

Volcanoes and Detectives:

Writing unconventionally in academic work (and maybe doing it well)

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Throughout my four years at Princeton, I've written about everything from Saladin to shopping mall design, from the Black Death to (more than one) history of the Princeton geology department. Given that I've had to write about a small compendium of subjects, I have often tried to use unconventional entry points to situate increasingly esoteric topics. In this article, I will discuss the introductions of three off-the-wall papers I wrote while I was here, assess what I was thinking at the time, and reassess their strengths and weaknesses. It goes without saying that risk-taking has its rewards, but it also has its risks.

The first paper's introduction that I'd like to look at is from a term paper called "Preparing for Ecumenopolis: Urban Sprawl's Persistence and Avenues for its Reform." This paper, written for an urban studies class, looked at a (too wide) variety of components of American urban sprawl and its possible solutions. The introduction is somewhat an augury for the rest of the paper's eclectic hodge-podge of sources, indicated by an initial lengthy block quote from literature followed by a similar statement from a polemical mid-20th-century urban planner named Constantinos Doxiadis:

The 2010 science fiction novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* takes place in a sprawling urban agglomeration that houses 87% of the human population, a city called New Angeles/Lost Tokyo-2.¹

The formation of [New Angeles/Lost Tokyo-2] occurred in two steps. Step one: the cities of New York and Los Angeles, 2,462 miles apart, much to the surprise and consternation of residents and property owners and municipal officials and parking lot owners and westsiders from the eastern half and eastsiders from the western half, slowly and invisibly and irreversibly merged into each other, in the process swallowing up what was in between, leaving one metropolis that contained, within it, what had been America. Alaska and Hawaii were included as well.

The second phase began a short while later, when the sprawling city of Greater Tokyo spontaneously bifurcated along a spatio-temporal fault line. Half of this bifurcated Tokyo moved across the world and wrapped itself around the perimeter of the recently formed New York/Los Angeles chimera. This half is referred to as Lost Tokyo-2.²

Surprisingly, the fantastic urban agglomerations of New York, Los Angeles and Tokyo merging into one colossal city are not so off base as to be outside the realm of urban theory and population demographics.

¹ Charles Yu. 2010. *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. New York: Knopf, p. 61.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

In 1967, the Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis proposed the idea of *ecumenopolis*, a speculative city that will span the entire world.³ His concept is remarkably in line with Yu's fictional "New Angeles":

This city [ecumenopolis] is already under construction. It will absorb almost all the important cities of the present, and will gradually grow out of them through their dynamic growth, as well as through the dynamic growth of the new settlements that are going to be created. It will be composed of almost all the major cities of the past and present. This city is going to expand widely over the plains and the great valleys and rivers, since the most restrictive factor in its formation will be the presence of water.⁴

This conception of macro-urban sprawl has its precedents... In 1961, Jean Gottmann characterized Megalopolis as a network of continuous urbanism, its chief example the North American line of cities stretching from Boston to Washington.⁵ Grounded in the reality of the American Northeast Corridor, Gottmann's 'Megalopolis' observation suggests Doxiadis' vision may not be too far from reality.

In this paper, I opened with a block-quoted section of a sci-fi novel and juxtaposed it with a block-quoted section from an urban planner's theory, using it to motivate a question of how the real world may reflect these visions. Looking back now, perhaps a simpler—and no less effective—opening might have involved just the provocative quote from Doxiadis. After all, my discussion of sprawl that followed only needed one nightmare vision of an urban future to provide adequate framing. 99.9% of the time, one block quote is enough.

