

What postcards want to say

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Abstract

Annie Proulx's first novel *Postcards* is a saga of the disintegration of a rural New England family, which is so realistically rendered that any connection with Jacques Derrida's philosophical theory of the post in *The Post Card* seems unlikely to exist. At the same time, it is evident that the novel is committed to the quiddity of the postcard as a medium that is simultaneously postal and postmodern. Through the clever use of graphically presented patchwork postcards, the novel epitomizes the economical and cultural transfiguration of the twentieth century America. In Derrida's postal theory, the postcard marks the end of the age of the postal system that transmits documents. This paper argues that what the postcards in the eponymous novel want to say is how Derridian "postcardization" corresponds to postmodernization at the most basic and personal level. The condition of *Postcards* may not be manifestly postcolonial, and the epistolary space is only partial, but the idea of the postmodern postal principle prevails in the novel, which registers the diasporic flux of people, place, and time with no destination whatsoever.

What does a post card want to say to you? (The back cover of *The Post Card*)

Annie Proulx's first novel, *Postcards* (1992), is a typical postmodern work comprising a fragmentary narrative and a patchwork of graphically presented postcards. A saga of the disintegration of a rural New England family, the story is so realistically rendered that any connection with Jacques Derrida's philosophical theory of the post in *The Post Card* (1980), however slight, seems unlikely to exist. At the same time, it is evident that the novel is committed to the quiddity of the postcard as a medium that is simultaneously postal and postmodern. It even provides the more advanced perspective of the postcard towards the "post-post" era. The postcard imagined by Derrida is an emblem of postmodern epistolarity, or of what he calls "postcardization," which represents the last stage of the materiality of the signifier. In the "real" world that is described in the novel, the solidity of the agrarian way of life is about

to be displaced by the hollowness of twentieth-century technology and consumerism. To put it another way, postcardization is postmodernization. This is not to suggest that Derrida's writing had any direct influence on the novel. Notwithstanding, it is possible to see how this novel of journey and transition embodies distinct postmodern features of the traveling postcard in addition to its own stylistic feat and hardheaded descriptions of reality, and how its narrative space and space of narration are "postcardized."

What the postcards in the eponymous novel want to say is how postcardization reflects postmodernization at the most basic and personal level. The migration of people depicted in the novel, their dispersal and drift in the decaying world of New England small-farm agriculture, is socio-economically provoked by the destructive power of capitalism. Among many aspects of postal circulation discussed in the "Envois" section of *The Post Card*, one significant factor crucial to postmodern concerns is that the post (letters and cards) can always not arrive at its destination. Mail can be delayed, intercepted, or lost,

and its destination is inevitably problematized. In other words, its migration must compromise with the barrier, the boundary, or the geographical and cultural border. Indeed, the postcard is restricted by its own physical boundary: “We are to read against all boundaries, even against the boundary presented by the card’s small rectangular shape” (Berg 333). The traveling letter/card must travel crossing the border, and in so doing it unsettles the boundary. I have recently taken up diverse novels like *The Color Purple*, *Crossing the River*, and *The Mixquiahuala Letters*^[1] to represent the idea of traveling as problematic “crossing,” and to explore the epistolary effect of crossing on the postcolonial migration, in which the border is constantly questioned and the home irrevocably lost. The condition of *Postcards* may not be manifestly postcolonial, and the epistolary space is only partial, but the idea of the postmodern postal principle prevails in the novel, which registers the diasporic flux of people, place, and time with no destination whatsoever.

The novel is largely set during the late twentieth century, a time when incompatibility between the rural village values and capitalistic consumerism was beginning to have a ruinous influence on small farms and their culture. The novel’s protagonist, Loyal Blood, is forced to abandon the Vermont farm he loves more than any other members of his family, when enraged to learn that his girlfriend doesn’t favor the dull and somber life of the farm, he kills her and secretly buries her body. Loyal runs far away from home into the American hinterland. Roaming mostly wild regions, working itinerantly at odd jobs such as mining, digging for fossils, or trapping animals, Loyal keeps dreaming of his old farm. However, he is never successful in his various jobs but remains unsettled, destined to be lonely and homeless.

