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Postcards of Downtown Reno: Intermedial and Cultural Assemblages

Postales del centro de Reno: ensamblajes intermediales y culturales

Cartões postais do centro de Reno: montagens culturais e intermediais

Cartes postales du centre de Reno : assemblages intermédiaires et culturels

Открытки из центра Рино: интермедийные и культурные комплексы

Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernández[1]
University of Nevada, Reno
Art, Art History, and Design Department
Reno (NV), USA
juancarlosg@unr.edu

[1] Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernández is an assistant professor of Art History. His research of contemporary art at the intersection of moving images, photography, performance, collective memory, and decoloniality has been supported by several grants and been published in journals such as *TDR/The Drama Review*, *Photographies*, *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, and *Photography and Culture*, and books such as *Walking with the Enemy: The Art of Subversive Mimicry in the Post-Truth Era* (Manchester University Press, 2026), *Pop Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), and *Ventriloquism, Performance, and Contemporary Art* (Routledge, 2023).

Abstract

The article examines tourist postcards depicting downtown Reno from the 1930s to the 1940s. The article adopts the notion of assemblage to understand these postcards as intermedial cultural objects and identify tensions and resonances between colors, techniques, and materials, media (including cinema), public imagination of Reno in the literary novels and films, and the cinematic experience of the city and expectation of the postcard's affective and effective representation. Moreover, the article shows how the postcards served as cultural agents in the reformulation and envisioning of Reno as "The Biggest Little City in the World" and a haven of white "American" culture.

Keywords: Assemblage, Intermediality, American Culture, Tourism.

Resumen

El artículo examina las postales turísticas de lino que representan el centro de Reno en las décadas de 1930 y 1940. El artículo adopta la noción de ensamblaje para comprender estas postales como objetos culturales intermediales e identificar tensiones y resonancias entre colores, técnicas y materiales, medios de comunicación (incluido el cine), la imaginación pública de Reno en las novelas y películas literarias, y la experiencia cinematográfica de la ciudad y la expectativa de la representación afectiva de las postales. Además, el artículo muestra cómo las postales sirvieron como agentes culturales en la reformulación y la visión de Reno como "la ciudad más pequeña del mundo" y refugio para la cultura blanca "estadounidense".

Palabras clave: *Ensamblaje, Intermedialidad, Cultura estadounidense, Turismo.*

Resumo

Este artigo examina cartões-postais turísticos de linho retratando o centro de Reno nas décadas de 1930 e 1940. Adota a noção de assemblage para compreender esses cartões-postais como objetos culturais intermidiáticos e identificar tensões e ressonâncias entre cores, técnicas e materiais, mídias (incluindo o cinema), o imaginário público de Reno em romances e filmes literários, e a experiência cinematográfica da cidade e a expectativa de representação afetiva dos cartões-postais. Além disso, o artigo mostra como

os cartões-postais serviram como agentes culturais na reformulação e na concepção de Reno como "a menor cidade do mundo" e um refúgio para a cultura branca "americana".

Palavras chaves: *Assemblage, Intermidialidade, Cultura Americana, Turismo.*

Résumé

L'article examine les cartes postales touristiques en lin qui représentent le centre de Reno dans les années 1930 et 1940. L'article adopte la notion d'assemblage pour comprendre ces cartes postales comme des objets culturels intermédiaires et identifier les tensions et résonances entre couleurs, techniques et matériaux, médias (y compris le cinéma), l'expérience cinématographique de la ville et l'attente de la représentation affective des cartes postales. En outre, l'article montre comment les cartes postales ont servi d'agents culturels dans la reformulation et la vision de Reno comme "la plus petite ville du monde" et refuge pour la culture blanche "étatsunienne ".

Mots clés *: Assemblage, Intermédialité, Culture, étatsunienne, Tourisme*

Резюме

В данной статье рассматриваются туристические открытки из льна, изображающие центр Рино в 1930-х и 1940-х годах. В статье используется понятие ассамбляжа, чтобы понять эти открытки как интермедиальные культурные объекты и выявить противоречия и резонансы между цветами, техниками и материалами, медиа (включая кинематограф), общественным восприятием Рино в литературных романах и фильмах, а также кинематографическим восприятием города и ожиданиями от аффективной репрезентации открыток. Кроме того, в статье показано, как открытки служили культурными агентами, переосмысливая и представляя Рино как «самый маленький город в мире» и убежище для белой «американской» культуры.

