

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

---

1989

## The Presentation of the City on 'Fat-Letter' Postcards

Mary Jo Deegan

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, maryjodeegan@yahoo.com

Michael R. Hill

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

Deegan, Mary Jo and Hill, Michael R., "The Presentation of the City on 'Fat-Letter' Postcards" (1989). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 449.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/449>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Deegan, Mary Jo and Michael R. Hill. 1989. "The Presentation of the City on 'Fat-Letter' Postcards." Pp. 91-105 in *American Ritual Dramas: Social Rules and Cultural Meanings*, by Mary Jo Deegan. (Contributions in Sociology, No. 76). New York: Greenwood Press.

# 5

## *The Presentation of the City on Fat-Letter Postcards*

---

MARY JO DEEGAN and MICHAEL R. HILL

Media-constructed rituals are cultural products. Unlike participatory rituals, my focus thus far, media-constructed rituals have more stability, higher internal order and consistency, and greater potential to reach people over time. Cultural artifacts from the past can reach people in their own era, the present, and the future, and in this way they provide a source of continuity even for rapidly changing societies. We begin this section of the book by examining a small artifact in an interaction ritual, the presentation of the city on a particular style of postcard.<sup>1</sup>

Cities are complex human environments that are frequently symbolized in the small space of picture postcards measuring a scant three-by-five inches. This small surface area, however, can capture and create an image of a locale, thereby representing its people, ideals and "good times." Postcards of cities are presentations of the city in an analogous way to presentations of the self (Goffman, 1959). In both types of presentations, the most socially desirable front is displayed. Postcard presentations, unlike human presentations, are static and completely controlled by their capitalistic manufacturers.

Considerable decision making occurs in the process of depicting cities on postcards, for cities are often squalid as well as beautiful, treacherous as well as sublime, and fear-inducing as well as spirit-elevating (see Strauss, 1968; Jacobs, 1961; Sandburg, 1970). In other words, cities reflect the whole range of human behavior and action because they are constructed from our dreams and limitations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Goffman, 1974). This wide array of human action, however, is rarely depicted on picture postcards of cities. These cultural artifacts are generally designed to portray the city on an idealized di-

mension, an attractive, desirable, and enjoyable place. They are, in other words, a form of impression management and institutional reflexivity supporting a particular attitude toward cities (Goffman, 1959, 1977). Although each card is oriented toward a specific locale, these cards collectively reveal the core codes for presenting the "ideal" city (Weber, 1948). When interrelated ideas are repeated in cultural artifacts such as novels and motion pictures, John G. Cawelti (1969, 1976) identifies them as a "formula"—a conventional system for structuring cultural products. Any particular formula tends to be closely associated with a specific culture and era. Each is distinguished by a limited repertoire of plots, characters, or, in this case, settings (Cawelti, 1969: 386–88). Formulas employ structural and anti-structural rules to generate a set of interrelated conventions underlying and giving form to cultural products. Formulas are bounded, repetitive, and anchored in experience, emotions, and ideas.

Formulas are more than mere conventional systems giving expression to the status quo. Widely accepted formulas project themselves into the future as prescriptive rules. This is important culturally because, as Erving Goffman (1974: 7) observed, rules organize our experience of the world. Although images of the city are generated by particular, historically grounded objects depicted on the postcard as artifact, such images (or as Goffman called them, "displays") form part of an "order set" of experientially and emotionally charged symbols of the city that we carry with us into the future (Mead, 1936). This emotional attachment, valuation, and concept of the city, in turn, generate the mechanism for perpetuating itself. Thus presentations of the city become established, stable, and greater than their component parts. As a formula, fat-letter postcards provide us with the means to enter and analyze this symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Cities, as dynamic social forms, are composed of innumerable people, objects, and interrelationships. Such an array of events, people, places, and things cannot be depicted on one tiny little card nor are all of these objects of equal value and significance. Therefore, certain aspects of the city are singled out for presentation. This selection process is directly associated with the distribution of power in cities. Presentations of the city reveal the nature of social control and power, as well as the type of "fun" associated with the city. Although the city encompasses the rich and the poor, workers and those at leisure, men and women, children and adults, and the young and the aged, the depictions of the idealized city focus on only a narrow range of humans, their activities, and their play. The activities and people that make everyday life meaningful for all people in a city are consistently ignored in favor of the powerful, the wealthy, and the male.