Fate has played cruel tricks upon the rest of the Bloods, too. Deprived of its main workforce, the farm cannot maintain itself. Loyal’s father, Mink, and brother Mervin (Dub) are arrested for arson, having set fire to their own home for the insurance money. Mink kills himself in despair while in prison. Dub moves to Florida after his term and becomes a successful real estate agent there. Loyal’s mother, Jewel, comes to live in a trailer home on the Blood property, but ends up

going missing, lost in the mountain. The only daughter of the family, Mernelle, marries a stranger named Ray who has advertised for wife, and who later dies of cancer.^[2]

1. The Bear Card

It is a bear that haunts the novel.

Shortly after running away from home, Loyal stops at a gas station, where he tries to seduce a woman. In the action of being physically ejected from the luncheonette, he comes into possession of numerous postcards when he is pushed into a card rack. They are “seventy or eighty postcards all showing the same thick-bodied bear with a red snout coming out of the black trees” (Proulx 30). These bear cards become representative of the postcards in the novel. Royal starts to send them home one by one with brief messages without revealing his whereabouts, though he never knows that the address he’s sending them to is no longer valid. The text of the novel is literally strewn with those postcards from Loyal and other cards related to the family and the farm ranging from 1944 to 1988 (except two earlier ones below). Every chapter opens with a simulacrum of the postcard with an epigraphic message in handwritten or typed letters and a three-cent George Washington postage stamp.^[3] It looks as if a real card is pasted onto the page, and naturally the front of the card is never to be seen. But we at least know what every card from Loyal is supposed to show: “Another bear postcard for Jewell” (17).

The stories of the bear and of its photographer are told respectively. In the card dated June 11, 1923, which prefaces chapter 3, where Loyal’s embarrassing incident is related, an amateur cameraman named Oscar Untergans brags that he shot a good picture of a bear. Chapter 5 starts with a card addressed to an electric company dated June 13, 1926, complaining that a bear has been found dead at the bottom of an electric pole. The story continues that the photographed bear was born “in the late winter of 1918” (33) and seen to have come down to McCurdy’s “Lodge’s garbage dump” (33) in summer 1923, when it was captured on film, and was frequently sighted for a couple of years until it abruptly disappeared. Untergans,

the photographer who caught its image, “sold hundreds of nature shots to postcard printers” (34).

The messages of the above cards in 1923 and 1926 combined, we can guess that it is by electric shock that the bear was killed. The bear’s miserable fate interacting with the human world illustrates the economic and ecological changes occurring in the twentieth century on the American continent. The death of the beast, seemingly as a result of electrocution at one of the newly built utility poles, epitomizes the clash between the world of nature and that of civilization. More precisely, it embodies the conflict between, on the one hand, ecological idealism, and on the other, the reality of industrial and technological invasion of the agricultural economy in the era of postmodern capitalism.^[4] Thus, the bear symbolizes not only Loyal’s wretched journey of alienation from a pastoral dream, but also the death of the old rural life, in which such small-farm agriculture as is found in New England is devastated. Most ironically, the bear imprinted on the postcard “with a red snout coming out of the black trees” (30) appears to be neither foraging in the garbage nor lying dead at the electric pole, but looks typically wild by the trick of Untergans not to show the full reality of the image (22). And yet it is the fake image that survives the photographer who created it, and who, falling in his bathroom, dies of a subdural hematoma: “The postcard endured” (34).

The “[m]essage and image” of a postcard are “intertwined in a complex fashion since the picture would often reduce or replace the necessity for written words” (Milne 109). In *Postcards*, the image of the picture side of the postcard is never shown, but the twelve cards Loyal sends, among which seven are sent home, distinguish themselves from other cards by having their unshown picture side thus described. It is this invisible bear that possesses the people in the novel. The only other card the front of which is mentioned is the one Mernelle has received from her pen pal in Alabama: “a white-columned building behind trees swathed in angry green moss. This ‘Old Southern Mansion’” (38). The image of a mansion is a negative print of the bear, white but similarly behind the tree, of something suffocated by the invaders and

destined to decay in the modern world. The mansion remains where it is to fall into ruin, but the bear leaves its own habitat and migrates into the human domain to be killed, only to live in the photograph.

