# 2. Greetings from Chicago: Image Networks and Infrastructures of Postcard Production and Circulation[1]

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## Introduction

The increasing speed, mobility and distribution of digital photographic images today, particularly through networks of social media and web presentation, produces a dazzling oversupply of images that can only be understood in relation to their circulation, and this we may consider an emblem of the condition of the twenty-first century. Yet this phenomenon closely recapitulates that of the early twentieth-century's boom in the production and circulation of photographic images as postcards through photomechanical reproduction, making it propitious to reconsider the proliferation and transmission of postcards. That vast sea of images has a history, valuable as a foundation for interpreting the near-infinite trajectories of images today. Now almost obsolete as an image genre, postcards are nevertheless a recent enough memory today for most adults that they haven't yet quite been lost to the antiquarian status of daguerreotypes or Victrola cylinders, perhaps because they adumbrate aspects of our present culture of digital images.

The photographic postcard genre was born in the late nineteenth century and came of age c.1900. Many millions of photo-based postcards were transmitted globally, their production dependent on heavy machinery rather than software, and their circulation tied to rail, road and postal networks. In America, sites that were not really sights became views for the tourist market, as virtually every small town was systematically photographed to produce postcards available to be mailed to remote destinations. Postcards were on the move in vast networks of production and circulation: Original source photographs were created in situ, transmitted to an urban postcard factory for printing, and returned for sale as mass-produced print runs of postcards to the locality depicted. Once purchased, they might be inscribed, mailed and preserved in albums. Postcards arriving by then-rapid and reliable postal delivery were precursors of e-mail; in their pairing of brief inscriptions and images, they were precursors of text messages, and since unlike formal,

sealed letters, they were open to be read by all, they somewhat resemble tweets as well. Moreover, postcards are part of the history of "conversational images," i.e. images we converse *with* and not *about* that proliferate in the form of connected photography we share on the internet (Gunthert 2014, par. 23).


Figure 2.1: Curt Teich Company, *Greetings from Chicago*, 1940s.

The enormous production of topographical photographic postcards between 1900 and 1950 by the Curt Teich Company of Chicago, proud operator of "the largest postcard factory in the United States," offers a case study of the circulation and distribution of images and the infrastructural networks necessary for it.[2] Best known for the "Gruss aus" or "Greetings from" postcard format (Fig. 2.1), in which the name of a city was formed from large letters filled with images of that city's icons, the Teich Company represented the nation with postcard views of nearly every municipality.[3] The millions of postcards they produced and disseminated demonstrate a curious amalgam of image genres, including reportage, advertising, mass-produced nostalgia, and more. Views of landscapes, cityscapes, sights and business premises constituted the bulk of the Teich postcard repertoire, but it also included popular ethnographic images and hand-drawn racialized caricatures of African-Americans, Native Americans and Asians. Although the postcard phenomenon was a global one, the Teich Company almost exclusively specialized in postcards of American sites. Jeffrey Meikle, the dean of Teich postcard studies, subtitled his history of the company's production "Imaging of a Nation" (2016). Teich's postcard empire relied on an industrial infrastructure connecting producers, retailers, salesmen and individual consumers or collectors. In my paper, I therefore propose to address postcard circulation not so much as a process of interper-

sonal communication and sharing images—like it is often done in the discourses of digital images (Cheroux 2019; Gunthert 2014). Instead, I will focus on the image networks and infrastructures that enable the production, dissemination and consumption of postcards and thus condition their mobility in the first place. In terms of ANT, I thus examine postcards as networks rather than as punctualized black-boxed actors (Law 1992; on the notion of circulation, see also the introduction to this volume).

## Modernism, Modernity and Commercial Printing in Chicago: Trajectories Outward from the Center of the Continent

Industrially produced mass-cultural artifacts of printed ephemera like Teich Company postcards are certainly remote in form, audience and purpose from works of avant-garde art normally described by the term modernist. Postcard images' formal language was conventional rather than ground-breaking. They are usually multiply authored rather than the works of identifiable masters, and they lack many of the attributes of the modernist aesthetic Andreas Huyssens so usefully summarized in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other" (1987, 7). That postcards are modern, however, is evident—the postcard form became prominent worldwide just as the twentieth century was beginning, and its mass production in factories using state of the art printing technology establishes it as an image category imbricated with the modern period and its methods (Brunet 2017). The production of Teich postcards and their outward trajectories from factory to the sites of their sale and consumption across the continent was specifically Chicagoan, and harnessed the capabilities of the city's industrial infrastructure. Moving the Teich Company's production from the category of modern mass culture to that of modernist expression requires a reconfiguration of the latter category. It is argued that Chicago modernism has its own characteristic forms, more popular, audience-oriented and comfortable with commerce and consumption than the more hermetic and austere vanguard practices of other venues (Olson 2017). Thomas Dyja emphasizes the modern corporatization so characteristic of Chicago culture, describing the city as "navigating the transformation of the cultural ideal of the common man into a national mass-marketing strategy" (2013, 336). Associating photographic postcards with modernism requires finding space for industry and commercial distribution within the sphere of artistic production, as is logical in the context of Chicago.