In a similarly incongruous way, fun in the city is often depicted on postcards as occurring in rural-like settings. These notable parklands are frequently not natural areas, but formal entertainment centers, bureaucratically administered public parks, or technologically defined leisure. Thus the seemingly innocent facades of the city found in fat-letter postcards are a hegemonic (Marx and Engels, 1939) message about the beauty of city life and what is to be valued

there.<sup>2</sup> The message of power is conveyed to both the sender and receiver of postcards. Fat-letter postcards are part of the process of constructing symbolic universes that alienate people from their experience of the city. By examining the formula for generating fat-letter postcards we can outline and underscore the process of constructing powerful images of oppression while we are having “fun.” A study of postcards illustrating city life, therefore, shows us the process of constructing idealized images of the city as well as the final product. It also shows the relationship between the structure and anti-structure of these images, which are part of ritual exchanges accompanying a “fun” vacation to such cities.

### **The Fat-Letter Format**

In this chapter we examine a particular style of postcard that we call “fat-letter postcards” (for lack of a more definitive term). The standard format of the cards provides a good opportunity for analyzing the formula used to select images of the city. Fat-letter postcards (hereafter referred to as FLPs) reached a peak of popularity in the late 1940s and 1950s, although contemporary versions can still be found at some newsstands today. The typical FLP spells out a city’s name in large-sized letters and depicts within each letter a local object or subject found in the specific city.

Each card presents an idealized view of a particular city, but since these postcards represent larger cultural symbols and rules for determining city symbols, they exhibit a great deal of homogeneity and repetitiveness. In fact, many of the cards would be interchangeable to a stranger unfamiliar with the cities represented on the cards. Despite the inclusion of multiple visual images from each urban location, the perceptive recipient of FLPs from several cities soon discovers that the specific spelling of the city’s name and the number of letters in that name are generally the only unique characteristics of each city. In other words, the cards are overtly intended to be a symbol of a particular city, while in fact they more often depict a generalized formula representing Every City. Postcards are intended to be sent to others and portray an inviting aspect to the receiver. They may become souvenirs to remember something presumably particular and unique. The symbols of the city on FLPs implicitly function very differently. Most city buildings and parks are indistinguishable from one FLP to another. The symbols thought unique to a particular city are often interchangeable with those of another.

Unwilling to wait for friends and colleagues on vacation to mail us FLPs complete with “Wish you were here!” messages from distant urban places while we stayed behind in Nebraska, we were fortunate to quickly compile a collection of 128 FLPs by other means. The cards in our collection were published during the 1940s and 1950s and thus expose this particular era for analysis. Based on the visual images on these cards, we describe the idealized city presentations that were commercially generated and popularly accepted in the recent past. We hold that the system for selecting elements of city life as symbolically important

is better understood if we locate it within the broad cultural context of our capitalist and sexist society.

### **Core Codes and Postcards**

In addition to the two core codes of capitalist and sexist oppression, a third is analyzed here: racism. This form of discrimination is blatant on the FLPs. Including racism in the analysis reveals the structural similarity of apparently different forms of oppression. This also allows application of the theory of critical dramaturgy in yet another context, again showing its capacity to account for various forms of oppression and repression in American society.

Since these postcards are associated with vacations (i.e., times away from everyday life and thus potentially anti-structural), bureaucratic values are not centrally represented. Depictions of government offices, department stores, and corporate offices are certainly bureaucratic, but the context of depiction is one of fun, showing places visited on holiday. The activities depicted—and the act of sending postcards—are often associated with leisure time. In these aspects, postcards reveal an anti-structural element. The inclusion of capitalist, sexist, and racist images, however, shows once more that having fun is intimately wedded to oppression.