The back^[5] side of the card is photographically displayed in *Postcards*, as if the real card is collaged onto the page, with those (verisimilar) handwritten or typewritten messages conveying only minimal and patchy information. This collage trick stands just opposite to the cards in Derrida’s “Envois,” where the front picture is more than emphasized and the (alleged) messages flood out of the frame of the postcard to constitute the whole narrative. The cards in *Postcards*, however, are all the more eloquent because of the tense relation between the invisible but powerful bear and the minimal demarcated writing. As in the intermittent chapters titled “What I See” that give monologic sketches of random American scenes, those postcards, in particular Loyal’s bear cards, remarkably illustrate “what cards see” or “what postcards want to say.”

2. “The Post Card”

Derrida writes that he selected the postcard as a specimen of the postal system after he came across a most intriguing card from the Bodleian Library showing Matthew Paris’s illustration of Plato dictating to Socrates. He realized that this quaint picture schematized his deconstructive philosophy in the history of Western thought “from Socrates to Freud and beyond.” The “Envois” section mainly explores the theory in which the postcard is considered to function as an extreme exemplar of the postal system.

Direct references to the postcard itself, however, are relatively rare in the complicated and extensive argument of Derrida’s postal theory. What Derrida considers essential to the postcard could be summarized in three characteristics: illegibility, reversibility, and support. He describes the postcard as “so modest, anonymous, offered, stereotyped, ‘retro’ — and absolutely indecipherable ...” (Derrida 47). “Indecipherability” is the first thing he mentions that he “likes” about postcards: “What I like about post cards is that even if in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter” (12). The postcard is open in the sense that it is meant to

circulate *unenvloped*: both the picture and the message are exposed to indiscriminate eyes; there can be no secrecy or privacy. While the letter is associated with privateness and confidentiality, the postcard casually discloses itself. In the unfortified card, the secret “circulates with full freedom” (185). The paradox is that this free and uncovered card is considered illegible.

The postcard is generally unreadable simply because its message is forced to be curt and fragmental. It is, as it were, an encoded note, which can be deciphered only by someone who shares the code. The card can also be regarded as illegible in the sense that one does not know which facet of the card is to be read: it is too much exposed to be specific. But what Derrida calls “absolutely indecipherable” about the card is already prescribed by him as the principle of the post: the letter may always not arrive at the destination. In other words, the meaning conveyed is destined to halt.

The letter might not always arrive often due to interception. Openness and illegibility of the card are quaintly intertwined with each other to disturb circulation and entail essential inarrivability. Taking up the story of a lost card, Derrida imagines that one postwoman might intercept and secretly read the message, and yet guarantees his addressee that “she would understand nothing” (49). He feels that the letter is “intercepted even before any hands could be put on it” (51). It is always already open, as is the card. Also, a postcard, possessing an eye-catching nature that excites general curiosity, could fall into anyone’s hands to end up “in the display case of a provincial bookseller who classifies his merchandise by name of city” (51). After all, “[o]nce intercepted — a second suffices — the message no longer has any chance of reaching any determinable person, in any (*determinable*) place whatever” (51).

In addition to “openness and illegibility,” Derrida takes up, as a feature of the postcard that he likes, “reversibility.” The reversible element of the postcard implies not only unintelligibility but also equalization and even subversiveness. “What I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back” of the card, “[nor] what is the most

important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address” (13). For Derrida, the reversed position of Socrates and Plato in the picture can symbolize among other things reversibility or subversiveness in the postal system. He alludes to a critical moment of the Penny Post reform “which regulates the tax according to the size and weight of the *support* and not the number, tenor, or quality of the ‘marks,’ even less on what they call the meaning” (141; italics in the original).

Support could be defined as materiality and substantiality of the postcard. “Why prefer to write on cards? First of all because of the support, doubtless, which is more rigid, the cardboard is firmer, it preserves, it resists manipulations; and then it limits and justifies, from the outside, by means of the borders, the indigence of the discourse, the insignificance of the anecdote [*sic*]” (21-2). That the origin of the word “card” is the Greek “papyrus leaf” evinces the intrinsic nature of the card as “support,” which in the French means not only prop or base (pillar or post!) but also “canvas” or “drawing paper.” *Support* also means “medium.”