The city's printed images both represent and result from its own transformations. Carl Sandburg's celebrated personification of Chicago emphasized the industries which played central roles in reshaping the economy of the nation, and joined urban mechanized production to agricultural productivity in generating wealth and promoting growth.[4] Taking in photographic images from afar and transform-

ing them into mass produced image products like postcards paralleled the older meat processing and grain transshipment industries of Chicago. Like them, the printing industry relied upon the city's roles as "player with railroads and the nation's freight handler" for the circulation of its products. Early twentieth-century commercial image printing was a manufactory that paired the might of the machine with skilled human labor in factory settings, and its products helped drive further commercial and industrial development. The city's excellent rail (and later, highway) connections with the rest of the country made it the center of a national distribution network for raw materials and commodities.

The Chicago printing industry has attracted the attention of historians who understood its expansion as inevitable owing to location. Local booster Walter D. Moody was quoted in the *Story of Chicago in Connection with the Printing Business* to the effect that:

> Transportation is the greatest power governing the growth or retrogression of a city. Thirty railways terminate in Chicago. This city is within a night's ride of 50,000,000 people. Any one of these can get into a train after dinner in the evening and get to Chicago in time for breakfast. Within this circle of 500 miles is more than half the population of the United States—and Chicago is the center of the circle. (Reagan Printing House 1912, 62)

Comparing New York to Chicago, Elizabeth Baker similarly notes:

> The high cost of carting tons of paper from railroad to warehouse, from warehouse to plant, thence, printed and bound, back to the railroad, has made it impossible for New York printers to bid against those who enjoy a railroad siding at their door. (1969, 85)[5]

Chicago printing was a growing industry for the city, central to the practices of advertising, mail order marketing and mass communications transforming modern consumer experience. The photomechanical reproduction enabling these centrifugal image torrents is closely linked to modernity in Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay (1969), but the twentieth century proved to be not merely the age of mechanical reproduction, but also that of the *dissemination, exchange* and *consumption* of images. Reproduction mandates circulation, each iteration of an image implying multiple possible trajectories.[6]

As New York City was the center of literary publishing and vanguard visual art, and Hollywood was the developing locus of cinematic production, Chicago became the nation's leading center of commercial image printing. The demands of image circulation and expediency of distribution of finished products from a central point re-centered this form of cultural production from Europe and the American east coast to the upper Midwest. Histories of twentieth century American culture have often privileged accounts of modernist movements in New York and Hollywood's

hegemonic presence in cinematic mass-culture above the cultural production of Chicago, viewing the city literally in the center of the country as marginal. But what do we see when we attend to that center and its image manufactory?

Hortense Powdermaker's pioneering anthropological study of Hollywood announced that its "mass production of fabricated daydreams" represents the "first popular art to become a big business with mass production and mass distribution" (1950, 39). This isn't precisely true, given the prior history of printed images, particularly postcards. But priority claims aside, her analysis is helpful in identifying the importance of mass audiences. She quotes a Hollywood insider who had researched popular opinion regarding the movies, finding that "The Hollywood belief that there is a difference between the big-town and small-town market is an absolute myth. A gas station attendant in Sydney, Nebraska had the same approach to the same badly made melodrama as a haberdasher in the Chicago Loop" (Powdermaker 1950, 46). That unified market for films was exactly the target audience for postcards as well. Like films, they did the work of presentation of the world near and far. But they did so in a far more intimate manner, literally coming into the homes of their viewers, for collecting, preserving and re-encountering at will. Postcards thus had the potential for sustained presence in their consumers' lives in a way not possible for the time-based art of film.