Слова: *Ассамбляж, Интермедиальность, Американская культура, Туризм.*

1. Introduction

In the context of Art History studies—traditionally focused on fine art—and the broader realm of academia and culture, postcards, in general, and the touristy kind in particular, have been marginalized as trivial and insignificant objects, often regarded as kitsch and minor art in modern culture. As Norman D. Stevens put it two decades ago, postcards had been—and still are—largely ignored by libraries, which, at the time of digital databases, have neither been interested in carefully collecting them nor are willing to invest resources in cataloging and researching them.[2] Most of the irregular collections libraries hold were created through donations rather than through an attentive, active effort to identify, trace, and obtain the postcards relevant to the institution's social function. For instance, public and private libraries in the US and beyond rarely have a consistent array of postcards, and libraries in the State of Nevada and the City of Reno, where I currently live, are no exception. Luckily, the Newberry Library, an independent research institution in Chicago, has received the archive of one of the most influential and famous printing companies, the Chicago-based Curt Teich and Company (hereinafter CT&C), and is supporting research on what is currently one of the most comprehensive collection of postcards on the globe.

Along with academic and institutional marginalization, the popularity of tourist postcards has also declined dramatically due to the closure of many printing

[2] Norman D. Stevens, «Welcome to the World of Postcards», in *Postcards in the Library: Invaluable Visual Resources*, edited by Norman D. Stevens (New York: Routledge, 2013 [1995]), 1.

companies, including the important CT&C in 1978, as well as the advent of instant electronic messages and social media. Nonetheless, the virtual world of e-commerce—think, for instance, of platforms such as eBay, from which the author has purchased most of the postcards included in this article— attests to a nostalgic trend that reveals postcards are still circulating as collectibles and testaments to companies and old times.

To distance from that marginalizing approach and to more attentively understand the tourist postcard as a valuable and significant cultural object, I propose to use the notion of the assemblage to identify how the tourist postcard embodies and helps to reveal paradoxes and critical interpretations of the complex aesthetic, social, and political phenomenon it belonged to and fed back into. It is worth reminding that notion of assemblage, as I adopt it, responds to a paradigm shift in social sciences, inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's proposal of *agencement* (translated as assemblage and sometimes as agency) of a "minor literature"—which I extend to the "minor art" of postcards—, characterized by the deterritorialization of language and the articulation of language and the political, and the collective assembly of enunciation.[3] The assemblage links, intertwines, and contrasts non-discursive multiplicities (including, in this case, colors and materials with the related bodily perception) and discursive multiplicities (such as the technologies, media, and urban policies).[4] In the assemblage, those multiplicities do not

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 81-88.
[4] Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 33.

entirely overlap, nor do they reduce, cause, or explain one another. These multiplicities, in their relationship and tensions, allow material and/or discursive intensities and singularities to resonate, and make possible, as Deleuze and Guattari suggested, critical insights and individualization, in such a way that there are no identical assemblages, so to speak.

Again, the use of the notion of assemblage (and agency) does not seek to simply understand the postcards as an array of material and visual elements. With the concept of the assemblage (and agency), and the subsequent idea of approaching the postcards as assemblages, I am interested in understanding the postcards as intermedial objects and examining how they served as cultural agents and objects, and what they discursively and perceptually produced concerning ideological, racial, as well as utopian representations of the modern realities and historical dynamics of Reno.

2. Early Tourist Postcards of Reno

As is well known, tourist postcards emerged in the US with the arrival of postcards produced in Germany, following the modernization and mechanization of serial production in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Postcards are also deeply indebted to capitalism and consumerism,[5] as well as the promotion of a varied array of trades, services, values, regions, and cities. In the case of the tourist postcards of Reno, the more memorable early cases are indebted to the promotion of Reno—in the usual provincial

[5] Lydia Pyne, *Postcards: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Social Network* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2012), 55.

terms of the US cultural exceptionalism—as the "Divorce Capital of the World" and "The Biggest Little City in the World". It is worth noting that in the early twentieth century, some states in the US West underwent a steady liberalization of divorce laws.

At that time, the State of Nevada had the laxest divorce laws in the country. It significantly increased the number of legal grounds for divorce, developed new and liberal policies for remarriage, and reduced the requirement for legal residency to six months to file for divorce. The laws fostered the development of divorce colonies, especially around Reno, where divorce-seekers could travel and stay to obtain their legal residency. As the number of colonies and visitors increased, and the divorce (and remarriage) business flourished, the State and the City identified the opportunity to boost tourism and, by 1931, decided to further lower the required period of residence to six weeks. This soon produced a never-before-seen boom of visitors, even from abroad, and a renovated emergence of hotels, casinos, colonies, and ranches explicitly offering entertainments and subtly including sexual services. In fact, some postcards of Reno in the 1930s and early 1940s were famously promoting the legal and sexual liberation of wealthy or upper-class women who could stay in the known "Divorce Ranch", and enjoy rodeo with the company of cowboys, also known as "dudes" working for the ranches (Figure 1).