Support is the very key to the Derridian deconstructive postal theory of writing and difference, what Derrida calls “postcardization.” Since the post is “distinguished from every other telecommunication ... by this characteristic: the transport of the ‘document,’ of its material support” (105), the postcard as a minimum particle of writing epitomizes the whole system of the post. Derrida argues that the end of material communication in the form of the postcard represents the decline of the postal principle itself, in which the meaning of signification changes and “the entire field of analytic exertion” (104) undergoes transformation. The postal procedures “concern the very support of the messages sufficiently not to be without effect on the content” (104). Thus the disappearance of the “letter (pli)” will be “simultaneously the unlimited empire of a postcardization that begins with the trait itself, what they call writing ... and the decadence of the post card in the ‘narrow’ sense, the decadence which ... is part of the end of the ‘classic’ postal system, ... of the ‘document’ to be transmitted, support and message”

(104). Postcardization is, so to speak, a synonym of postmodernization.

The postcard has yet to reach its full potential: “Postcardization also changes the postcard into something other than itself” (Simon 104). Support in its rigidity and preservability demonstrates power to limit or demarcate, as observed by Derrida when he writes that “‘*ecart*’ [division, interval] is the anagram of ‘*carte*’” and that the *carte* reminds him of “the *cadre* [frame]” (Derrida 37). Its “border” or “frame” cuts or partitions itself out from the world, though the border, as any other demarcation, being ever divisible, always tends to be variable and unstable, which would vindicate a promise of trespassing and crossing. The extreme materiality of the postcard paradoxically points beyond the documental communication: “Now a certain form of support is in the course of disappearing” (105). Alleging that he is citing one “Monsieur Brégou, Principal Inspector of the Posts and Telecommunications,” Derrida predicts the computerized (though yet with tapes and cards) vision of communication — mail without the support (103-106). He even has an insight into the terror of policing by “generalized perforization,” the state surveillance over all transferences, which is exactly what is happening now with the Internet.

3. “Postcards”

The powers Derrida detected in the post-card are ingeniously deployed in *Postcards*. Furthermore, this novel, beyond the traditional epistolary form, has to negotiate the difficulties of the postcard as an extreme case of the letter. The incongruous combination of openness and illegibility of the card, in particular, could entail the intrinsic insignificance of its message. Epistolary fictions require messages to be open, but they cannot allow of their illegibility. Even though they rely on the systematic intervention in and the publication of the interior of enveloped private letters and often pretend as if these missives are accidentally intercepted or eavesdropped, it is their crucial task to make them intelligible, coherent, and explanative. However, *Postcards* notably turns the tables on these expectations. It makes the most of the tensions between the casually exposed, fragmentary, and

unintelligible text of the cards, which are intriguing to an eavesdropper-reader, and the episodic stories that complementarily explicate the situation around the cards. The first card in the beginning of the novel that solicits “Mr. Loyal Blood” to the electric stock fence, although its content is not clear-cut at first, suggests much about the fate of New England agricultural life and farms that is later made more explicit, even implying the death of wilderness that the poor bear would emblemize. All the other cards, with mostly fragmented and often illegible notes, even those not from or to the Bloods, more or less involve the scenes of decaying farm culture. It might not be far-fetched, therefore, to hypothesize that the unseen image on every other postcard in the novel is of that doomed bear.

The unintelligibility of the postcard in *Postcards* is equated with postmodern alienation. Although most of the cards in the novel serve as functional elements of a narrative and consequently convey some substantial information about the story, the cards Loyal sends home stand out in their persistent unintelligibility. His literally unreadable writing is a typical case of the common illegibility of the postcard: “Another bear postcard for Jewell” is “written in Loyal’s handwriting, so small it was a nuisance to read it” (37). The text itself is extremely uninformative. The only message of his cards is the usual greeting to his family. Generally it may not be surprising that most postcards have no dates or return addresses, particularly when their front pictures often depict the foreign scenery of tourist destinations. Loyal’s bear cards would hardly give details of his geographical location, as if preventing themselves from being traced. The low, manual, almost primitive hunting-gathering jobs that Loyal takes up over his long journey are virtually antipodal to most economic activity of his place and time. His unreadable cards gesture the isolated and alienated soul of the loser.