Our analysis proceeded in two ways. First, we examined the cards to generate categories of frequently found representations. (The details of this methodology are discussed in the next section.) The image classification revealed a formula for depicting the ideal city. Knowing the formula uncovers a set of rules through which the postcard designer routinely identified and featured the “important” and “beautiful” elements of city life. In the process, we discovered that the structure of class elites and white males was institutionally strengthened while, simultaneously and incongruously, the anti-structure of the city was shown as rural and parklike. *Communitas* and playfulness within the city were less frequently displayed. Second, we critically evaluated these rules by comparing the idealized categories (1) to the everyday life and experience of people who live and work in the city (a more encompassing and egalitarian structure of everyday life), and (2) to the possibilities of playfulness and *communitas*. In so doing, the dramaturgical rules are seen to produce hegemonic depictions of the capitalist-built environment and its domination by Anglo males (Eisenstein, 1979). The first part of the analysis, then, is a descriptive and enumerative technique for uncovering the pattern on the FLPs, and the second part employs a critical perspective for judging the ideological context of the formula and structure thus revealed.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The source materials for this study consist of 128 FLPs obtained from flea markets and antique dealers in Nebraska during a period of about one month of

active searching on weekends. Our ability to accumulate rapidly and easily this number of cards illustrates their continuing availability and status as "collectible" or desired artifacts, underscoring a characteristic of significant cultural artifacts: persistence over time. All regions of the United States are represented in our sample, as well as a wide range of city sizes and types. Since the universe of possible FLPs is unknown, it is assumed for the purpose of analysis that the sample cards are representative and approximate a random distribution, although the sample may be somewhat biased in favor of the Midwest or toward places visited by travelers from the Midwest.

The first analytic step was to devise a scheme for classifying the images depicted in each illustrated letter spelling the name of a city on each FLP. An intuitive classification was constructed for the images presented in our FLPs. The overall classification is a framework for sorting the images. Thus each category in the classification represents a culturally meaningful "typification." This exhaustive classification provides ninety-seven descriptive categories, including subcategories.<sup>3</sup> A second, independently constructed classification was commissioned as a double-check and was found to be remarkably congruent with our initial classificatory system. Although the classification used is culturally situated, so are the artifacts. We conclude that the categories employed provide a descriptive framework that most residents of the United States would find meaningful, workable, and reasonably free of ideological bias. The major categories or typifications in the classification are: (1) nonresidential buildings, (2) residences, (3) transportation, (4) parks, (5) monuments, (6) natural landscapes, (7) rural/agricultural scenes, and (8) people.

The second preparatory phase of the study applied the classification to code or associate each letter on each FLP with the most appropriate typification. A trained coder chose the single best category for each letter and entered his choice on a prepared coding sheet. Mutually exclusive rules were devised to assign category precedence when multiple typifications sometimes appeared in a single letter (e.g., a monument in a park, or a bus parked beside a bus terminal). Sample replications by a second coder demonstrated high levels of intersubjective agreement sufficient for us to place considerable faith in the reliability and reproducibility of the coding. Data from the coding sheets were then entered and stored for machine processing.

## **EMPIRICAL RESULTS FOR MEASURING THE FORMULA**

Given the major category groups and knowledge of the number of letters on each FLP, it is possible to compute the proportion of category types on a typical or ideal FLP. In other words, the formula for generating such cards can be summarized quantitatively. These results are shown in Table 5.1. Review of this table reveals that the great majority of symbols are those of nonresidential buildings. All other major categories in the classification are represented in relatively

**Table 5.1**  
**Typifications of the City on Fat-Letter Postcards**

<u>Typifications</u>	<u>Proportion</u>
Nonresidential Building	63.1%
Natural Landscapes	8.8
Monuments	7.3
Transportation	6.9
Parks/Recreational	5.1
People	4.0
Rural/Agricultural	2.5
Residences	<u>2.3</u>
	100.0%

small proportions. The predominant image of the city on FLPs is overwhelmingly that of humanly constructed, nonresidential buildings (63 percent).

### **Identifiability**

The images of public buildings on FLPs are frequently not distinctive or easily identifiable as to function (i.e., bank, school, office, etc.). Hotels, public administration buildings, schools, museums, offices, and the like often look so similar that it is not possible for the recipient of the postcards to identify the function of many of these buildings with any confidence. In some instances, lettering on the side of the building such as "Hotel" or "University," or the presence of recognizable symbols such as a crucifix or icon helps the recipient (or the researcher, in our case) to make an informed guess about the building's main use. The identifiability (or, more crucially, *lack* of identifiability) of these buildings is particularly significant to the overall message of FLPs if one remembers that, on average, 63 percent of the images on FLPs in our sample represent nonresidential buildings.