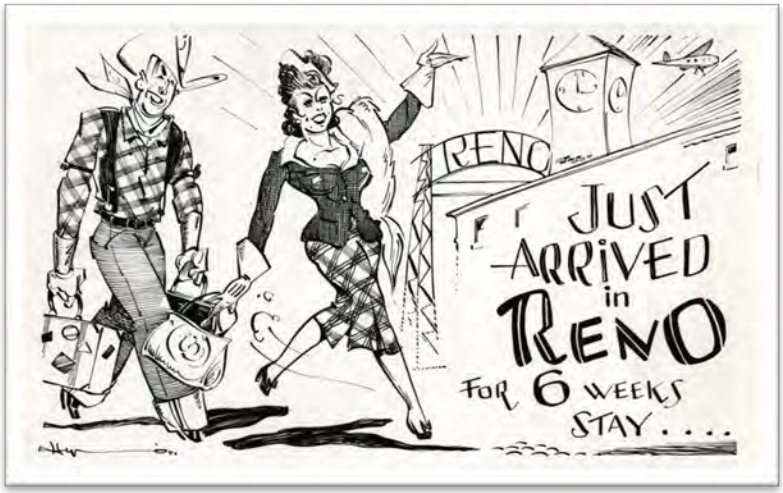

Figure 1. "Just arrived in Reno For 6 Weeks Stay" postcard. A dude cowboy carries luggage for a newly arrived divorcee. Postcard without information of the printer. Postcard from a drawing by Lew Hymers in 1942. Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

The lucrative divorce trade, which arguably commissioned most of the tourist postcards of Reno and played a significant role in the visual reconstruction and promotion of the city, was successful until the 1970s, when the widespread institution of no-fault divorce widely adopted in the US. Among the various types of touristic postcards commissioned since 1931, I will focus on a specific kind of image of downtown Reno, which was heavily influenced by CT&C's production of the famous linen postcards, which coincidentally were first sold in the US in 1931. The production of the linen postcard lasted until 1953, which also helps us define the 1930s and 1940s as the period of interest in this article and of what scholars such as Jeffrey Meikle have described as the time of "a uniquely American

variant" type of postcard known for "its extravagantly colorful surface [...and] distinctive textured finish".[6]

3. Linen postcards of Reno

This type of postcard emerged after the Great Depression, when printing companies sought ways to reduce production costs. Inspired by the French émigré and printer Jean Berté, Curt Teich, himself a German émigré, experimented with water-soluble inks that were cheaper and thinner, favoring a large number of reproductions and displaying richer, more striking colors than those produced using lithography. CT&C also experimented with papers, textures, and embossing techniques to create postcards that could dry faster and whose colors would not fade, thereby significantly speeding up production and increasing sales. This is how the type of "Art Colortone" postcard, as CT&C called it, emerged, featuring brilliant colors and easily recognizable textured surfaces reminiscent of linen (Figure 2). These new postcards took the market by storm and became referential, being constantly imitated in the country and overseas.[7]

[6] Jeffrey L. Meikle, «Pasteboard Views: Idealizing Public Space in American Postcards, 1931–1953», in *Public Space and the Ideology of Place in American Culture*, edited by Miles Orvell and Jeffrey L. Meikle (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2005), 112.
[7] Pyne, *Postcards*, 71.

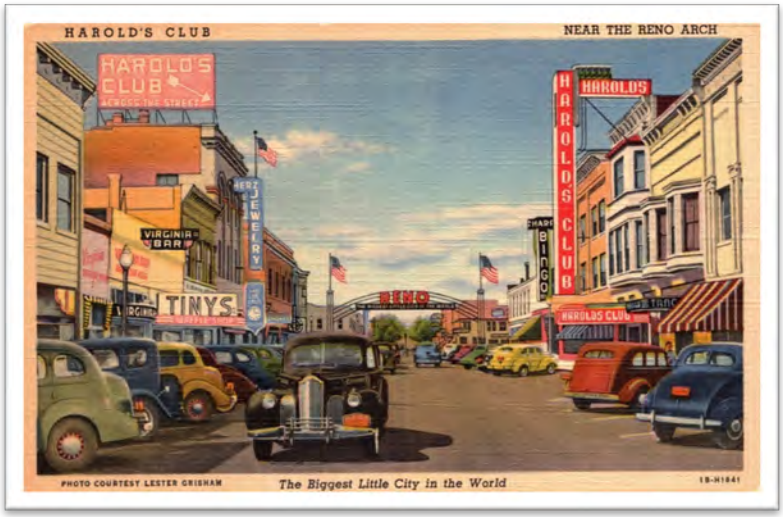

Figure 2. "Harold's Club". Postcard produced by CT&C, 1940. Original black and white photo by Lester Grishman. Postcards commissioned by Split, a divorce agency. Edited and printed by Curt Teil and Company. 1941. Color Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

As Jeffrey Meikle has pointed out, many of those postcards popularly known as linen postcards, with "their saturated colors", offered a "popular view of the United States not displayed in grainy newspaper photos, high-contrast [and large format] *Life* magazine photo [published since 1936], or the stark [black and white] documentary work of [the Great Depression by] photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans" produced for the Farm Security Administration, which runed between 1939 and 1947.[8] In fact, even if Evans never explicitly mentioned the widely known linen postcards, he harshly described and criticized modern color postcards as the "quintessence of gimcrack"

[8] Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Postcard America: Curt Teich and the imaging of a Nation, 1931–1950* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 3.