The reversibility of the postcard could problematize what a card says. What is most important? Is it “the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address” (Derrida 13)? Is it the invisible bear or the unintelligible text? Is it an ambiguous place-name of dispatch, or the lost

address? Sometimes even the telling testimony of the image on the card can be unreliable. Although a scenic picture postcard may serve commercially as a token of “possession,” a proof of being able to afford the trip or having access to the treasure, it could work contradictorily as the bear card does. For the photograph hardly proves authenticity, irrevocably detached from the origin in its nature of reproduction. In other words, the information of a picture postcard cannot always be attributed to the sender. It could even work as an alibi: a card with the image of a famous site may be used to obscure the sender’s whereabouts. A postcard does not always say what it seems to say.

All that Loyal’s cards home invariably show is their address, “Cream Hills, Vt,” which confirms how his desultory life is anchored to the old farm. But it is an empty code. Wandering from place to place as described in the narrative part of the novel, Loyal never enjoys peace or security, but consistently longs for home. The irony is that this address, the destination of his cards, has irrevocably been lost — the farm become unmanageable, the family broken up, the property sold — and that the cards are astray and, in a sense, dead. Criticizing her brother’s ignorance about the disintegration of the family and the futility of mailing them to its address, Mernelle dismisses his cards as dead: “What makes him think I want to hear from him? I don’t care about his damn postcards” (226). The address of a postcard could serve as its alibi by intimating that the place is “a cipher,” that the destination is lost. Although the home address remains “addressable” in Loyal’s letters and those of other family members, the farm, as Margaret E. Johnson argues, is “less a place of singularity understood for itself and more of a cipher” (Johnson 26), since the property turns out to be something hollow and immaterial even to Loyal.

If what a postcard says is obscure and nobody cares what it says or whether it says anything at all, how can we determine what a postcard wants to say? What strikes us as being most significant in the cards, particularly when they constitute a fictional collection of sundry pieces that are never actually assembled in one place, to which even the identities of addressers and addressees are less relevant? In principle, as

Bernhard Siegert observes, the postcard itself may be “nothing but a stamp that could be written on” (Siegert 154). But it is the postage stamp pasted on the card that really matters, even if it may not look especially important. Needless to say, the postage stamp is on the one hand an emblem of “the general equivalent” (Derrida 141) instituted first by the British penny post, but on the other, it is a sign of taxation that the prepayment postal system entails. As “a stamp with the effigy of this diabolical” royal couple, which Derrida refers to (100), the stamp is also “an allegory of all of history, our history” (110). The head of George Washington is the only item common to all the cards displayed on the pages of *Postcards*. It is a visible and ironical counterpart of the invisible bear. While Derrida’s stamp is never actually shown in the book, here in the novel on the back side of the card the Washington stamp is always prominent and dominant.

Washington likeness on the stamps symbolizes both the postal system and the government of the United States of America. All the tragedies presented in the cards seem to be equated with the value of three cents, but the “diabolical” head demands that the country levy heavier taxes on the people. Even a small Vermont farm is not isolated from the country or history. At the beginning when Loyal announces that he is going to leave home, it is war that his family is discussing. Mink says, trying to stop his son, “There’s a War on, in case you forget. Farm work is essential work. Forget out west. Don’t you read no papers? Don’t you hear no radio programs? Them out west farms dried up and blowed away in the Dust Bowl. You’re stayin’” (Proulx 11). Depression and World War II marked a restart of the accelerated modernization of the country in the latter half of the century. As Wes Berry states, “World War II has drawn people away from farms and into cities to work in war industries, furthering the rural migration that escalated after WWI” (Berry 172). In Minnesota, Loyal picks up two hitchhikers, one a self-professed sailor and the other a Native American who claims that he has just got out of the army, thus bringing together war, history, and territory. The sailor turns out to be a robber and an impostor, and the Indian might be a shaman who is capable of inviting a tornado to have Loyal “partially

scalped” (61) and leaving him with a mysterious book. These men may represent the contrast between two kinds of violence, social and natural. The question arises whether the invisible bear on the front can subvert Washington.