The Teich plant was no less a dream factory than the Hollywood studios, but while in Hollywood "the industry" only meant one thing, Chicago was characterized by many industries, all visible and immediately to hand. Printing was loud, sometimes dangerous work involving volatile inks and heavy machinery. Image printing in Chicago took place in large factory spaces much like those where machinery and other commodities were produced, and it required skilled work forces, for whom image printing provided a solidly middle-class livelihood. The Teich Company plant at 1733–35 Irving Park Boulevard had specially reinforced floors designed to bear the enormous weight of its thundering presses and the tons of paper stock required to feed them, as well as the enormous windows prized by loft-dwellers today, to supply as much daylight as possible to enable the fine work by hand of the retouching department (Fig. 2.2). Different floors of the building were allocated to separate production functions, and tasks were differentiated according to gender.

Like many printing concerns, the Curt Teich Company's roots were in Germany, where its founder was born, and where the craft of printing had reached its highest level of sophistication in the late nineteenth century. Curt Teich trained as a lithographer before emigrating to the United States in 1895. Founded in 1898 with but three employees, his company grew to boast of 275 workers in twelve departments (Retouching, Photo-Litho., Engraving, Transfer, Art, Miehle, Offset, Composing, Bindery, House Department, Cutting and Shipping Department) occupying three floors covering a full city block, and housing five Miehle Presses, six Gordons, one vertical Miehle, five Scott, and two Harris Offsets (Curt Teich Company c. 1935).

Located in a then predominately German neighborhood, the Teich factory was embellished with large signs on its roof announcing the company's name, and direct access to a freight railroad line running along Ravenswood Avenue. Unlike commercial printing behemoth R.R. Donnelley & Sons on the city's South Side, the smaller Teich Company seems to have employed exclusively white workers for much of its history; both firms were emphatically non-union shops.[7]

Figure 2.2: Retouching Department, Curt Teich Company, c. 1920.

## Image and Process: From Photomechanical Reproduction to Commercial Display

The Teich Company used a number of photomechanical printing processes for postcards over the years, most derived from lithography. Chromolithography, developed in 1837, was a form of color-registered printing via lithographic stones. The photochrom process derived from it involved photographic transfer of a

(negative) camera image to a lithographic stone for printing—essentially, photochromolithography using a negative to harden a layer of bitumen to insolubility on a lithographic stone, in proportion to the light exposure received through the negative. Solvents removed the portions of bitumen not hardened, and the stone could then be inked. Photochroms gained their delicate chromatic splendor from between four and fourteen colors printed in registration, each from a separate stone. A proprietary photomechanical hybrid process, it was patented by Hans Jakob Schmid in Switzerland in the 1880s, and in the US, licensed exclusively to the Teich Company's greatest rival, the Detroit Publishing Company (Hughes 1994; Walter and Arqué 2014). Denied the right to use photochrom, the Teich company improvised CT-Photochrom, a process based on black halftone images overprinted with only four colors (Meikle 2016, 31). Those colors were applied to base monochrome images, and Teich agents would provide customers with a color chart resembling today's Pantone decks, to use in specifying hues for the tinting of their images. Up to 32 cards were printed grouped together at one time on Teich's sheet-fed presses, allowing the Teich Company to produce postcards in vaster quantity, if less elegant quality, than their competitor.

Although photographic images were the basis of these postcards, the final products represented interventions of the artist's hand upon the camera image, answering to demands of production, marketing or consumption. Beyond the inevitable photographic interventions of cropping and framing, the cards featured heavy retouching and interpolation of hand-drawn elements. Working toward a less demanding and more striking result, by 1931 Teich developed what they called CT Art-Colortone, a simplified five-color process employing more brilliant inks printed from more durable and lightweight zinc plates rather than lithographic stones (Newberry Library n.d.). This process was to form the basis for Teich's celebrated "linen" postcards, produced between 1931 and 1950. The texture (apparent in Fig. 2.1) was pleasing to the touch, but also expedient in serving to conceal the low-quality paper used for the cards, and the relatively low image resolution of the 125-line per inch printing screens employed. This process allied its products with the long pre-photographic traditions and practices of the lithographic printing industry, whose products spanned the range from fine art to inexpensive ephemera. Most evidently, the cheerful pastel tints of the process result in a color palette immediately recognizable, though rare in reality, rather like Wordsworth's description of a painting by George Beaumont:

> Ah, then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
> To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
> The light that never was, on sea or land,
> The consecration and the Poet's dream. (1807)

This tinting resembled the colorization of classic black and white films, in that all of the hues were assigned rather than recorded with the making of the original image.