and as images lacking the "fidelity and restraint" he loved in photos revealing the patina of time.[9]

One can easily imagine that Evans was instead in favor of the type of postcards exemplified by the following two produced in the 1930s from photos taken sometime between 1929 and 1931, when the "The Biggest Little City in the World" motto, made of light bulbs, was added to the Reno Arch to celebrate the Lincoln and Victory Highways that connected the East and West coasts and placed the city 'in the center' of the US. One is a view, from the sidewalk, of a snowy and muddy Virginia Street and the Reno Arch at night, with a truck and a couple of cars (Figure 3). The second, with a more frontal view and taken in the afternoon, shows several vehicles of different brands and men looting on a dirty Virginia Street, Reno's main street (Figure 4). These two sepia postcards that still suggest the western spirit of a small city located in a desert valley in the desolated Sierra Nevada contrast with CT&C's linen postcards that betray a decided effort of idealization and sensual experience in what, paraphrasing Teich himself, would be a case of painterly and affectively "fake photography".[10]

[9] Liz Jobey, «Photographer Walker Evans: answers on a postcard», The Guardian, 5 February 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/feb/05/photographer-walker-evans-postcards.

[10] Ralph Teichm, «Notes on the Teich method», Curt Teich Archives–The Newberry Library, n.d.

Figure 4. Postcard without information of the photographer and printer. Circa. 1930. Posted in 1931. Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

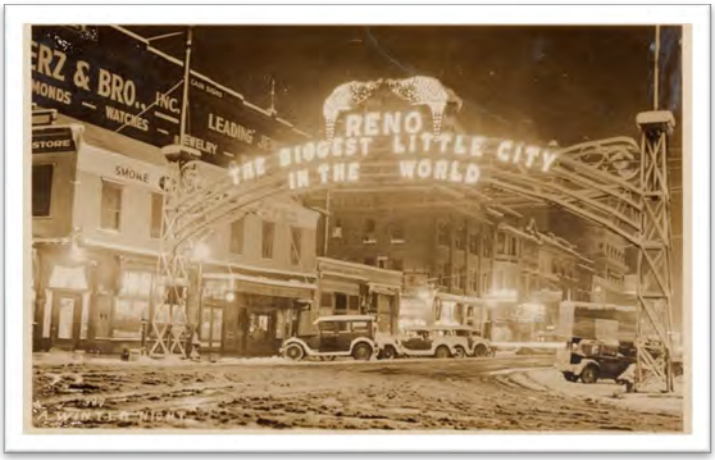

Figure 3. Reno Arch at Night, in winter time. Postcard without information of the photographer and printer. Circa 1931. Posted in 1937. Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

To understand this, let us recall that CT&C's linen postcard production typically began with a black-and-white photograph taken by an employee, a company commissioning the card, or an independent photographer. More crucial was the work of CT&C's artists, who cropped and altered the photos by using airbrushes, removing unwanted elements such as telephone wires and trucks,[11] as well as traces of the impact of the Great Depression. They also added other elements to the images, such as cars and poles, which were affixed to the buildings' roofs and the Reno Arch, weaving US flags as part of a blatant bid to produce an idealized and ideological representation.

While the Farm Security Administration demanded that documentary photographers include fire hydrants, traffic signs, wagons and horses, and men loafing,[12] CT&C's linen postcards and their imitations offered an ideologized construction of a sanitized—image of the—city. Notably, this was neither an imposition nor the sole result of CT&C's decisions. For instance, it is worth noting that the production involved the customer's requirements,[13] who, undoubtedly caring about their private interests and attracted by the aesthetic and affective impact of CT&C's art, followed a color-by-number chart to specify, for instance, the desired color for the sky, the buildings' façades, and the advertising boards affixed to façades and roofs. Customers could also request the elimination of elements, such as people, and the addition of others, like trees. Based on the

[11] Stephen J. McElroy, «Assemblage by Design: The Postcards of Curt Teich and Company», *Computers and Composition* 37 (2015): 153, doi: 10.1016/j.compcom.2015.07.002.
[12] Meikle, *Postcard America*, 291.
[13] Warren A. Watkins, «How Curt Teich postcards are produced», *Deltiology: A Journal for Postcard Collectors and Dealers* 14 n.º 4 (1974): 4.

picture and the client's requirements, the company created a proof that had to be approved by the customer before production began.[14]

The remarkable combination of diverse interests from different actors in the production of a single series of postcards, which makes any postcard somehow unique even if uniformized by CT&C's art, is attested in the job files conserved in the Postcard Archives Collection. In addition to the specifications mentioned above, the job files (which include the Curt Teich Postcard Geographic Indices available online)[15] indicate that the divorce agencies and casinos, along with the Sierra News agency, comprise the bulk of the commissioners of downtown Reno tourist postcards from the 1930s to the 1940s. The files also include copies and other notes about the commission to facilitate an accurate reproduction on which the CT&C's profitability depended.