The “support” feature of the postcard is crucial to the novel. The materiality of the card supports the postmodernistic pastiche effect of scissors-and-paste cards on the pages. It is the contour of the card that gives the novel its spatial dimension. On the one hand, realness of the collaged cards foregrounds the traveling function of the post. On the other, while the texture or the thickness of the card is imperceptible on the pages, its visible perimeter separates the card section from the other parts of the text. It looks as if the card were photographed or illustrated, its heterogeneousness distinguishing itself from the surrounding text. This sense of demarcation leads to the notions of limit and boundary. The limited space necessitates deficiency of the message, or “indigence of the discourse,” while the question of boundary opens up the possibility of “crossing,” the idea not regarded enough in *The Post Card* but constituting a considerable part of the postmodern consciousness. Moreover, preservability of the cardboard-paper postcard evokes the consumerist economy, since many picture postcards are sold and resold.

4. Crossing

What the postcards in *Postcards* specifically say is what postmodernization is like at the minimum and personal level. This is represented first by the postmodern nature of the postcard. It is also portrayed as how people in the novel are engaged in various phases of the cards. Postcards in the novel are especially deployed to characterize postmodernity as migration and crossing. What I call crossing is an active, negotiatory, and even subversive phase of migration that deals with particularly postmodern differences. Traveling or migration involves crossing borders or boundaries in various ways, and crossing the border stages the problematic of traveling in which the border as a zone of negotiation means both prospect and delay. As human circulation increases in force and frequency in the postmodern world, the issue

of border-crossing is gaining in import by registering the critical scenes of difference.

The postcard embodies postmodernization in its different forms of crossing. Derrida’s “postcardization” foregrounds the last phase of the “classic” postal system that is differentiated by its undertaking “the transport of the ‘document,’ of its material support” (105), where the postcard materializes in its limited and exposed body the transport or the travel of words. If not a stamp, the postcard is an avatar of the movable trace, or writing. At the core of the development of the postal system has always been the speed of transportation due to importance and urgency of the message, but probably only with the illegible, insignificant, and trifling postcard, it is the sense of distance, the feeling of traveling far, that matters more. The card, in particular the scenic picture card advertising tourism and circulated for commercial purposes, epitomizes motion, traveling, and migration. It celebrates diversity of places and the distance between them, and often testifies, or provides an alibi for, the addresser being “there,” wherever “there” is.

Not only does the letter/card symbolize travel, but it also represents the people who migrate. The letter/card has long functioned as one of the most important communication tools for people migrating around the world and crossing borders. More directly, the materiality of the postcard with its rigid support emulates the physical bodies of migrating people. It is interesting to note that the postcard as a traveling medium could be compared to the vehicle for the flowing population. It is also worth examining how the commercial postcard is deeply engaged in the capitalistic economy and what cultural phase of the postmodern migration it illustrates.

Many of the randomly collected cards in *Postcards*, often failing to identify their authors or return addresses, display themselves just like anonymous cards at a souvenir shop, and it is not easy to perceive from these cards all the movements of the people or the changes of environment. The breakup of the Blood farm, however, is somehow traceable. Loyal’s journey brings out the whole issue of crossing in this novel in terms of his cards. The mechanism of their postal circulation confirms his constant move. His

crossing of state boundaries from Vermont to Minnesota, to Michigan, to Utah, to New Mexico, and back to Michigan is analogized with the motility of the postcard that cannot arrive and is always on the way. Roaming mostly wild areas and engaged with odd jobs, he keeps dreaming of his old farm. He gets almost killed by a cave-in or, though once having acquired a small farm, ruined by a tornado, and is never successful or stable, seemingly destined to be lonely and homeless. Out of the postal network over the country looms out the vast wasteland of the American continent around which he wanders. The story of his vagrancy over many hollow years is contrasted to the curt messages and simple date figures in the small, framed space of the card. The lines of demarcation between the space of the card and the space of narrative represent the boundaries between the imagined family and the continual migration of people, the individual struggle for life and the fate of declining small agricultural economy, and the postal (or literature) and the real (or history). People strive to cross the border and disappear in the chasm.