Imagine the craftsmen at what the Company called "postcard headquarters" working at the rows of big tables in the Retouching Department, rendering the colors and tones of a New England coastal landscape or a view of the Grand Canyon, applying that look of the 'light that never was' to landscapes they'd never seen. The photographers and retouching colorists didn't meet or consult in the case of the Teich Company's products, whereas at the rival Detroit Publishing Company, classic negatives of scenes of the American West from decades earlier by renowned landscape photographer William Henry Jackson were translated into photochrom postcards under his supervision (Hales 1996). At Teich, by contrast, image-making was almost entirely subsumed into the production work (McElroy 2015). The brand was all—it was Curt Teich's name that was emblazoned on many of the company's products, and yet much of the company's business lay in producing cards for other distributors to market under their own imprimaturs, or for clients large and small, including manufacturers of practically everything, celebrated travel entrepreneur Fred Harvey, and innumerable hotels—each concerned with its own branding rather than with that of their image purveyor. Such clients were often highly exacting in requirements, which ranged from matching reality to transforming it. A furniture manufacturer might send fabric samples to insure the appropriate rendering of upholstery, or a shop proprietor might request the removal of rival businesses' signs obscuring his premises' façade.

As Meikle explains, a photographer or agent sent an image to Teich with color notes, then:

> In the company's art department, an airbrush artist retouched the photo by cropping, removing undesirable features, adding desirable ones, and in general sharpening and clarifying the image. Working with a halftone produced from this airbrushed photograph, a colorist then prepared a postcard-sized watercolor proof to be sent to the client for approval. At the plant in Chicago, printing plates for offset lithography were prepared in four colors—the primaries, red, yellow and blue, plus an additional dark blue which contributed a dramatic sense of depth. (Meikle 2009, 114)

Postproduction transformation of source photographs was routine. For a card representing a view of Lover's Leap and the Narrows from Wills Mountain Inn, Cumberland MD, for instance, the directions read: "THE NATIONAL HIGHWAY SHOWS UP BLACK. RUNNING ALONG SIDE OF THE STREAM OF WATER, PLEASE MAKE SAME SHOW UP LIGHT. ADD MAN OR TWO ON TOP OF LEAP" (Fig. 2.3). Adding figures to landscapes and tidying up compositions was all in

a day's work for the Retouching Department.[8] It could produce clouds, change weather, summon the moon and even turn day into night.

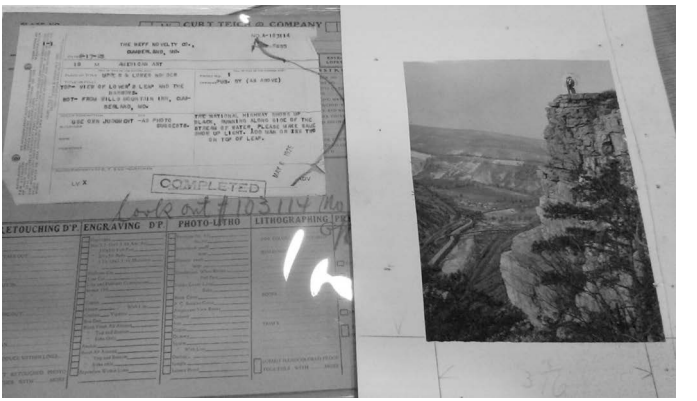


Figure 2.3: Job envelope, information sheet and retouched proof for *View of Lover's Leap and the Narrows, from Wills Mountain Inn, Cumberland MD*, 1925.

It is a small marvel of historical chance that many thousands of the chatty and jaunty production and retouching instructions that circulated through the Teich factory are preserved today at the Newberry Library. The company kept these notes following each print run, since the jobs only became profitable upon repeat orders, with the files available to direct production of subsequent editions as needed. Instructions were often conveyed on Teich Company "House Telegram" forms, boldly printed "Think intelligently" and "Act quickly" in their upper corners. These instructions can be assembled into a found poem about the appearance of the world and the printers' mastery over it:

> "Put in canoe or two." "Put flag on poles, add some fellows in gray-blue uniforms." "Take out island in distance." "Put in about 3 yellow cabs parked along sidewalk." "Strengthen the mountain view, a little if possible." "Particular Customer, cards to be first class." "Bronze turkeys are black with greenish tinge, white stripes in tail, red comb and wattle. Some turkeys are pure white, others are mostly white with light brown, on back from head to about wings. All, of course have the red comb and wattle." "Close all the open windows and add more sidewalk on the corner." "Show a little red in the Gasoline pump and take out the sign on building as indicated. For the street use a color that will be O.K. in your judgement." "Mr. Miller says he wants the words Miller Fireproof Storage imprinted across the door of the vault. Just make these letters on the photograph so they will appear on the plate." "On the view of the Swimming Pool, please change the color of the two light blue