4. Cinema and Postcards of Reno

In CT&C's tourist linen postcards and their imitators, the social complexity of public spaces was tamed, and those spaces aesthetically rendered as up-to-date venues of capitalist consumption. The city of settlers, traditionally associated with crime and wild cowboys during the nineteenth century, and portrayed in the 1920s as a tawdry place of cynical opportunists—as Drago Sinclair's *Divorce*

[14] Megan Kelly. «Curt Teich Postcard Archives: A connection to the past», *Antiques and Collecting* 114, n.º 9 (2009): 20–25.
[15] «Curt Teich Postcard Geographic Indices», Internet Archive, Accesed 23 May 2021, https://archive.org/details/nevada-teich-geo-index.

Trap novel (1931) did—was depicted in the 1930s under a very different light by the linen postcards. One may even say that in contrast with Sinclair's literary rendition, the postcards produced by CT&C and its imitators resonated with part of the chic spirit of John Hamlin's *Whirlpool of Reno* novel (1931), in which a young divorcee, perhaps the one like the woman on a postcard from the 1930s (Figure 1), experienced the city as a "heart-breaking, sophisticated little city" where evenings in several night spots were "far preferable to the grim, appalling, unpeopled silent spaces of the desert"(Figure 5).[16]

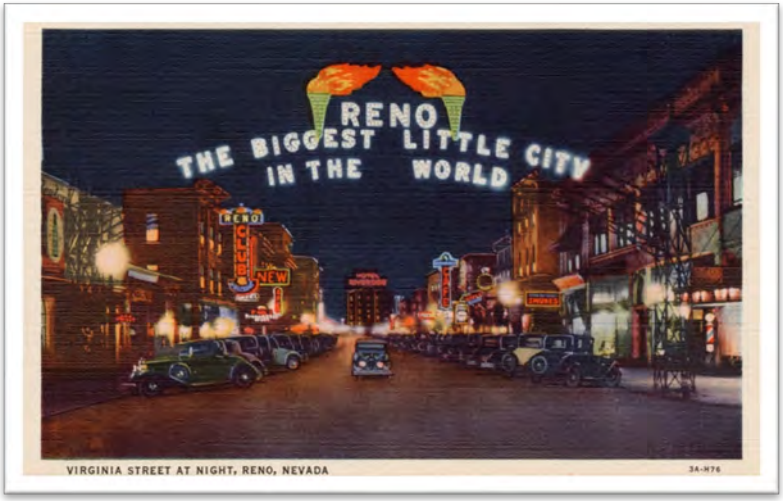

Figure 5. "Virginia Street at Night, Reno, Nevada". Postcard commissioned by Armanko's Stationery & Office Supplies. Unknown photographer. Edited and printed by Curt Teil and Company. 1933. Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

[16] John Hamlin, *Whirlpool of Reno* (New York: Loncols Mac Veach, 1931), 9 and 226.

In the same vein, one can include films and cinema as pertinent and significant discursive actors in the development of postcards as intermedial assemblages of mass appeal, as well as in shaping expectations of what a modern city and its images, including the tourist postcards, could and should be. In this regard, let us start by pointing out productions such as *Road to Reno* (1931), *Night Life in Reno* (1931), *Merry Wives of Reno* (1934), *The Women* (1939), and *Saturday Evening Post* (1954) most of the times featuring divorce-seeking women as main characters, and creating a chic and trendy atmosphere of divorce seekers "going Reno" (i.e., on the loose in Reno). Even if the few exterior shots are only or most of the cases of Reno Arch at night or of the city from a taxi, they still intend to mold—in the audience's imagination—Reno as a modern, never-sleeping, and arguably small New York City with its emblematic Broadway's neon lights. It is not a mere coincidence that in 1941, CT&C used a series of photos taken by one of its sales representatives to produce a famous colorful postcard depicting uncontextualized neon signs at night with the Arch included as the centerpiece (Figure 6), much in the fashion of how those signs were registered in films of Reno and New York as testimonies and sensual and sensational marks of modernity.

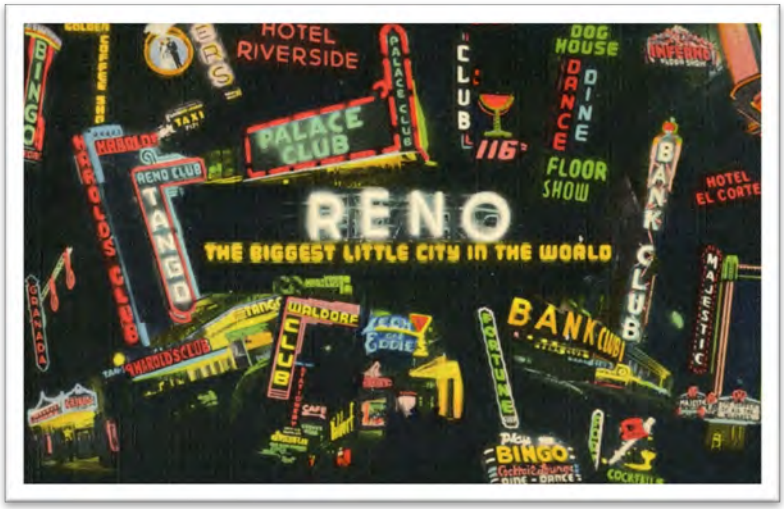

Figure 6. "Bright Lights of Reno, Nevada". Commissioned by Split, a divorce agency. Based on photos by G. I. Pitchford. Montage, edition, and print by Curt Teil and Company. 1941. Color Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