The other members of the Blood family driven out of the old farm are also forced to migrate, moving away from home or across the border in different ways. Released from prison, Dub drifts far down to Florida, and with the money he makes from swindles in the real estate business, discovering another way to deal with the land. Although he achieves considerable success with the help of his able and aggressive Cuban (immigrant) wife, he eventually gives up riotous and violent Miami to move on to Houston, Texas, to be, of all things, a travel agent. Mernelle marries and stays in Vermont, but her husband Ray, a timber buyer, often travels abroad and always returns with a toy bear,^[6] “from Sweden, even Puerto Rico and Brazil” (222), before he dies from cancer.

Left alone in one of the trailer homes at the park into which the former family field was transformed, Jewell Blood starts to live her second life, which she enjoys with a sense of freedom for the first time in her long life of subjugation to the family. She learns how to drive, a skill she has long wanted to master, and obtains a second-hand Volkswagen Beetle. A sales card from a dealer to invite her for a new car may indicate

that she is already involved in the market economy and the network of migration. But, before anything else, driving a car is a symbol of her personal border-crossing. “She longed to drive up Mount Washington, up the toll road,” where “at the summit you could see to the end of the world” (215), and she goes ahead to carry out the plan on one November day. However, hindered by cold weather, she gets lost deep in the mountain. When the Beetle is discovered wrecked, there is nobody in the car.

The notion of crossing the border, embarking a new life, is also evident in the case of Boston dermatologist Dr. Frank Witkin, a new resident of Loyal’s “home.” He purchases and moves into a part of the old Blood property to establish a hunting camp. A city dweller invading a rural village to accelerate its modernization embodies a kind of social and ecological border crossing. Witkin is so new to country life that he sends L.L. Bean a note inquiring about the function of his new boots in one of those typewritten cards that become increasingly prevalent in the latter part of the novel. Inspired by the photograph of Teddy Roosevelt “with the heads and skins of animals” (130) — do they include bears?— he dreams of a wilderness with inexhaustible wildlife to shoot. However, unlike those manly sportsmen in the past who only pursued gallant adventures in exclusively male company,^[7] Witkin imagines a weekend camp in which his family could be united. It turns out, however, that he finds his family another imagined community and the project another lonely and fruitless journey home. Estranged from his wife and children, bereaved by the loss of his beloved half-brother, Witkin cannot but pursue his lonely dream by himself. He never intends to assist the deterioration of the pastoral or destroy the environment, but his private move epitomizes one facet of the postmodernization of country life. The property he devised to his totally spoiled and corrupted son Kevin, has turned into nothing but a country camp full of noise and with a view of some abject trailer homes. Along with the noises inside the house, there are those from the airplanes in the sky and from the cars in the trailer park and on the road: “The traffic” (306).

The car is one thorny aspect of motility that is brought to light in this novel. The argument of

migration necessarily involves development of the means of transportation, and what predominates in the twentieth-century American scenes is the car. Automobile transportation supports the wandering of Loyal about the continent and the commuting of Frank Witkin from the city to the country. It is as a result of driving up the mountain that Jewell disappears. Her trailer itself is a grotesque version of automobile. Referring to the list of noises that annoys Kevin, the noises of assorted trucks, cars, motorcycles, and airplanes, Wes Berry argues that “a primary antagonist in *Postcards* is fossil fuel” (Berry 175).^[8] The idea that fossil fuel in America is connected with modernization is demonstrated by the wide-ranging power system and with the internal-combustion engine Berry quotes as poet Robert Hass’s observation that “America is a capital investment in transportation infrastructure” (176), which includes motorization.