> bathing suits on the two men in the view to Navy blue." "More color in lamp shades. Try to hold art work down to lowest possible figure." "Color of building—like No. 9 on color chart. Perhaps a wee bit lighter." (Curt Teich Company 1910–1940)

In making postcards, Teich retouchers took accurate and information-rich photographs and progressively introduced distortion to their syntax. Cropped, captioned, re-touched, colorized and given faux-linen surfaces, they functioned as raw material for a set of transformations. The final decisions in the Teich retouching room were repeated and circulated with a high degree of exactitude and uniformity, but those visual ideas and images were only arrived at through adulteration of the original camera pictures.


Figure 2.4: Curt Teich Company, Appointment card for sales representatives, 1920s.

The trajectories of images in the process of transformation to postcard format were bi-directional. Individual postcard consumers and collectors could not ac-

quire cards unless retailers stocked them from the manufacturers, of course, but first photographs were made somewhere and shipped to the factory in Chicago. Print runs of cards were produced and sent to distributors, who then displayed them to potential purchasers. Profit margins at the Teich Company for individual cards were slender and the teams of sales representatives were paid on a commission basis. Numerous booklets exhorted them to greater achievements in pushing the product. These documents represent the company's marketing to its own sales force, as when "Sales Pointers" exhorted: "The only true test of advertising is to 'Say it with orders'" (Curt Teich Company c. 1935, n.p.).

A special version of the card depicting "postcard headquarters" was developed for staff to send to prospective clients, announcing imminent sales calls (Fig. 2.4). In addition to producing its own vast inventory of scenic postcards to sell to retailers and wholesalers, it solicited orders from clients who used postcards in their own promotion. An undated document headed "POST CARD CHECK LIST" has four headings under which various points of advice for such clients are offered:

> Determine When Your Landscaping Will Be Best for Photography (What time of year will flowers and foliage be best?)
> Obtaining a Photographer (Ask locally who is best—the better your transparency—the better the finished cards.)
> Taking the Transparency (Go with photographer as he takes picture. Look through his camera so you know what he is including. . . . and that no cars are prominently shown in the view as they date your card.)
> Composition (An attractive view of a part of your building often is better than trying to include every unit.) (Curt Teich Company 1940s, n.p.)

The Teich sales manual also advised salesmen on how to pitch vending display strategies to their clients.

> The art and science of psychological post card display is a study in itself. We here at post card headquarters, however, will be glad to offer concrete suggestions for such effective displays for any one of your dealers if you will simply make your request known to us. (Curt Teich Company c. 1935, n.p.)

The company also marketed postcard dispensing machines, albums and racks. Sales methods were carefully standardized and scripted to build demand:

> IN POST CARD ALBUM NO. 1, mount samples of those subjects you can supply to your trade out of your stock. Present one of these albums to each of your customers and prospective customers so they have a constant catalog on hand from which to make their own selections—so they can order direct of you by phone or mail. Keep your trade informed of all new subjects, service them with suggestions that will help them to sell more post cards and folders by making known to them that

> at all times the latest developments in merchandising, displays, contests, educational values, and the like. They appreciate it—they sell more—you derive a larger volume of business from their stores. (Curt Teich Company c. 1935, n.p.)

From factory production to marketing by Teich sales staff, to retail sales and consumer selection was a long chain of commercial relationships, a series of trajectories forming a larger arc of production to consumption. This arc resulted in literally millions of postcard images over half a century or so of intensive production, a ubiquity that enabled postcards to achieve enduring cultural resonance.

## Representational Standardization: Encyclopedias and Microcosms in the City at the Center of the Continent

The Teich Company effectively represented the entire United States by means of postcard views of every landscape and municipality, marketing those views by means of a network of middle-men who promoted distribution of postcard views as well as touting for orders for cards of new subjects. They developed the broadest possible audiences for postcard images, which standardized topography into a system of representation in which the familiar and the alluringly unfamiliar, the known and the foreign all have their places. The drive toward encyclopedic representation, the impulse to map the known world, and the development of an orderly microcosm of systematized representation were already characteristic Chicago endeavors. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, like all world's fairs, constructed a symbolic microcosm on a single site, bringing the world to Chicago and linking Chicago to the world, but that was only the most prominent of the encyclopedic/microcosmic endeavors in the city. The growing cartographic empire of Rand McNally, Inc—like the Teich Company—was essentially a printing firm which chose to specialize in a particular category of production, literally mapping the world (Ackerman 1993). Donnelley and Sons, by contrast, chose to pursue the broadest possible spectrum of business, which included printing the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck mail order catalogs—themselves encyclopedic enterprises. The city at the center of the continent busied itself reducing the universe to orderly systems of representation for commerce, edification, communication and tourism, in the process becoming the locus for the reproduction, packaging and dissemination of imaged experiences of other places. Another approach to encompassing worlds was evident in Narcissa Niblack Thorne's construction of dozens of 1/12$^{th}$ scale rooms perfectly representing different styles and periods of American interiors, like dollhouse rooms without inhabitants.[9]