Equally or even more important for the tourist postcard production and circulation, as well as its understanding as an intermedial object, was the resonance between the cinematic view in film and in tourist postcards of downtowns: a view that is not created from the point of view of a pedestrian standing on the sidewalk, but of a camera on a car (a strategy famously exploited by films since the 1930s in the US, including those recently mentioned) and a camera hovering on a crane (Figure 8). It does not seem to be a mere coincidence that while pedestrians disappeared from most of the tourist postcards of US downtowns (also Figures 2 and 5), and especially those of Reno, automobiles, both parked and running on the

streets, became omnipresent as the major and favored medium of circulation and, more importantly, of an aesthetic and cinematic experience and consumption of the modern city and its flux.

In fact, one should not fail to recognize that by the 1930s, the Fordist manufacturing techniques had drastically cut the price of consumer commodities, including the postcards, and had paved, together with the monopoly of the world's oil production, the path for the "rise of an 'automobile consumer class', fueling the expansion of a new culture of mobility"[17] to which the linen postcards' urban images were connected. In this order of ideas, one cannot ignore the fact that, when looking at the linen postcards of downtown Reno, they resemble the view through the car's windshield, which in turn becomes like a cinema screen of the local and tourists' circulations and reveries of Reno as the US's little Rome; as a famous and now-gone neon light, protagonist on another postcard, suggested (Figure 7). And more to the point, with its clean and usually desolate spaces, the tourist postcards of downtowns strikingly resemble a combination of the types of film stills known as publicity stills and production stills.

[17] John Urry, *Societies beyond Oil: Oil Dregs and Social Futures* (London: Zed, 2013), 43.

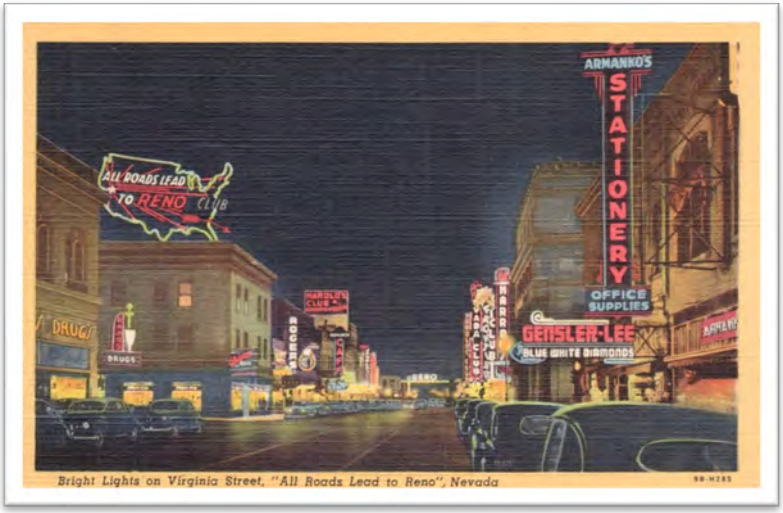

Figure 7. "Bright Lights of Virginia Street. 'All Roads lead to Reno, Nevada". Unknown photographer. Interestingly, this famous linen postcard has all the characteristics of one produced by Curt Teil and Company. Nonetheless, the catalog number 9B-H285 is not included in CT&C's public index, which means that it was either made by an imitator, or an omission occurred at CT&C. Circa 1949. Color Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

The first are made for and used to create publicity materials to market the film to the audience, especially the then-famous but now-forgotten lobby cards, which in the late 1920s were hand-colored using stencils and watercolors. Like the lobby cards, the linen postcards were offered a sort of remnant of the aura—as Walter Benjamin would say—of handmade art. Notably, CT&C claimed that the linen postcards were "striking note of smartness" and could be

considered to be the most "aristocratic of all postcards".[18] For their part, the production stills record the on-stage scenes of a commercial film production, and, significantly in our case, serve to match a scene with another or to recreate a scene later for a retake.