Interestingly enough, the *card* resembles the *car* in many respects. This would be another way the postcard says what it wants to say. The popularity of the postcard is in tandem with the development of tourism and consumerism. Andrew S. Gross claims that “postcard and automobile technologies” are “at the dividing line between modernization” (Gross 78).^[9] Both are connected to travel as personal liberation as well as incorporated into the broader economic system of consumption. The automobile has served to bridge tourism and consumerism, traveling as a moving advertisement. Cars were “among the first products to display their make on the *outside*” (Gross 80). With each body open and exposed, a car is an advertisement for itself, while a postcard travels while simultaneously displaying enticing scenery and manifesting the unsettled existence of its sender. Distance means more to the postcard than speed in the postal system, while it is maneuverability more than speed that characterizes traveling by car. The card that opens chapter 53 is emblematically titled “A Postcard under the Windshield Wiper,” advertising a developed community in South Dakota (Proulx 292).

It is evident that postcardization itself is a kind of crossing. The very last card of the book is one from Dub as “Blood’s Travel Productions” to Kevin Witkin inviting him to Houston. With ironic reversal of the

correspondents’ positions, the card is offering a space for negotiation of different cultures and the prospect of further migration. Ironically enough, it does not seek the postal reply, but commands, “‘CALL US RIGHT NOW!’” (305)

Today the postal principle goes beyond talking on the telephone to the function of texting on one’s cell. The postcard not only indicates the decline of the materially supported transportation of documents, but it also prognosticates the electronic and digital age of communication. Another element of the traffic noises torturing Kevin that exemplifies the demise of the slow life is the noise of airplane. But transportation in America does not culminate in the airplane, nor the postal transportation in airmail. It is not that the postcard “destines the letter to its ruin” (Derrida 249), but, in the process of postmodern technological development of communication, the postcard witnesses rather the future than the end of the postal principle. It is not surprising that the postcard, a minimized form of postal communication with its openness and curtness, anticipates e-mail and other digital communications tools. Unlike the telephone with its private intimacy, the insubstantial digital media strangely resembles the rigidly supported postcard in its publicity. The limited space of the card even shares a brief and enigmatic message with the rectangular face of a cellphone: open but unintelligible.

What the postcards in *Postcards* want to say is how postcardization reflects postmodernization at the minimum and personal level. They want to say how the bear card shows the bare facts about the economical transformation. They want to say how people migrate and cross the border as cards do. They also want to say how postcardization has potential for deconstructing itself.

Notes

[1] “Letters, Diaspora, and Home in *The Color Purple*.” *Seeking the Self-Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. 276-290. “The Letter and Crossing: Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*.” *Chiba University Bulletin of the Humanities* 40 (2011) 37-72. “The Mixquiahuala

Letters and the Meaning of Epistolarity.” *Chiba University Bulletin of the Humanities* 41 (2012) 1-34.

[2] The constitution of the family might remind us of another odyssey of a farm family in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. While dead Addie unites the family in Faulkner’s novel, in Proulx’s, the vanished and ever-wandering son Loyal singularly tethers the disintegrating family. It is the postcard messages that substitute the multiple stream-of-consciousness voices.

[3] The US postcard rate was 1 cent in 1944, and it was gradually raised to 9 cents before nondenominational A, B, C stamps began to be used in May 1978. The value of the stamps in the novel is, therefore, mostly anachronistic.

[4] Later Loyal even hears of the market of the gallbladders of black bears in “Japan and Korea and China” (245).

[5] Derrida denominates the picture side of the postcard “dos (back)” in *The Post Card*, but this seems to be an idiosyncratic use. In this essay, “back” is the side on which the address is written.

[6] Since Ray’s timber business indicates the exhaustion of forest resource, the death of wildlife, Mernelle’s bear collection is as ironic as the photographed bear on Loyal’s cards.

[7] Witkin is apparently a petty and ironic double of English hunters in the West at the end of the nineteenth century, some of whom ravaged the Wyoming wilderness, as described in Proulx’s *Bird Cloud*, a tale of the building of her own house.

[8] Loyal is at one time a fossil hunter.

[9] Gross also mentions an incident at the turn of the century in which “local photographers and printers were selling images of local scenes,” (82) which explains the birth of that bear card. The argument that the picture postcard practically began in 1893 with the private- and government-supported Chicago Exposition (Miller 3, cited by Gross 82) reminds us how the postcard is entangled with the state.

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