The identifiability of the nonresidential building images was approached empirically in the following way. The coder had available a comprehensive list of twenty-five subcategories in which to place images of buildings. When a structure could not be identified sufficiently using all available information (including printed legends and handwritten notes authored by postcard senders) to place it in one of the available categories, it was considered an "unclassifiable building."

On average, this category was used in classifying 22 percent of the images in the buildings category. This average, however, is somewhat misleading. Approximately 27 percent of all the cards examined included a “key” or printed legend on the reverse side of the card. An example of such a key is reproduced in Example 5.1. Using the key, it is possible to identify the vast majority of buildings, structures, and places shown on the face of the cards.

**EXAMPLE 5.1: BOISE (Idaho)**

- B = Ada County Court House
- O = View of Business District
- I = Arrow Rock Dam
- S = Boise River Bridge
- E = Union Pacific Depot

Insight into the identifiability of major buildings is thus provided by looking at the frequency of use of the category “unclassifiable building” for postcards with a key and for those without a legend. For cards without a legend, 29 percent of the building images were categorized as unclassifiable buildings. For cards with a key, the figure drops to below 1 percent. (ANOVA—Analysis of Variance—shows this difference to be statistically significant beyond the .0001 level.) Thus the key provides useful identifying information that cannot be obtained from visual imagery alone. It is not surprising that a key makes the symbols of buildings more identifiable (nearly 100 percent identifiable), but what is surprising is that no key was provided for 73 percent of the cards in the sample. Because buildings comprise such a large proportion of images, the typical recipient of an FLP would be unable to identify the function or purpose of approximately one-fifth of all the symbols on FLPs, unless a key is provided. Each recipient would only be able, at best, to categorize many images as unidentified buildings. Since our coder is an advanced student of urban morphology, it is possible that his skill in identifying building functions is superior to that of the casual recipient of FLPs. Therefore, the suggestion that the typical recipient would be unable to identify approximately one-fifth of the symbols as other than “buildings” is probably a conservative estimate.<sup>4</sup>

**Images and City Functions**

It might be hypothesized that the symbols on FLPs reflect the underlying individuality of a given city. Generally speaking, this was not the case. Using the appendix provided by Howard J. Nelson (1955), the service classifications for ninety-seven of the cities in our sample were obtained. Nelson’s classification used employment data taken from the 1950 U.S. Census (this date is generally

contemporaneous with the FLP images analyzed here). A city is placed in a particular classification if its employment in a given employment sector is greater than one standard deviation from the mean or usual level of employment in that sector in other cities around the country. The following categories were devised by Nelson and adopted for our analysis (the percentage of our sample cities in each category follows in parentheses): manufacturing (12 percent), retail trade (5 percent), professional service (4 percent), transportation (11 percent), personal services (4 percent), public administration (9 percent), wholesale trade (6 percent), finance/insurance (16 percent). When no employment sector dominated the employment structure of a city, it was classified as "diversified" (31 percent). Our analysis found that the "real" functions of cities as classified by Nelson are not significantly reflected in the images of the cities found on FLPs. Stated another way, the proportions of images on a typical card devoted to buildings, transportation, residences, parks, monuments, natural landscapes, rural/agricultural scenes, and people cannot be reliably predicted even if one has detailed knowledge of the actual employment structure of the city in question. This conclusion might be reversed by using a larger sample of FLPs, but we doubt it. However, while the fundamental, day-to-day activities of life in cities are not presented in FLP symbols, the formula for the images is partially predictable if one has knowledge of population size, regional location, and whether or not a city is a state capital.

### **Symbol and Population Size**

In our analysis, population size is consistently the most informative dimension. Using 1950 population data, we divided our sample into five population-size categories. The majority of our symbol categories have significant relationships to population size. The specific results are given in Table 5.2. Here one sees that the larger places (Category V) are portrayed as having greater proportions of nonresidential buildings and monuments compared to smaller places. Although large urban areas are not usually known for rustic vistas, they are depicted as having as many parks/recreation facilities and natural landscapes as smaller places. Even more striking are the data on residences. While large cities obviously have large housing and residential areas, this aspect of the metropolis takes a backseat to images of buildings and monuments. Although the following results were not statistically significant, it is interesting to note that images of people were encountered less frequently on the FLPs for the largest cities when compared to smaller cities. Regardless of population size, however, the emphasis on non-residential buildings is remarkable. In only the smallest places (Category I) is this trend countered with a modest tendency to have more natural landscapes represented (20 percent) and residential structures (4 percent) displayed.