The encyclopedic corpus of Curt Teich Company cards is highly conventionalized—the angled views of Anytown USA Main Streets, the vertiginous rise of mighty urban towers, the truncated perspectives of hotel lobby interiors, and the picturesque beauty spots reflecting landscape compositional strategies long ago perfected by academic artists. The making of views that could fit these templates required only moderate competence in photographic execution, buttressed by the certainty that errors and lacunae could be remedied at the Teich plant. It was in their accumulated totality that these images gained purchase upon the imagination (Meikle 2000, 271). The Teich Company's postcard representation of the world is a microcosmic and an anti-cartographic pursuit. Maps display the relations of here, there and wherever, whereas the postcard picture of the world is disjunctive and accumulative, showing heres and theres but not the connections between them. The gaps in between postcard images are filled by imaginative projection, which solves the problem of scale posited in Jorge Luis Borges' famous story about a "Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it" (1999, 325). Teich postcards described the city, and brought the nation into the city for reproduction, using ambitious image-marketing strategies and circulation resources to do so. Images did not merely circulate within the city, they also contributed to fashioning and refashioning networks of senders and recipients, as well as individuals' relations to the known and the imagined world.

Although image production was the work of the metropolis, small towns and sites of natural beauty or wonder were also often the subject matter of postcards rolling off the presses in Chicago, just as they were of Hollywood's productions (Levy 1990). A training manual published by the Curt Teich Company for its sales representatives announced: "COMMUNITY VANITY IS A VULNERABLE THING," continuing:

> No town is too small for an edition of colorful post cards showing the attractions of its community. Although it be located five miles from a railroad and perhaps ten miles from a main highway, there is something in that town that will attract people to it—tourists, motorists, vacationists and every one of those people is a potential buyer of souvenir post cards. (Curt Teich Company c. 1935, 3)

Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* celebrated and savaged life in just such small towns ten miles from the highway, much like a postcard album brought to life and pored over by a sensitive collector of vicarious experiences. But while Lewis (1920) viewed the small town from the point of view of its own inhabitants, the viewpoint of the postcard is that of the traveler passing through, summing up the site and codifying it as a "view." Nondescript hamlets of little interest to the world were dignified by assimilation to the postcard view template, while scenes of sublime drama were domesticated, as is apparent in *Sunset Route, Mile Creek Canyon*, where a Texas-scaled sublime landscape becomes comfortably picturesque (Fig. 2.5). When composition

alone was insufficient to reconfigure a scene as postcard picturesque, of course retouching could do the rest, as in the card where the mighty Super Chief train dominates an orchard whose lush fruit owes everything to the skill of the Teich staff, who also supplied the modestly toy-like mountain peak in the distance (Fig. 2.6).



Figure 2.5 (left): Curt Teich Company, *Sunset Route, Mile Creek Canyon. Crossed Three Miles East of Langtry, Texas*, 1908.
Figure 2.6 (right): Curt Teich Company, *506—Santa Fe's "Super Chief" Traveling thru the Orange Groves, California*, 1940.

Postcards didn't seek to shatter or overturn existing world views, they codified them. The Teich picture of the world reflected the identities and values of its producers, as well as the social hierarchies, exclusions and presumptions that governed middle-class and corporate America. Thus, the postcard world is essentially a presumptively white, male middle-class world that valorized mobility. Yet it was also designed to appeal to audiences without that mobility—binding together metropolitan and provincial audiences—and it offered views of the world to everyone willing to consume them. The "lazy card's" condescension to both subject and sender, the conventional stereotypes of Native Americans, and the obsessive presentation of Black bodies as comic and inferior would have been offered for sale side by side with more anodyne views of main streets and beauty spots.[10] It was the purchaser's choice to consume and circulate racialized caricatures, to affirm the orderly expanses of wheat fields and small-town America, or to do both. Postcard images are fragments of the world to be appropriated, circulated, repurposed in one's own voice, or assimilated to one's own memory.

