You've Got Mail: Researching and Analyzing the Genre of Postcards

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In this article, Samantha Ginzburg examines how postcards can be much more than a souvenir. By exploring the history and trajectories of postcards, she suggests that the postcard is actually a complex genre and that even when a genre may look simple, there is often more to it. Ginzburg concludes by sharing how re-creating a genre helped her become a better researcher and writer.

Whenever I go on vacation, I always go to the lobby shop of the hotel I am staying in to look for a postcard to send home to a friend. Although sending postcards is not as popular as it used to be, it has grown into a tradition for my family and me. Since I really did not know much about postcards, I decided to do some research so I could become more familiar with how postcards came to be and how they differ from similar genres.

Researching Postcard History

My first step in researching the history of postcards was doing a Google search. One of the first things I found was an article that tied postcards to my heritage. I discovered that historians can determine what happened in the past by examining postcards. This is how Galit Hasan-Rokem, a Hebrew Literature professor, examined the history of Jewish culture. I found "Mobility in a Modern Genre: Jews and Postcards" particularly interesting because I am of Jewish descent, and surprisingly, studying this genre has helped me learn about my own culture. Hasan-Rokem was able to study the Jewish culture

all the way back to the early twentieth century through postcards. Earlier postcards showed more of a historical overview of religion in the Jewish culture. As Galit studied more modern postcards, she discovered that some postcards depicted how men and women shared a balance in work and labor. It was completely unexpected that I would find an article relating to Jewish culture when doing a simple Google search for the history of postcards. I anticipated articles relating to traveling and how postcards became important to those who traveled in the past, but I found that there is much more to this genre than I expected.

I continued my research using the Internet and found several more articles about the history of postcards. Cards, in general, have been around for thousands of years, but the first known postcard dates back only to 1840. Theodore Hooke, an English writer, was the first person to post a picture postcard. John Charlton then patented postcards in 1861. The year 1908 could certainly be considered a good year for postcard production because over seven million postcards were sent out in the United States (*Emotions*). Today, that may not seem like a lot, but back in 1908, it certainly was. Postcards began as ads that were mailed out. This was a good way to advertise because postcards were cheaper to mail than regular mail. The time period when postcards were mostly used as advertisements is known as the Pioneer Era. Both advertisement and regular postcards during this era looked different than the ones we are familiar with today. For example, they did not include a line down the middle separating the address from the message. Another difference was that people were not allowed to write on the side of the postcard that included the address. Instead, they had to write over the picture, so their messages were even more limited than what they are on today's postcards.

Companies were thrilled about the invention of the postcard, but they did not sell well to consumers at first. People did not like the fact that postmen could read the messages they wrote, but as people eventually realized that postcards were cheaper to send, they began to appeal more to consumers ("A History of Picture Postcards"). This is something that is still true today—people are always looking for a way to save some money. This may actually contribute to the reason that postcards have lost some of their popularity today, however, because it is cheaper to send an e-mail or a text message. Economics play a big role in how we communicate with others.

It is important to keep in mind that postcards did not appear overnight. Greeting cards, lithographs, and envelopes with pictures on them are all examples of antecedent genres that influenced the creation of the postcard. Lithographs are classified as small cards made of wood

or paper (*Art History*). Unsurprisingly, small cards made of wood were not a very effective means of communication. They were large, bulky, and inconvenient. Making postcards a bit smaller and thinner made them much easier to mail.

The White Border Period of postcards occurred from 1915 to 1930. This era is known for the white border around the picture on a postcard, which helped save money on ink. Since this era happened right after World War I, companies in the United States did not have a lot of money to spend on printing cards, so the white border made postcards more cost-effective. Yet around this same time, many people lost interest in sending postcards because movies were becoming popular. More time spent going to the movies meant less time spent sending postcards to friends. The competition for visual entertainment pushed postcards to the back of people's minds and, consequently, postcard companies struggled (*Emotions*).

In the early 1930s, postcards became more popular again because creators began printing them on linen cloth. This made the colors more vibrant and caught the eye of the consumer more effectively. This led to the modern photochrome era of postcards, in which postcards have pictures that are the closest they have come to actual full-color photographs.