It can be sensed that the cinema-goer's experience is essential in the cultural context and for understanding the tourist linen postcards of desolate downtowns as cultural objects and assemblages that resonate with—what in Cinema Studies is known as—the "cinephile moment". This notion refers to an individual shot that is not necessarily highly memorable (for instance, in terms of visual impact, such as an explosion in an action film) or of narrative importance per se. It is, instead, a shot important for the spectators who celebrate their subjective encounter with evanescent elements in the film (in this case, possibly with the moving cars and the weaving flags) as if faced with an epiphany.[19] The cinephile moment, as the linen postcards with their painterly looks and texture—even if they are mass produced—seem to emphasize, is sensual and personal.[20]

[18] *Sales Pointers* (Chicago: Curt Teich & Co., 1935), n. pag.
[19] Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 7.
[20] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Londres: Reaktion Books, 2006), 190.

5. Reno as a White-Utopian Haven

In addition to CT&T's art, the divorce agencies and casinos' interests and requirements, the public imagination of Reno in the literary novels and films, and the cinematic experience of the city and expectation of the postcard affective representation, the tourist linen postcards—understood as cultural objects and intermedial assemblages—also invite us to consider urban planning and an ideological white-utopian urbanism.

As Alison Isenberg has pointed out, CT&C's beautification of the cities' main streets in the US, seem to be interested in depicting "a dignified and simplified retail corridor" offering—and selling—a "commercial vista in which the eye could travel, like a consumer [and, I add, a cinema goer], uninterrupted by the bodies of other shoppers [and customers]", and without being bothered by the hawkers and 'cheap' sidewalk sales tactics".[21] Note how the postcards of downtown Reno, when compared to the actual photos, have eliminated the store tents that would obfuscate—like the late nineteenth-century bohemian Paris partially did to—the Haussmannian order and control. The few pedestrians included are less identifiable as citizens and instead serve for scale reference (Figures 2 and 8).

[21] Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 45 and 70.

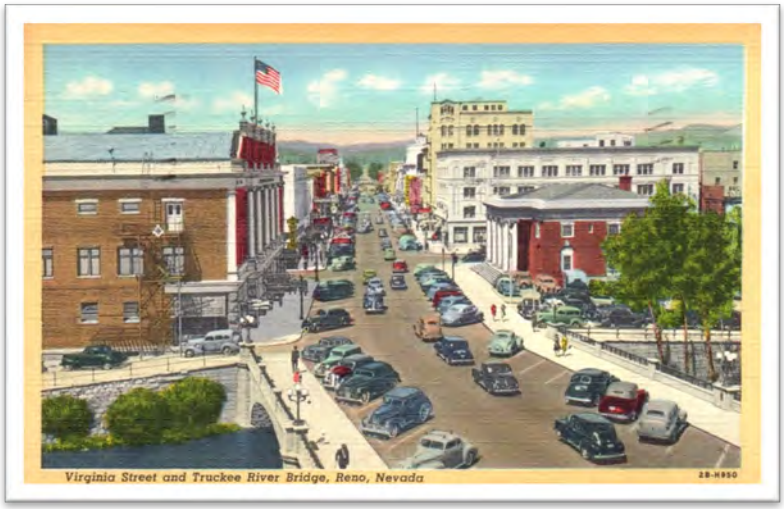

Figure 8. "Virginia Street and Truckee River Bridge, Reno, Nevada". Unknown photographer. Commissioned by Split, a divorce agency. Edited and printed by Curt Teil and Company. 1942. Color Postcard in the public domain. Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez's personal collection.

And significantly, in addition to the erasure of the traces of poverty and violence, there is an unashamed invisibilization of class conflicts and any hint of the presence of any race/ethinicity that is not white or "native" as it was the saying in the 1930s and still now, as I write these words, in the current context of MAGA. And this absence is all the more dramatic and shameful considering that, even though Reno has had a large white population, the city has witnessed the presence of the real Native Americans since it was founded in 1868, within the traditional territories of the Washeshiu, Numu, and Newe. And equally perturbing is the absence after the city had been the venue of the "Fight of the Century" in 1910, when the heavyweight champion James J. Jeffries returned from

retirement just to challenge the renowned Black boxer John Arthur Johnson, aka "Galveston Giant", to unsuccessfully "prov[e] that a white man is better than a Negro".[22] It was Reno, the only city in the US that decided to be, at the height of the Jim Crow era, the venue of what proved to be an event that triggered race riots all across the country, from the relatively close states of Texas and Colorado, to the far away New York and Washington, D.C. on the East Coast.

It should be pretty evident now that the tourist linen postcards of downtown Reno are intended to suggest the existence of a small, white metropolis in the desert, well before the emergence of Las Vegas as a major tourist destination in the 1960s. Reno was conceived and sold through the linen postcards as a small city without skyscrapers, and without visual references to the noisy, multicultural, and multiracial experiences of the 'dangerously' growing New York. Reno was seen and promoted as a white haven that was more "American" than the large cities of the East and West coasts, experiencing immigration, or unquestionably marked by the historical presence of Mexican communities before and after the so-called Mexico-US war. In the latter case, consider San Francisco and Los Angeles, which are just three to eight hours away by car and an hour and a half by plane. Of course, at the time of a new great wave of migration from Europe, including Eastern Europe, the linen representation of a downtown Reno arranged the architecture, cars, people, boards, neon lights, natural light, trees, and even the experience of weather and temporality like a set of a 'film

[22] David Remnick, «Struggle for his soul», The Observer, Accessed 2 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/observer/osm/story/0,,1072750,00.html.

picture' to be seen and experienced by the viewer of the postcard, who may potentially become—or was already—a visitor of the "American" city was not devoid of paradoxes and tensions.