Like all mass cultural ephemera preserved in sufficient quantity, postcards do an excellent job of showing the views and values, emphases and omissions, reports and fictions, recognitions and misunderstandings of their time. Certainly, the structure of the Teich Company's postcard production replicated the order and hierarchy of power in society, but the claim of colonization is excessive. Exploring

the forms of selectivity, agency and repurposing of mass-produced images by individuals, and the inscription upon circulated postcards may provide unexpected insights. Important work remains to be done on the use and preservation of postcards by individuals.

## Dissemination, (Re-)Collection and the Past

Teich Company workers produced what would become commodities for purchase, either by someone who had viewed that scene itself and wished to remember it, or by purchasers traveling nearby a location where postcards of the scene were for sale, who may or may not have experienced the place. Appadurai's insistence that rather than "some kind of spatial landscape against which time writes its story," it is "historical agents, institutions, actors, powers that make the geography" and François Brunet's claim that "any history of art is bound to be a geography" apply as well to the ways in which the Curt Teich Company postcards frame an early 20th century American imaginary (Appadurai 2010, 9; Brunet 12). This is also true of their shaping of collective memory of place and the production of locality. While David Prochaska sees the postcard industry as organized to produce a visual archive of the entire world—"the illusion of archival totality"—we can include postcard purchasers, recipients and collectors in their trajectories of meaning as well (2001, 391). Roughly synchronous with the rise of snapshot photography, the postcard and snapshot categories matched each other like mirror images; the private, home-made and individual becomes public, mass produced and formulaic. Postcards are not facsimiles of what you yourself have experienced in the way that your own snapshots purport to be. Sometimes they are tokens purchased in lieu of one's own experience of place rather than as souvenirs of it, or as even surrogates for an experience the recipient of the card has not had, sent to indicate "You are not here" as much as "Wish you were here." The postcards were typically mailed to someone else far away, who presumably had not seen the imaged site either, and perhaps saved and passed on to future generations of postcard collectors, thus making a complicated journey away from the point of origin, and through a high degree of stylization, imagination, and expectation, forming a chain of production, circulation, inscription and consumption.

Deltiology—the practice of postcard collection and study—shares the vicariousness and obsessiveness of the related pursuit of philately. In both cases, two things are important: the immensity of a production expressive of encyclopedic aspirations, and the individuality of any one example as you hold it in your hands—the materiality, modesty, intimacy of the image, and its role as a messenger between individuals. There is near-infinite potential for freedom in the circulation and consumption of postcards. The card is mass-produced, but the experience of selecting,

inscribing, sending or saving the card is deeply individual and subjective. Postcards represent the place you've been, the place you haven't been but imagine, the place you claim to have been, all the places you could be. They produce a nearly seamless representation of the world—encyclopedic, complete, yet able to accommodate aberration and eccentricity, to include not only celebrations of place and identity but also expressions of contempt, curiosity and fantasy.

The private use and collection of postcards are inextricably linked to producing a collective memory and the past of a nation. Postcard images' accumulative, iterative imaging of both Main Street America and of its outstanding sights amounts to a body of historical record and a visual index to the beliefs and preoccupations of American culture. Jefferson R. Burdick, probably the greatest collector of printed ephemera of the twentieth century wrote:

> A Card Collection is a magic carpet that takes you away from work-a-day cares to havens of relaxing quietude where you can relive the pleasures and adventures of a past day—brought to life in vivid pictures and prose. Here is a phase of our heritage without which history has no full meaning, and only history can help men understand the past and prepare for the future. This is history from an original source. . . . History is not alone a record of world-shaking events. It is also a remembrance of the smaller things . . . . (1967, 6)

Burdick's view of the card collection as a resource for escapism and of the past as a haven would seem to exclude precisely the questions of violence, racism, injustice and colonialism that preoccupy many postcard scholars of today. But his emphasis upon the remembrance of smaller things opens the door to a near-infinite subjectivity of point of view, given that postcard collecting appealed to far wider audiences than merely the white, middle-class nuclear family. The vast inclusiveness of postcard representation actually attests to whatever the opposite of "havens of quietude" would be, offering broader potential for imaginative claiming, contestation, reinterpretation and engagement with world.