As World War II began, postcards' popularity decreased due to supply shortages, but they quickly regained popularity once the supply shortages ended. Around this time, all other postcard companies either merged with the photochrome postcard companies or went out of business. Postcards continue to be very popular today and it seems unlikely they will ever disappear. They have become a tradition to many families, including mine, and make a great souvenir to send to someone to let them know they are being thought of while the sender is away (*Art History*).

Exploring Types of Postcards

Another important factor to keep in mind when researching a genre is how many subgenres it includes. In my research, I've found five types of postcards. They include view cards, greeting cards, historical cards, art cards, and photographic cards. View cards are postcards that have images of a place that has changed over time or no longer exists. Historians like to examine these cards because not only do they get to analyze a picture of something they would have not otherwise seen, but they also get to read the message and possibly see what the place was like when the consumer purchased the card. Greeting cards are postcards designed for sending greetings for
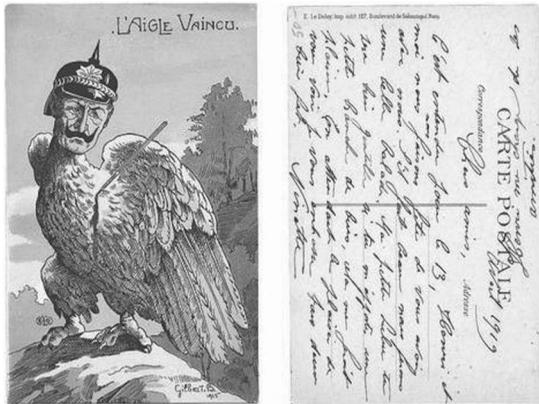
Figure 1: An example of a historical card showing World War I propaganda, found via online collectibles store Vicmart at www.vicmart.com/i-2638-wwi-france-anti-german-propaganda-postcard.html.

a specific event or holiday. These postcards used to be sent for every holiday, but as demand died down, selection has become limited mostly to postcards for major holidays and birthdays. However, some people may choose to use any postcard as a greeting card by writing a sentimental message like "Happy Birthday" or "Get well soon" on the postcard, while still indicating from where they are writing. Historical cards focus mainly on events and social norms. If you were to find a postcard with war propaganda on the front (Figure 1), it would be an example of a historical card. Art cards are the most wanted among postcard collectors. They are actual pieces of art and run at much higher values. These cards display prints of artwork rather than photography. Photographic cards are also known as photographic art cards. These cards include photography that would be recognized as art (*Art History*).

Tracing Trajectory

Although postcards were not originally used for what they are today, most people would say the purpose of a postcard is to send a message to a friend or loved one while they are away from home. However, postcards have many different uses. They can be used as evidence for historians and scientists to examine. They can be collected by avid collectors, which is known as deltiology (*Emotions*).

In some cases, postcards can also be used as sociological historic evidence. Researcher Jeanne van Eeden collected a group of old postcards from West Africa for examination because she wanted to get a better idea of what tourism in Africa was like in the past. She found that postcards often depicted the whites as ruling the land. It was often white people who were in the pictures on the front of the postcards (van Eeden 602). According to van Eeden, many things can be determined by looking at an old postcard, including technology, nature, landscapes, and tourist activity of the time (601).

Other research examines postcards from a very different perspective than van Eeden's historical study. Wei-Jen Chen and several other researchers

published a study that looked at whether sending a "crisis postcard" to people who had attempted suicide before would make them less likely to reattempt. The people in the study received small postcards that gave tips on how to cope with suicidal thoughts and support to help prevent another suicide attempt. The cards were small enough to fit in a pocket so they could be taken anywhere. Unfortunately, the results showed that the postcard had little to no effect (Chen et al).