But in other papers I wrote, I tried to finesse even more layers to my introductions, in a process that was not unlike the main conceit of dream-levels from the 2010 film *Inception*. One of those papers was called "Not a Mountain like Others": The Dangerous Complacency and Photographic Legacy of the Thera Eruption through Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*." It is perhaps the weirdest paper I have ever attempted, its lens text and subject under study being extremely contrived. In it, I tried to associate tourism of the volcanically-preserved Bronze Age city of Akrotiri on the island of Santorini with the theory of photography through Anne Carson's prose novel *Autobiography of Red*, which itself associates photography theory with volcanoes. That was a mouthful. For a taste, here's an excerpt from the introduction:

On the island of Santorini,⁶ a boutique bookstore sells a pamphlet entitled "The Atlantis Dialogues." On its cover is the image of a bust of Plato and a small, white silhouette of an aerial view of Santorini. Within its pages, the pamphlet quotes one of Plato's most famous lines about the mythical lost island of Atlantis—"In a single day and night of misfortune... the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared into the sea."⁷

³ Constantinos A. Doxiadis, 2005. "Ecumenopolis : The Coming World-City." *Ekistics* 72, p. 198.

⁴ Doxiadis, "Ecumenopolis : The Coming World-City," p. 198.

⁵ Jean Gottmann, 1990. *Since Megalopolis: The Urban Writings of Jean Gottmann*. Edited by Jean Gottmann and Robert A. Harper. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 156.

⁶ Editor's note: Santorini is also known by its ancient name, Thera. Mark Cartwright, "Thera," in *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (Ancient History Encyclopedia, 2012), accessed July 22, 2014, <http://www.ancient.eu.com/thera/>.

⁷ Plato, *The Atlantis Dialogues*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Paravion Press, 2014), p. 4.

The implicit association between Santorini and Atlantis, in this case inscribed on the pamphlet's cover by an image of Santorini, reflects an aesthetic circulation of a geological event—namely, the eruption of the Thera supervolcano around 1614 B.C. that extinguished the Minoan Bronze Age civilization at Akrotiri.⁸ During the eruption, 150 billion tons of volcanic debris were ejected from the volcano, significant segments of the island's ring collapsed and Akrotiri was buried in volcanic ash.⁹ Similar to the myth of Atlantis, the civilization disappeared with a violent natural catastrophe—freezing the Akrotiri settlement in time through a process similar to the taking of a photograph.

Anne Carson explores the relationship between volcanoes and photography in her novel in verse, *Autobiography of Red*.... [the protagonist] Geryon's fascination with the relationship between volcanoes and photography forms an intrinsic part of the work, best expressed when the third-person narrator writes, "A volcano is not a mountain like others. Raising a camera to one's face has effects no one can calculate in advance."¹⁰ ... Just as the volcanoes depicted in *Autobiography of Red* have far-reaching consequences on their subjected populations, so does the Thera volcano on the public perception of Santorini.

In this excerpt, you can see that I was trying to do a great many things at once. A postcard sold at a store becomes a discussion of Atlantis, followed by an explanation of a real-life Atlantis destroyed and preserved by a volcano, and then an introduction of the lens text *Autobiography of Red*, which traffics heavily in volcano imagery—it's just too much! I simply become exhausted even when explaining it. Again, for a much less convoluted opening, all I needed to do was talk about Akrotiri and then *Autobiography of Red* (which would still be contrived, but more acceptable). Given these two misfires concerning the *ecumenopolis* and volcanoes, I must leave you with an example of what might be a more effective way to handle this.

One paper I wrote, "I was part of the nastiness now': Death, photography, and survival in Raymond Chandler's 'Killer in the Rain' and *The Big Sleep*," employed a much more manageable introduction, one that introduced the themes with lens texts that were more organic and less belabored. Rather than force lens upon lens upon text, in this passage I established a situation and a means of analyzing it. No more, no less, and therefore much better.

⁸ George E. Vougioukalakis, *The Minoan Eruption of the Thera Volcano and the Aegean World*, trans. Alexander Doumas (Athens: Society for the Promotion of Studies on Prehistoric Thera, 2006), 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.; Walter L. Friedrich, Marit-Solveig Seidenkrantz, and Ole Bjorslev, "Santorini (Greece) before the Minoan Eruption: A Reconstruction of the Ring-island, Natural Resources and Clay Deposits from the Akrotiri Excavation," *Geological Society* 171 (2000): 71, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://sp.lyellcollection.org.ezproxy.princeton.edu/>; Floyd W. McCoy and Grant Haiken, "Anatomy of an Eruption," *Archaeological Institute of America* 43, no. 3 (May/June 1990): 48, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41765836>.