**Table 5.2**  
**City Size and Typifications of the City on Fat-Letter Postcards**

Population Category	<u>Typifications</u>						(n)
	Nonresidential Buildings	Transportation	Residences	Parks	Monuments	Natural	
I (LE 10,000)	57%	6%	4%	4%	3%	20%	(24)
II (10,001 - 27,500)	62	4	4	3	6	6	(25)
III (27,501 - 70,000)	59	5	1	8	4	7	(25)
IV (70,001 - 200,000)	67	11	1	6	8	7	(29)
V (GE 200,000)	71	7	1	5	16	7	(25)
Significance	.06	.047	.01	.047	.009	.0000	

---

Note: Data for nonresidential buildings reaches a level of significance sufficiently close to usually accepted levels to warrant inclusion. Data for Rural/Agricultural Scenes and People did not vary sufficiently at usually accepted levels of significance to warrant presentation.

**Table 5.3**  
**Region and Typifications of the City on Fat-Letter Postcards**

Region	<u>Typification</u>				(n)
	Residences	Natural	Rural	People	
Northwest	1%	8%	4%	8%	(34)
Midwest	2	4	4	7	(43)
South	5	11	4	7	(22)
Southwest	1	10	5	25	(17)
Northwest	0	19	11	7	(12)
Significance	.05	.005	.018	.004	

Note: Data for nonresidential buildings, transportation, parks/recreational, and monuments did not vary sufficiently at usually accepted levels of significance to warrant presentation.

### **Regional Symbols**

In addition to size-linked images, some symbols have regional distributions. The data for this discussion are presented in Table 5.3. Here we see that residences are featured somewhat more frequently in the South. Natural (19 percent) and rural/agricultural features (11 percent) are more often projected on postcards from the Northwest. Finally, symbols of people (25 percent) are most characteristic on postcards from the Southwest.

### **The Symbols of State Capitals**

Finally, the empirical findings in our study reveal that state capitals have a slight tendency to differ from other cities on three dimensions (see Table 5.4). No state capitals depicted private residences. Conversely, these cities had twice as many monuments and three times as many images of people when compared to other cities.

**Table 5.4**  
**State Capitals and Typifications of the City on Fat-Letter Postcards**

State Capital	<u>Typification</u>			(n)
	Residences	Monuments	People	
No	3%	6%	3%	(106)
Yes	0	15	9	(22)
Significance	.0205	.0095	.03	

Note: Data for nonresidential buildings, transportation, parks/recreational, and monuments did not vary sufficiently at usually accepted levels of significance to warrant presentation. FLPs

## THE DEPICTION OF SEX AND CLASS CODES

These categorized empirical data can now be summarized and evaluated. First, it is clear that the most significant ideal image of the city is the nonresidential public building. Such public buildings tend to be expensive, controlled by the elite of a city, and dominated by male personnel. They portray a segment of public life that is dominated by men and displays of their wealth. Thus FLPs are sex- and class-coded artifacts. To many people who live in cities, their everyday life is composed of their residences, their neighbors, their families (particularly children playing in the neighborhood), small businesses, and their places of paid employment. These workplaces, moreover, are often dirty, cramped, old, and undesirable. The places of enjoyment and recreation are often local playgrounds and parks, small restaurants, ethnic and minority businesses, and community buildings. The places, events, and people depicted on FLPs almost entirely negate these elements of city life. A popular argument in support

of the hegemonic depictions is that dirty, cramped, old, and undesirable workplaces are not “fun” to see, whereas beautiful buildings are. Such an argument, however, ignores the distortion that occurs through these depictions, their support of a certain populace, the control over images and consciousness that results, and the suppression of beauty that is not wealthy, male, or Anglo. The equation of beauty and fun with an elite generates alienation in the general populace who cannot control the presented images of their lives.