The trajectory of postcards now extends far beyond mailed cards sent between people who already know one another. Today, people even send postcards online—and to total strangers. The blog PostSecret was created in January 2005 by Frank Warren. People anonymously create postcards telling their deepest, darkest secrets and mail them to the PostSecret address, then Warren posts them on the PostSecret blog for people to read. Warren says he got the idea for this blog one night in Paris, France, where

Figure 2: A screenshot of a postcard from the PostSecret website.

he had purchased a few postcards and put them in a nightstand next to his bed. He had a dream where he was examining the postcards with messages written on them. He then re-created the postcards he had seen in his dream and released them to the public. Not too long after, he created the PostSecret community so other people could create their own postcards. The blog went viral, and now every Sunday, Warren posts pictures of the postcards he receives. This form of a postcard has a completely different trajectory from a typical postcard. Instead of relaying a message to one person via mail, the message is posted to the world via the internet and is done so anonymously. In addition, taking the trajectory of the anonymous postcards a step further (and back to print), Warren has even had books of the postcards published.
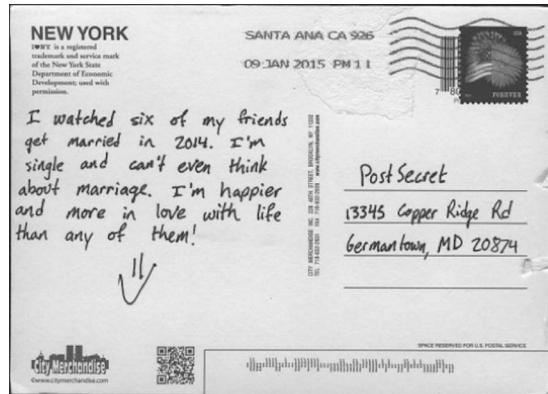
Uncovering My Research Process

You may be wondering how I know so much about postcards. I obviously was not born knowing all of this information, so I had to do some intense research in order to be as knowledgeable as I am about postcards. My first step, as many other college students can relate to, was Google. I simply typed "postcards" in the search bar. I found a lot of relevant information, including articles that gave me information on the history of postcards.

I then decided to go to the Milner website and look for scholarly journal articles. I searched the terms "postcards" and "history" and found the two articles that related to the trajectory of postcards, which were the van Eeden article and the psychological study article. I also examined a few postcards I had sent my friend over the years that she had happened to keep. This helped me understand the general guidelines of postcards, but also how there is not a set standard. Some of the cards were the average four-by-six-inch rectangle, while others were cut into shapes. For example, one of the postcards was shaped like a turtle. The postcards I looked at on PostSecret also had variations.

Producing a New Genre

I decided to create my own postcard (Figure 3) to further understand the process of making one, which meant I had to do more research in order to create a genre that I had never created before. I have sent postcards to my friends, so I decided to look at those as examples. I also searched the terms "postcard" and "template" in Google images, and I found some guidelines to reference. According to the United States Postal Service website, a postcard has to be approximately four by six inches ("Sizes for Postcards"). I then noticed on all of the examples of postcards I reviewed that there were lines on the left side for a message and lines on the right side for an address. There were obviously fewer lines on the right side so I kept that in mind when creating the back of my postcard (Figure 4). I also decided to include a divider between the message and address and an area to place a stamp. The easiest way to do all of this was simply in a Microsoft Word document. For the picture, I wanted to have a place that was important to me. My family and I always used to vacation in Maine. I included a picture of the ocean in Maine as the front of my postcard. Although not all postcards include text on the picture, I decided to write something so the postcard stood out a little more. I included "Greetings

Figure 3: The front of the postcard I created.
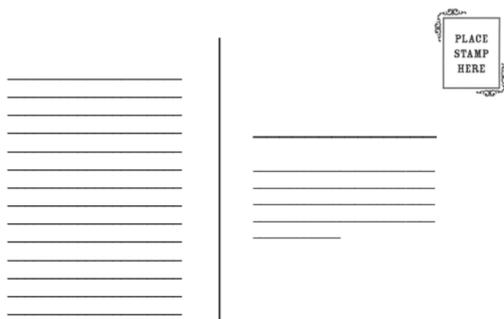
Figure 4: The back of the postcard I created.

. . . From Maine" on the front so it was obvious as to where the postcard was coming from. After designing everything on Microsoft Word, I printed it out and attached the front and back side together to create a homemade postcard. By creating my own postcard, I learned that every genre, no matter how simple it seems, has specific requirements and takes time to create.