In this order of ideas, the paradoxes also encompass the context of federal policies, particularly two types of promotional campaigns that help us add to and complicate our understanding of the linen postcards as they were commissioned, distributed, purchased, posted, and enjoyed between 1931 and 1953. The first type of campaign can be described as one that aligned with or echoed the "See America First" movement that emerged during World War I. "See America First" explicitly linked tourism and nationalism, by practically "characterizing national tours as the duty and privilege of every citizen, and one that should hold higher priority and more meaning for them than trips abroad",[23] in a bid to celebrate the singular American culture. This is precisely the time, after the Great Depression, that tourism grew "into a major industry on the level of agriculture and manufacturing".[24] As William Pinkerton put it, "See America First" wanted to build an understanding between "the New Yorker who's never been west, the Iowa storekeeper who's never been East, the Alabama planter who's never been North, and the Michigan factory-hand who's never been South".[25] And yet, no matter whether the ideological façade of that policy presented

[23] Sarah Elizabeth McLennan, «Promoting Tourism, Selling a Nation: The Politics of Representing National Identity in the United States 1930-1960» (PhD. Dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 2015), 3.
[24] Ibidem, 20.
[25] William Pinkerton, «Uncle Sam's After You to See Nation First— It's 'Travel America Year'», Washington Post, 21 April 1940, 27.

travel across the US as a democratic performance of citizenship, it was clear that visiting a place like Reno would only or more likely be possible for the typically white, wealthy, and upper-middle class.

The second type of campaign related to Franklin D. Roosevelt's official proclamation of the "Travel America Year" in 1940, within the context of World War II. Citing the growth of "international conflict" overseas, he called on nations in "the Americas [to] further consolidate our unity by a better knowledge of our own and each others' countries".[26] He also invited "citizens and friends from other lands to join in a great travel movement, so that our peoples may be drawn even more closely together in sympathy and understanding". In this case, the strategy of nationalism was very much in line with the imperial policy of expansion the American culture beyond the borders of the country. The second type of campaign continued but also differed from the first. It envisioned or collaborated with a reinforcement of the cultural links with Western Europe and a rehabilitation of the nation's international image—on the continent and overseas—, as well as a push for the federal government's protagonist role, while retaining the market-driven logic of vacations in contrasts with the already emerging policies of annual paid vacations in countries such as Sweden, Mexico, France, Chile, and Cuba. So, in addition to the racial and social whitewashing already mentioned, the linen postcard sealing an image and a memory of the city of Reno—and the city as memory and

[26] W. Bruce MacNamee, «Travel Looks Ahead to Another Big Year; America's Cooperative Campaign of l940 To Be Intensified to Keep High Level», The New York Tines, 29 December 1940, https://www.nytimes.com/1940/12/29/archives/travel-looks-ahead-to-another-big-year-americas-cooperative.html.

image—, also involved the idea of selling the US cities and a national(istic) emblem of a white America beyond the borders to both whites and people of color who could visit and enjoy a white haven and a 'Western culture' in the double sense of the modern US' West and the West European culture.

6. Final remaks

As I have briefly shown, the linen postcards of downtown Reno were expected to have affective and social effects, and to respond to social exigencies and economic interests. They can be regarded as intermedial assemblages that bring together textures, colors, sizes, formats, figures, photographic and more importantly cinematic modes of construction and experience of the image and the city, as well as a multitude of actors, interests, and discourses, including those of divorce agencies, casinos, urban planning, white-utopian urbanism, and tourist and federal policies. These postcards were critical in nurturing the imagination and expectations, nationally and internationally, about Reno's present and "desired future" as the white haven; being the present and future two central issues for what will later be known as city branding theory and practice.[27] Ironically, the adoption of a new technique by CT&C, named Curlteichcolor, with more attractive colors and hyperrealist images, displaced the Art Colortone, and coincided with the period when Reno began to fall behind Las Vegas in terms of visitors, gambling revenue, and (inter)national perception. The Southern city of the State of Nevada took the lead and became what people in Reno had

[27] Eric Häusler and Jürgenr Häusler, *How Cities Become Brands Developing City Brands Purposefully and Thoughtfully* (New York, NY: Springer, 2024).

envisioned for the city's future. Las Vegas was now the modern city of capitalist consumption and entertainment, and the face of the Modern American West. Las Vegas became, so to speak, the new, yet very different, Reno in an increasingly globalized context of capitalist consumption of culture and services, and circulation of imagined global geographies, as the postcards of the Las Vegas Strip in the 1970s and 1980s, and the casino and resort Luxor Las Vegas in the late 1990s, will attest.

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