A vivid example of how Americans’ perceptions are oriented to the elite occurred when we showed a set of slides from Cuba to an American audience. A member of the audience said that the many homes and other buildings with exteriors of peeling paint in Havana were very depressing. When we explained that the Cuban government put primary emphasis on housing for all—emphasizing the upgrading of rural areas—and that, nonetheless, despite the peeling paint, Havana had no ghettos, the audience member responded that Cuba was better off when it had beautiful facades for the few. For her, workers’ homes and peeling paint were shameful and should be hidden, whereas beautiful edifices for the rich were symbolically important for entire nations. When we saw our Cuban photographs we felt warmed by our memories and the social equality symbolized by peeling paint on otherwise remarkably clean and habitable dwellings. The audience member, however, was depressed by the contrast with elite, well-painted American homes. This social construction of the presentation of the city is rooted in our core codes and carries over into—and is reinforced by—interpretations of images on FLPs.

In the second most frequent category depicted on FLPs, natural landscapes, the same pattern of atypical urban image is found, but arises from a different context. It exhibits characteristics that are anti-structural, but in a “fun” rather than “playful” context. In fact, if this category is combined with those of monuments and parks/recreational, it is immediately apparent that these aggregated images (21.2 percent of all images on FLPs) of the city are opposed to the ever-present built environment that characterizes urban life. But these parklike symbols are often images of large urban parks, which are often inconvenient, if not unsafe, for people to actually use. In this way something desirable is tantalizing but unavailable. Similarly, architectural landmarks and statues of Anglo male leaders are elevated in significance, and these are, in Goffman’s sense, institutionally reflexive. Many of the rural and leisure activities require automobiles, gasoline, time, and money to use (what Illich, 1981, calls “shadow work”). Entry fees may also be needed. The image of nature, then, is a subversion of free space and refers to an embedded use of landscape that is structured into our everyday lives.

As we saw in our empirical analysis, the activities and places presented on FLPs are not unique to each city. They are common elements in an interpretive view of what is considered significant. The lives of women and children are rarely symbolized in the public space of the postcard. The average citizen, of either sex, is rarely portrayed. In the infrequent instances where human groups

are shown, they predominantly represent people at leisure, not at work. Thus we see groups of people at the beach or in a park. Formal rituals such as community parades or celebrations are rarely depicted. The city as a living entity built by the many workers who live there is absent.

The skewed typifications on FLPs are ways to advertise certain parts of the city as more desirable, more fun, more beautiful. The traveler on vacation (as well as the recipient of a postcard) interprets these idealized images as the "things to see" or admire in a city. Fun but not playfulness is advertised. Central businesses in downtown areas and recreational facilities benefit directly and indirectly from these formulas. Work in the home, neighborhood, and sweatshop remains unseen; these are not fun. Women and children are not shown. On the other hand, the literally concrete accomplishments of architects, civil engineers, park designers, and urban planners form leading images of the city.

The American city symbolized on FLPs is a static image of male capitalists. It is an institutionally reflexive depiction of the city as a "male landscape" (Hill and Deegan, 1982). By valuing these elements of city life, feelings and emotions tied to the city are transferred, ordered, and made meaningful in relation to these symbols. A woman who loves a particular city now imagines or remembers it through the symbols elaborated on a postcard. She learns to point with pride to events and objects that she rarely uses or controls. They are not images with which she feels at home. These selected, capitalist, male objects and events represent the important events and places of her city. She becomes, thereby, alienated from her own experiences, places, and activities in that city, even during those rare occasions when she enters the male landscape as a tourist (Hill and Deegan, 1982).

The poor know, too, that their homes, neighborhoods, shopping areas, and work are not portrayed as ideal parts of the city. People who control and construct the city are the rich. The poor, then, are alienated from their daily lives and learn to admire the places where they have entrée as menial laborers, if at all. This pattern of alienation is reinforced for minority groups. Furthermore, many minority citizens may also hold multiple minority statuses simultaneously, for example, by being old, black, female, and poor (Deegan, 1985), increasing their distance from the "desirable" way of life.