¹⁰ Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*, vintage contemporaries ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998; New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1999), 135.

In Raymond Chandler's detective story "Killer in the Rain," a curious line appears. In the midst of a struggle between a blackmailer named Marty and an unhinged woman named Carmen over pornographic photos, the narrator-detective observes that "Marty and Carmen were still facing each other like a couple of images."¹¹

Well known for his flashy similes, mystery novelist Raymond Chandler was one of the pioneers of the hardboiled detective genre and is regarded as a major voice in American literature.¹² He is most known for his novels featuring Philip Marlowe, a cynical but mostly honorable private detective who investigates the dark side of 1930s Los Angeles.¹³ In particular, the themes of death and survival are intrinsic to Chandler's work, and are exhibited throughout his 1939 breakout novel, *The Big Sleep*. The aforementioned line from "Killer in the Rain," however, through its photographic metaphors of "still" and "images," suggests that photography's exhibition of these themes is critical to understanding their depth and complexity, themes which resonate with Jacques Derrida's philosophical work. In his book, *Athens, Still Remains*, Derrida discusses the intrinsic connection between death, survival, and photography, a connection that is revealed through "Killer" and further elaborated upon in *The Big Sleep*.¹⁴

"Killer in the Rain" is a story that Chandler expanded and combined with one of his other stories, "The Curtain," to create *The Big Sleep*.¹⁵ However, the line is absent from its analogous scene in *The Big Sleep*. Not only does this line demonstrate a conflict between "Killer" and *The Big Sleep*, it implies that Chandler's meditation of death and survival through photography evolves over the writing of the two works. To borrow a photographic term, Chandler's philosophical meditation on death, survival, and photography *develops* into a form that illustrates Derrida's implied assertion that photography's association with death and survival make survival more complicated because traces of past experiences haunt the archival nature of photography and life.¹⁶

In this introduction, I first outlined a scene from literature, drawing attention to a line that motivates a contextualization of the work and the need for a theoretical work to address the line's questions relating to the imagery of photography. The tension between the earlier version of the Raymond Chandler story and the final novelized version therefore motivates the application of the lens text by Derrida to learn more about the use of the photographic theme in literature.

Thus, each component is organically established and introduced, and there aren't the same onion-like layers to get through to get to the main argument. Of all the strange and eclectic papers, this one about detectives is one that I look back upon quite fondly. My volcano paper may have been messy, and so too was the one about the "world-city"—but I guess even these imperfect works are motives for greater ones. For full disclosure, I must admit I ended up writing my senior thesis on Doxiadis's *ecumenopolis*.

¹¹ Raymond Chandler, *Killer in the Rain* (Black Mask, 1935; London: Penguin, 2011), 63.

¹² Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Scribner, 2000; New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 137, accessed July 8, 2014, <http://books.google.gr/books>

¹³ Robert F. Moss, "An Introduction to The Big Sleep," Criticism and Scholarship: The Raymond Chandler Website, last modified 1997, accessed July 9, 2014, <http://home.comcast.net/~mossrobert/html/criticism/bigsleep.htm>.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-Francois Bonhomme*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, english ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 2, originally published as *Demeure, Athens* (n.p.: Editions Galilee, 2009).

¹⁵ Moss, "An Introduction to The Big Sleep," Criticism and Scholarship: The Raymond Chandler Website.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs*, 27, 67.

To conclude, a writer's work is never finished. It can just grow to expand the whole world. The trick is making that expansion organic through the use of "form-fitting" lenses and texts and sources that are complementary rather than distracting.

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Bios

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