonates also with efforts where postcards are used as a site of resistance (see Goldsworthy 2010). In the project "Postcard Protest," a bookstore invited customers to share their thoughts on the current US politics on a postcard to the White House (see Figure 2). Postcards are here "opened up" both in a material sense (the graphic cues of the word "RESISTANCE" that play with a tourist-postcard aesthetic) and in a discursive sense (turning a communication medium for tourists into a citizen tool for political communication).

Elizabeth Egan started a similar project, "@100postcards,"[3] where she sent a postcard a day to the White House and posted it on Instagram (Egan 2019). Egan thus makes use of the semi-public ambiguity of the postcard that turns into a multimodal feature; she opens up the medium for conversations among various postcardists (sender, postwoman, etc.) and across other (social) media (see Östman 2004)—not unlike Lepcha's tweets to the India post office and Schor's use of Instagram as a public gallery (2020).

ETHNOGRAPHY *AS* POSTCARDS (METHOD)

Using postcards as a methodical tool is another approach that may be used for research dissemination. Levell's (2020), Schor's (2020), and Gugganig's (2020) contributions expand the methodological toolbox by employing postcards as research communication, as fieldnotes, and as community-outreach tool. As open systems and multimodal approaches,

FIGURE 1. *Gugganig's office table: second postcard from left from a #Colleex workshop, third from left by Charisma Lepcha (see contribution), and postcards by her colleagues Nina Klimburg-Witjes and Nina Frahm from their respective fieldsites (Photograph by Mascha Gugganig).*

the projects were "not stabilized at the outset" (Fortun 2003, 187) but took on meaning through enacted encounters that could not have been foreseen (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019, 5). Instead of a PowerPoint presentation, Levell created postcards as a research-dissemination tool, which highlighted the postcard's multimodal identity when her audience interpreted both the subject matter and its (postcard) form simultaneously (Levell 2020). Similarly, Gugganig produced twelve postcards for her traveling exhibition "Hawai'i beyond the Postcard," based on photographs and interview quotes from her ethnographic research (Gugganig 2020). As conceptual postcolonial critique (Mamiya 1992), she "opened up" the postcard by printing interview quotes on the glossy side and images on the matte side. Visitors were then invited to write classic postcards that she subsequently sent to the next location of the exhibition, which thereby gathered contours along the way, mutating into unexpected dialogues also between visitors that never met. In contrast to an ethnography of postcards, this contribution presents postcards as method, highlighting and using the "openness"—or unreliability—of national postal services and the materiality of postcards themselves.

If ethnographic research serves to better understand not only what people say they do but more so what they actually do, then postcarding is a manifestation of this tension between description/representation and praxis. This is best exemplified by the potential for a postcard's "bizarre interpolation" (Adjin-Tettey et al. 2008, 15)—that is, the relationship between image and unfitting message. For example, a 1911 postcard shows a man in an electric chair
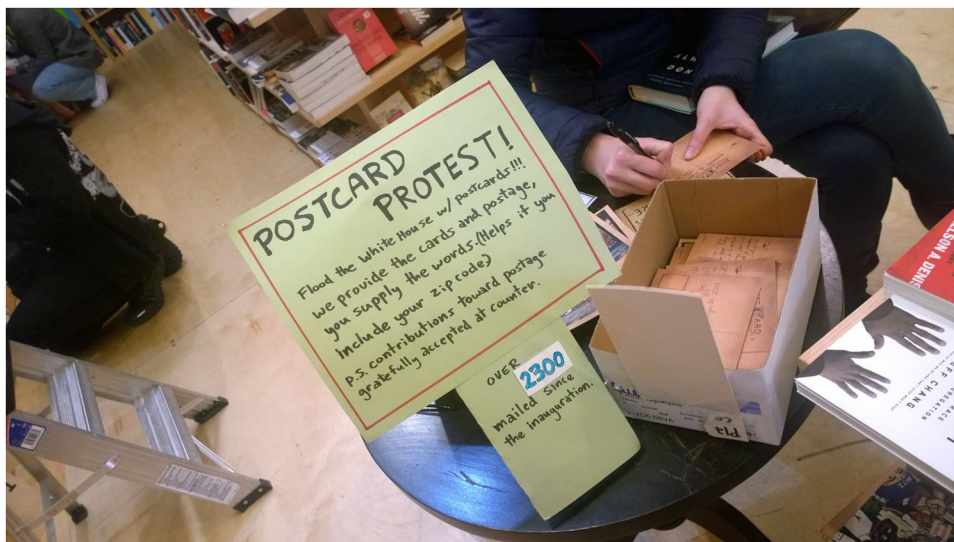
FIGURE 2. *Danielle Gendron participates in the "Postcard Protest" at the Dog Eared Bookstore, San Francisco, December 2017. (Photograph by Mascha Gugganig)*

