

Panel Presentation
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Records, Knowledge and Memory (RK&M) for Geologic Repositories of Nuclear Waste

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At the outset I will say that I cannot answer the questions posed to us today for this panel – that is, I don't know what “message” should be included in all permanent markers programs, nor how and where these messages “should be archived and transmitted” – what I can do is make several comments that arise really from the occasion of this symposium, about how I have come to think about certain aspects of this vexing and quite probably impossible problem. Note that I didn't know I was on this panel, so these remarks emerged in my hotel room yesterday... this may well be apparent.

So, what follows then are five short things to throw into the mix... not an argument, just a few propositions.

One

Two peculiar things that that occur to me in relation to the last few days at WM 2014:

First.

“The world used to contain its own outside, whether as a beyond for explorers, or as a space where waste could be disposed of. Now there is no outside, no space for expansion, no more *terra nullius*...”¹

It’s all cultural heritage in a way – beginning with carbon, or plutonium, according to taste.

Second, and relatedly.

The future – *the future as such* – is forced, imposed upon us in *radically* unprecedented and traumatic ways with nuclear wastes.

In a way, it is in the wake of both of these things that we have come to be interminably grappling. And of course this sets in motion all sorts of frantic and far-reaching activities – both conceptually and globally (as one is quite clearly aware in a context such as this).

At the same time, I think, we may start to see the poverty of tools that we have at hand, and perhaps the poverty of our imaginations as well. What I mean is that repertoire of responses to the long term disposition of nuclear wastes has been in many ways, narrow, even as they have been richly techno-scientific, and irreducibly political. We dig holes, design containers and packages, we consult, we manage “legacy,” we fret about signs and markers and monuments.

And until rather recently – and I draw here from my work concerning the WIPP – it has seemed to me that the communications we have focused on have imagined the medium of markers – or signs – as *the* mode of transmission, or in some cases, the message itself (as with the menacing installations imagined by Jon Lomberg). In other words, the *future as such* has been grasped as a problem of projecting meaning (think time capsules); a problem of historical transmission: building a sign that would retain its distinctive features as a sign for *x* number of millennia. Nuclear media, as I have come to call it.

¹ David Wood, 2005 *The step back : ethics and politics after deconstruction* (State University of New York Press, Albany), 172-3. See also, Timothy Clark, “Towards a Deconstructive Environmental Literature,” *Oxford Literary Review* 30: 45-68.

But even with astonishingly diverse inputs into the development of such markers and signs – and diverse it has been... anthropologists, semioticians, linguists, material scientists, social scientists, engineers, futurists and so on – it remained essentially a *technical* question. A question of design. A question of building a better sign. Better meaning. And it strikes me that in exactly the same way as the physical materials – the materials that must be developed to withstand the weathering and temperature changes, the precipitation and handling, the environment, the duration – just as these are seen to be technical questions – that is solvable, if at all, via technical means – so it is that the sign has been seen as a question of assembling *better* semiotic units, better units of meaning.

All of this amounts to building a sign that can *shout* louder in order that it can *mean* longer. Note the troubling equivocation going on in relation to the idea of distance; the clarity of the sign in its spatial aspects is taken to be a guarantor of the sign's clarity in its temporal aspects. And the hope is that the temporal decay of the sign's meaning happens at a slower rate than the radiological decay of the nuclear materials to which they point. This is a big wager.

Two

The meaning of every message rests ultimately with the receiver of that message – in this case, the unknown addressee in the future – and not with its source. Where I come from, texts are produced by readers (and interpretive communities and codes), and not solely by authors. This too is a wager, as we see in the case of the tsunami stones. And this also renders somewhat anachronistic two lingering and competing ideas about communication: first, that meaning is either simply packaged up by some fictional entity called a sender or author, pushed down a channel of some sort, to then be received by an addressee – the communicative model produced here, associated with Shannon, Weaver, and von Neumann; and second, that meaning is immanent to, and produced by, the medium itself – a thought characterized by McLuhan and others connected to the Toronto School of Communication. Both inadequately capture the actual and creative and unpredictable freedom and agency that persists on the part of “receivers” to produce meaning from “messages.” This is also a problem.

Three

As Jonathan Bordo put it, “Let me call a site of memory that in principle gives dominance to living witnesses a “keeping place” and thus distinguish it from all those depositories of memory where preservation takes precedence over recollection – museums, galleries, archives, and so on...”

“Keeping place” as a designation opens up the possibility for a division between a *heritage* or generalize legacy, and a *lieu de mémoire* – a site of memory – requiring interested, engaged and culturally specific custodian-witnesses... Such sites are marked by a continuing contestation over custodianship between a hegemonic state-sanctioned practice of memory that acts as if there are no living witnesses, and practices of memory that acknowledge living witnesses who claim these traces to be theirs to curate.”²

Of course, this is it, isn't it. The living witness. Imperiled through the practices themselves – the leak, the accident; through a custodial practice (and public secret) that disavows any witness; and through a deep temporality that makes the very possibility of a living witness almost, but not quite, unfathomable.

Four

It occurs to me that The Nuclear Guardian Project has some things right. I don't think I realized this clearly when I was writing about the WIPP. To be custodians, guardians, curators of this massive and distributed radioactive museum of non-art (Morton), requires a seismic shift in thinking from the impassive didactics of markers, to an active and ongoing process of curation, interpretation, reinterpretation and dissemination. The Records, Knowledge and Memory initiative moves in this direction – or at least it seeks to clarify the language we use, to collate what it is that we think we know, and to problematize the transmission, disposition and context of “messages.”

If Sebeok's *modest proposal* for nuclear Templars – the Atomic Priesthood – was to ensure that no one would really know the actual truth, and site-marking seeks to ensure that at least those who really *should* know the truth can know (enough), the guardianship model, in contrast, democratizes knowledge such that the relevant constituency – that is, those for whom the relevance and reality of nuclear wastes is an abiding and ongoing matter of concern and care – is as wide as it can be. In other words, it is precisely the acknowledgement that there is no outside, no behind the barn. Living witnesses, not inadvertent intruders.

² Jonathan Bordo, "The Keeping Place (Arising from an Incident on the Land)." In *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Rose Olin, 157-82. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Five

Thinking of Jantine's presentation and the paper Claudio sent me on the tsunami stones, I quote myself from a text in which I quote the Japanese poet, Mariko Nagai from a piece she wrote about the 2011 tsunami for *Foreign Policy*:

The warning did come in time, but some did not remember. The warning blared after the earthquake, the tsunami warning that came out of nearly every village and town hall, *There is a tsunami warning, please evacuate to high ground, This is a tsunami warning, please evacuate to high ground.* They were too used to it, too used to the warnings that came nearly every year, the warning that did not amount to anything more than a mere splash. Those who did not heed the warning went back to retrieve their memories, their past, what they deemed important...

They did not remember that this coastline has been plagued with the angry waves as long as written words have existed, each devastation chiseled into stones. It is grief impressed upon the pages and stone tablets that dot the coast of the Sanriku area... It is regrets contained in these words, regrets that translate into warnings for the future, for the present. But some had forgotten. So instead, they went home, thinking they have enough time.³

To me this poses a real and thick question (that I would add to those posed earlier) – What is the threshold – the semiotic dosage – in the present, to ensure the transmission to the future? How much, and how long? After all, if you remind us too much, we will not listen, and thus forget. But then, if you do not remind us, there will have been nothing to listen to, and we shall certainly have already forgotten.

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³ Peter van Wyck "An Archive of Threat." *Future Anterior*, 9.2 Winter: 53-80; Mariko Nagai, "The Forgetting Stone," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2001.