Connecting to CHAT

Representation, distribution, socialization, and production are a few terms that are involved in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Examining aspects of CHAT helps break down the necessary elements to re-create a genre. By creating a CHAT map, I was able to understand why I was creating a postcard and what use it would be if I were to actually distribute it.

CHAT can be used to help investigate any genre. It essentially helps researchers to analyze the complex elements that make up the foundation of a genre. We can also use CHAT to examine why we use genres and what goes into the production of them. Anyone can interrogate and gain more in-depth and nuanced understanding of a genre, no matter how complicated, using CHAT, so if you are ever stuck on a project or even in a real-world situation, CHAT can help you figure out where to start and how to reach your goal.

Representation

In her article "Just CHATting," Joyce Walker argues that representation "highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it . . ." (75). Location is a key factor in determining what goes on a postcard. Companies that create postcards probably create more postcards to sell for popular tourist spots such as Disneyland than they do for, say, Lincoln, Nebraska. Furthermore, the message that is handwritten in the postcard is determined by the audience to whom the consumer is sending the postcard. Decisions related to representation lead to the success or failure of a postcard—in this case, success might be measured by how many of a given postcard are actually purchased and sent through the mail. When I created my postcard, I envisioned a postcard that would be sent from one of my favorite vacation spots and planned to find an image that would clearly represent that location to anyone who might send or receive my postcard. At that point, I could begin the process of actually producing the postcard.

Production

Production is important to bring a genre from a thought to a product. Many things are required for a professional-looking postcard. You would need a graphic designer to design the template and edit the photo on a computer

program. You would also need a photographer to take a nice picture for the front of the postcard, which would require a camera. Finally, you would need the right type of cardstock and a quality printer and ink to print the finished product. After production, the process leads to distribution.

Distribution

Distribution is how a genre is dispersed among consumers and readers. Being aware of appropriate places for distribution helps get postcards to the proper audience. Postcard companies produce and distribute their products to a variety of places ranging from hotel gift shops and tourist sites to gas stations. According to the Travel Channel, the most popular vacation spots include places like Paris, France; New York, New York; Rome, Italy; and Cancun, Mexico ("Top 10 Vacation Spots"). Since these cities are always drawing in tourists, odds are that many postcard companies distribute their products for sale in these locations. The type of postcard distributed at a given location may vary. For example, many (though not all) postcards at Disneyland are more kid-friendly than those sold in Las Vegas. Of course, as I demonstrated, it is also possible to create your own postcard to distribute to a friend via the mail, as long as you follow the appropriate postal guidelines.

Socialization

Socialization is the interaction among people from the time the genre is in production through its use. Postcard companies send postcards to stores, where they are purchased by consumers. Consumers then interact with their chosen audience by writing a message on the postcard they purchased and mailing it. Sending a postcard is a kind gesture. A lot of people send postcards to family members or friends because postcards let loved ones know that even though people close to them are on vacation, they haven't been forgotten. However, some consumers also choose to purchase postcards and not send them to anyone. Sometimes they buy postcards to add to a scrapbook or collection. In this way, the postcard becomes more of a way of capturing a memory than of sending a message to someone else.

Conclusion

Although postcards have not been around for long, it appears as though they will not be going anywhere anytime soon. Online greetings may continue to gain popularity, but I do not think they will severely impact the postcard market. Although I am always connected to the technological world, I still like to pick up a postcard when I am on vacation and send it to a friend. Postcards are personal and material in a way that online cards are not.

Researching a genre that I was not familiar with helped me gain access to knowledge about writing and research that I would not have otherwise encountered. For anyone wishing to learn more about the writing process, I strongly suggest researching an unfamiliar genre, re-creating it, and writing about your experience. All in all, it helped me become a better writer.

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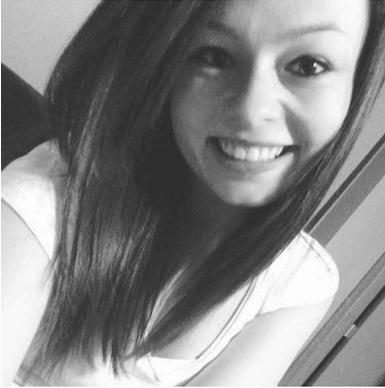
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