The FLP presentation of the city is alienating in yet another fundamental way. The city as a lived environment is often depicted as parklike. Some FLPs include illustrations of rural areas actually well outside the city limits. Thus the crowded housing, teeming street life, and the vivacity of city living are abstracted from the idealization of the American city found in FLPs. To enjoy the American city, one is ideally in "natural" settings although these are often rarely enjoyed by its citizens on a continuing or everyday basis.

This is not to say that all images of the city are inherently alienating. Beautiful buildings, important male leaders, and architectural constructions such as bridges, lighthouses, roadways, and fountains are human achievements located in specific places and frequently the focus of important activities shared by many.

Placing such symbols in a formula that eliminates other symbols and inflates the significance of these typical patriarchal constructions of reality is problematic, nonetheless. It is precisely these powerful, if not sacred, communal places that are used to justify a patriarchal and hegemonic social order, thereby generating alienation of a populace from its everyday life and meaning. Thus the popular culture of a city is manipulated to serve the interests of the privileged and makes the life of a city a world of static monuments to the male order.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter had two major goals: to discover the core codes underlying the formula for presenting the city on FLPs, a media-constructed ritual; and to evaluate this formula as a component in American interaction rituals. In so doing, we documented that the capitalist, built environment is most highly valued while the work and lives of everyday people are consistently slighted. When natural landscapes are depicted, they too reflect an idealization of everyday life abstracted from the mundane structures of existence. What few images there are of people in FLPs are primarily of Anglo males, reflecting their patriarchal control of the city more overtly than their undepicted domination of public buildings, the most frequent image on FLPs.

Although it could be argued that the formula for depicting the city found on FLPs is tied to a bygone era, such an interpretation cannot be established given our data. Only further research on presentations of the city in contemporary life could resolve this issue. Without concrete evidence to support contrary positions, we should not yield to the easy temptation to wish away the obvious and continuing domination of our society by oppressive codes of sex, class, and race. Those who argue that "things have changed" in the last few years must demonstrate their case, not just respond to the mountains of counterevidence with charges of "old data." In fact, there are clear parallels between our findings and Goffman's (1976) analysis of gender advertisements. He found that these capitalist images of women pervaded popular media and followed sex codes similar to those used on FLPs (Goffman, 1977). We have extended his findings to a more hidden dimension of sexism, the "symbolic annihilation" of women through their lack of portrayal in cultural artifacts (Tuchman, 1975). In any event, we demonstrated the existence of a patriarchal, racist, and capitalist formula in FLPs from the 1940s and 1950s. The theory of critical dramaturgy to which we subscribe holds that such formulas gather momentum once they are established and then project themselves into the future. They become part of the ritual of "having a good time" on one's vacation. They are built into one's memories of that event, memories that are recalled later in the everyday world of work and obligations. Have things changed in the intervening years between the faddish use of these cards and today? We find no serious evidence in the literature or observed behavior patterns to demonstrate that they have.

Core codes are dramatically depicted on FLPs and these images are institu-

tionally reflexive of sex, class, and racial inequalities. We believe, however, that control over urban images belongs to the community as a whole and that such images should represent all interests in the community. Community definitions of shared work, of anti-structure and play, and the potential for *communitas* should dominate future presentations of the city. We urge more research on past and present formulas displaying our cities and people, but we are more concerned with the development of emancipatory formulas for generating symbols that celebrate urban life and our communal bonds.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the meetings of the Popular Culture Association, April 1984, in Toronto, Canada.

2. In hegemonic systems, oppressed persons participate in their own oppression. By selecting (from a stock of prepared, preselected images), purchasing (a capitalist transaction), and mailing (a bureaucratically organized transaction) fat-letter postcards (FLPs) to friends, postal card correspondents unwittingly reify and strengthen the power of FLP imagery—images that celebrate the wealthy, white world of commercial, cultural, and military success. Thus, in this case, there is an intersection between the Marxist concept of “hegemony” and the Goffmanian construct of “institutional reflexivity.”

3. A full listing of the classification scheme is available by writing to the authors.

4. Due to the coder’s familiarity with American cityscapes, he was able to identify several buildings that might have otherwise remained unidentified. We encouraged the coder to use his stock of experiential knowledge to identify buildings since a recipient of a postcard may also recognize unnamed buildings. Thus, the coder’s typifications are similar to, although not identical with, the everyday knowledge of others in this society.