Van Wyck Brooks mourned the fact that modern American society had inherited no immediately discernable "cumulative culture" that could be "placed at the service of the future"—in effect, that it lacked a version of Burdick's magic carpet (1918, 340). Yet what if the cumulative culture was not diachronic and sedimentary, but explosively mass-produced, and everywhere to hand, following multiple trajectories through time and space, accompanied by inscriptions—in short, a postcard culture? The pervasiveness and vast production of photo-mechanically printed ephemera, permeating virtually every household in the land, can be framed as the foundation for a visual collective memory. As Brooks was codifying the idea of the American search for a "usable past," Curt Teich postcard imaging of both American landmarks and of the Main Streets of small towns was creating a kind of usable present that organized and conventionalized imagination of the nation and the

world beyond. Although some critics consider postcards nostalgia concretized, the period when those images were being codified and mass-produced was also that of the development of landscapes as sites of tourism and of cities and towns as noteworthy population centers, such that both subject and representation were in the flux of becoming at the same time. Postcards are often analyzed as raw material for social history and geography, but shifting emphasis to their production and circulation redirects our attention to their audiences, and their assimilation into everyday life (Webb and Geary 1998; Prochaska 1991).

Brooks' usable past has given way to the newer concept of collective memory, which emphasizes experiences undergone rather than values excavated or created. Discussions of collective memory have developed beyond Durkheim and Halbwachs' original conception of the reservoir of knowledge shared among members of a particular social group to emphasize society's memorialization of historical events, particularly tragedies, and the roles played by media images in shaping collective memory for generational cohorts (Young, 1997). Jeffrey Andrew Barash focuses (2016) upon mass media's transmission and selection of current events with the result of imbuing them with larger cultural significances. Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Christian Baden argue that collective memory "must be widely disseminated and appropriated by individuals in a group to ensure mutual awareness. As a consequence, collective memory exists in the shared and private imagination of people, and is represented in the texts, practices, and artifacts of a group" (2016, n.p.). Collective memory thus construes group recollection of the past through the perspective of the present, and in relation to the needs of the present moment, an active construction of the past pertaining not to the individual unconscious, but to broad societal imperatives such as postcards' accretive, iterative imaging of the world, amounting to a body of historical record and an index to the preoccupations of American culture. Those preoccupations have changed with passing time, introducing new points of fascination in this vast historical image horde.

By its nature, photography puts circles and rectangles around reality, slicing image from context, and so emphasizes the world outside oneself. Teich Company postcards concentrated on surveying the breadth of the world from the viewpoint of provincial observers yearning for whatever is to be found beyond the immediate horizon, building expectations for the experience of seeing that world in advance, and creating imaginative trajectories that might one day be followed by actual travel. At once multiply authored and effectively authorless image-objects, cheap, ephemeral, consumable, postcards were literally vehicles for the inscription of messages and meanings by purchasers, transmitters and receivers. Ultimately, it is in their circulation and ubiquity that their significance lies, and it is these factors which position the universe of photographic postcard production as a viable collective memory, as full of lacunae, contradictions, troubling revelations and unacknowledged desires as any individual's memory must be.

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## Notes

1 Portions of this essay were presented in the American Art and Visual Culture Seminar at the Newberry Library in 2018 and in the NEH summer institute "Making Modernism: Literature and Culture in Chicago" at the Newberry Library, summer 2019. I am grateful to my fellow participants in both forums for their comments and suggestions.

2 The archive of the Curt Teich Company is today housed in the Newberry Library, Chicago.

3 Today considered emblems of mid-century American tourism, the "Greetings from" cards in fact originated much earlier, and in Germany. For more on "Grüsse Aus" cards, see Confino 1997, 181.

4 Carl Sandburg's 1916 poem "Chicago" opens with these lines:
Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders

5 Baker notes that the average Chicago printer employed roughly twice the number of workers as the average New York printer. A contemporary study of labor arrangements in the Chicago printing industry is Brown's *Book and Job Printing in Chicago* (1931). Grehl points out that: "Although Chicago has never been a major center for literary publishing, it was important in trade publishing, and particularly in trade magazines and direct-mail sales from the 1860s onward. Starting in the 1920s, Chicago's large, versatile plants and edge in shipping rates lured major magazine accounts away from other regions." (2013, 156)

6 Although Brunet is more concerned with the relatively limited circulation of fine art works, his arguments are also relevant to printed ephemera existing in vast quantity.

7 The comprehensive R.R. Donnelley & Sons corporate archive is housed at the University of Chicago Special Collections Library.
8 This interventionist approach to the interpretation of images from source negatives was also true of the Detroit Photographic Company (Handy 2001).
9 The Thorne miniature rooms are now displayed in the Art Institute of Chicago.
10 One topic requiring further investigation is the tendency of racialized caricature cards to drawn rather than indexically captured imagery (see Sheehan, 2018).