and bears the sender's message, "I have been gardening all this week" (Moran 2005: 18; see also Kelly 2004). Schor's project "Greetings from the [un]Holy Land" plays with this "bizarre interpolation" between idealized tropes and lived realities, which also reflects ethnographic research practice (Schor 2020). By sending (and posting online) twenty-one postcards from Jerusalem to recipients outside of Israel and Palestine, she questions established narratives in a conflict zone by contradicting romanticized tourist images with written texts that encapsulate daily witnessed violence. The postcards serve as an ethnographic artifact and open up a conversation between images and annotations; they become multivalent fieldnotes.

These projects highlight multimodal invention, as they are not about "a pre-existing 'thing,' 'idea,' or 'practice' to be presented" but about "enact[ing] encounters in which the unexpected, the unforeseen, and the otherwise may be co-produced" (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019, 5). These tensions can prove fruitful footholds for ethnographic methods.

CONCLUSION

For ethnographic work, postcards are "good to think with" as both ethnography and postcards carry one world into another (Harris et al. 2020; Pandian and McLean 2017). Just as ethnography is an open system, postcards are malleable—and, as such, are reflective of sociocultural realities. They appear in a variety of forms, genres, and discourses—and, as such, offer a multimodal analytical lens. Counter to images of postcards as anachronistic, cliché, or hard to "contain," we argue that it is the postcards' virtue as open, semi-public, and variegated media that makes them conducive to multimodal engagement, inventive forms of analysis, and reflective modes of critical research. We highlight here the (interrelated) dimensions of focus, context, and method of postcards, and thus ways they can be a site for ethnographic engagement as an open system. If we focus on the postcard, it can offer insights, just as when we engage with a specific topic we wish to comprehend ethnographically. The context of postcards invites us to conceive of them as an open system, with its various material and discursive dimensions. Playing with these dimensions bears much potential for creating new methodical approaches, and potentially new genres.

Feedback for our works has been overwhelmingly positive, suggesting that people both inside and outside academia are curious about more diverse forms of intellectual engagement and dissemination. Yet, as many other scholars point out (Powis 2017; Willim 2017), the lack of a categorical home for multimodal works like these have left us with a sense that more institutional work is needed to recognize the exclusionary nature of classic knowledge-production formats in academia. This collection of works speaks to an anthropology invested in multidirectional exchanges, and with it to the need to create viable review frameworks for such multimodal work (Chio 2017; Dattatreyan and Marrero-

Guillamón 2019, 225). Jenny Chio (2017) rightly attests that multimedia scholarship requires us to ponder on whether the "end product" or intelligibility of a piece of work counts, including emotional labor. Throughout a recent stay in our respective "fields," we sent postcards to each other, capturing reflections into each other's corners of the world that offers a tactile form of collaboration and connection.[4] It brought us back to the semi-public virtue of postcards, and the question of whether they should be included here as well.

[Fig. 3 & 4]

Opting with the private side of the postcard, and thus with not reprinting them here, "[Fig. 3 & 4]" is a reminder that not all postcard projects, or all knowledge for that matter, is inherently destined to be public/published (Fujii 2016; Pachirat 2015). Returning to the deep intelligibility that Chio (2017) speaks of, postcards may provide an opening for issues, concerns, feelings, or preliminary thoughts in ethnographic fieldwork and within an academic system that has long determined norms for what is an acceptable format of research. We thus encourage more engagement with the so far unexplored ethnographic worlds of postcards.

NOTES

1. The call was kindly supported by #Colleex: https://colleex. wordpress.com/colleex-open-formats/postcards-and-ethnography/. Accessed September 22, 2019.
2. See also the collaborative research project "Relocating Innovation: Places and Material Practices of Future-Making," where three researchers developed thirty-five postcards as mode of exchange. https://sand14.com/archive/relocatinginnovation/download/.
3. https://www.instagram.com/100postcards/. Accessed May 19, 2020.
4. Both authors never met in person, but connected through the call for postcards.

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