POSTCARDS

ephemeral histories of modernity
You give us those nice bright colors,
You give us the greens of summer,
Makes you think all the world's a sunny day.
—PAUL SIMON, "Kodachrome"

In the mid-1950s, the protocols of the Cold War were still being worked through. During the Formosa crisis in 1955, factions within the Eisenhower administration argued for deploying nuclear warheads against an Asian nation for the second time in a decade.¹ The split between the Chinese Communists and the Chinese Nationalists had escalated into military attacks and counterattacks, and the United States was alarmed at the spiraling intensity of the conflict. President Eisenhower feared that if Formosa (now Taiwan) fell, its loss would "seriously jeopardize the anti-Communist barrier... in the Western Pacific."² The anxiety of the Eisenhower administration over the Formosa crisis came close to leading the United States into a war against mainland China. In a bellicose speech delivered on March 20, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced that if war were necessary, the United States would deploy nuclear armaments, "new and powerful weapons of precision, which can utterly destroy military targets without endangering civilian centers."³ Dulles was not afraid to engage in nuclear brinkmanship. He was the "original misguided missile," in the opinion of Democratic Senator Henry Jackson, "traveling fast, making lots of noise, and never hitting the target."⁴ Dulles's disclaimer about Chinese civilian populations being unharmed by nuclear weapons of mass destruction, as they are now routinely called, was never tested. In the end, Eisenhower resorted to diplomacy instead of bombs, but not before the world was forced to fix its eyes on the Doomsday Clock. Even though China possessed no nuclear weapons of its own with which it could have retaliated against the United States—it did not conduct its first atomic test until 1964—the Soviet Union by 1955 had assembled an arsenal of two hundred nuclear warheads. Had the United States detonated an atomic bomb over the outskirts of Beijing, the attack would have been read in the Soviet Union as a radioactive postcard to Moscow. Dulles, it seems, was not averse to the specter of Armageddon.

Fifty years later, as the United States began to develop a new generation of nuclear weapons and to withdraw from nuclear arms treaties it negotiated during the Cold War, the period of the Formosa crisis is worth reflecting upon. The protocols worked out during the Cold War by the Eastern and Western blocs to contain the possibility of nuclear annihilation no longer pertain. A new nuclear age has
arrived, characterized by the proliferation of nuclear capabilities, a reconfigured nuclear arms race, and only slightly rejigged forms of official insanity.

Even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq invasion of March 2003, that intense span of superpatriotism in the United States, the Bush administration had begun revising the American policy on nuclear weapons. Three months after the suicide bombings of the World Trade Center towers, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the landmark agreement it signed with the Soviet Union in 1972 to formalize the principle of "Mutual Assured Destruction" (MAD) as a means of inhibiting nuclear war. At the same time, it campaigned to erase ethical distinctions between nuclear and conventional weapons, never secure at the best of times, advocating the use of nuclear weapons in both preventive and preemptive attacks. The Nuclear Posture Review leaked in 2002 called for the development of low-yield nuclear weapons, so-called mini-nukes, such as the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, to burrow deep into the ground before detonating, for use in war against rogue states such as Iran, North Korea, Syria, and the now-rehabilitated Libya. Nineteen billion dollars was assigned to the Department of Energy to develop the weapons. The threat of radioactive postcards had been revived.

At the time of the Formosa crisis, the protocols for representing the Cold War visually were also being worked through. Nuclear blast postcards and photographs made during the first two decades of the Cold War, especially blasts reproduced on American color postcards published in the 1950s, form the central interest of this essay. The postcards surfaced from oblivion when I was assembling an archive on shifting American responses to nuclearization. Although I am wary of these postcards and photographs, unsure of their excesses and of their logic, I am convinced they have something to say about photography and post-Cold War developments, as well as about photography and Cold War ideologies and anxieties at the time of their making. There is a substantial literature on atomic imagery and its dissemination, but nothing on the postcard's supporting role in underwriting a public image of the bomb. The lacuna has consequences for how the protocols of nuclear representation should be understood. The atomic postcard is a product of tourism—in this case of memories constructed in miniature—and its modes of address and reception differ from those of mass-circulation magazines or photographs exhibited in art galleries. Categories of atomic photography may overlap, but the fit from one category to the next is not precise.

In this essay, I hope to bring the atomic postcard within the orbit of nuclear visibility, and at the same time to discuss similarities and differences between it and some other forms of atomic representation. Are there historical meanings that can be attributed to atomic postcards, for example, but that cannot be attributed to other forms of nuclear imagery? To what degree was the imagery of atomic postcards controlled and edited by American authorities for public circulation? Did the deployment of color, notably the intense chromatic properties of Kodachrome, alter how the images were read at the time of their initial distribution? What themes were inscribed in the handwritten messages on the backs of the cards carried from sender to receiver? In short, what were the conditions under which atomic postcards were produced and received? My discursive answers to these questions draw on a range of visual and textual material from the 1940s to the 1960s, in particular a 1955 photograph taken not far from the Nevada Test Site by Robert Frank. I will conclude with an analysis of three color postcards dating from the early to mid-1950s.

The Nuclear Landscape

While President Eisenhower was deciding whether or not to bomb China, the uprooted Swiss photographer Robert Frank was producing a black-and-white photograph of a souvenir postcard rack, set on a worn plywood shelf outside a store near the Hoover Dam in Nevada (fig. 13.1). The photograph shows nine sets of color postcards on a triangular revolving rack, of which the fronts of only three are visible. The cards are selling for ten cents apiece, the cost of top-of-the-line color cards at the time. In ranked descending order, the three cards offer a generic view of the Grand Canyon, the Hoover Dam itself—picted with the American flag at the dead center of the image—and an atomic explosion mushrooming over ground zero to the west of the canyon and the dam (fig. 13.2). On the left side of Frank's photograph, fragments of words and numbers struggle to announce the cost of a "Pictorial Tour of the Dam" for thirty-five cents, and in the background an automobile, no less a symbol of American industrial progress than the Hoover Dam, is parked at an angle on the tarmac. The automobile's right front light and license plate are cut off by the middle postcard, making it seem one-eyed—not unlike the camera recording it—and stateless—again, not unlike the camera.

Frank executed the photograph in 1955 while driving across the United States on a Guggenheim Foundation grant, an excursion that resulted in his 1958 book The Americans. He photographed

other postcard stands during his journey, but was so drawn to the Hoover Dam rack that he shot five negatives of it from slightly different viewpoints. He did not print any of the five for inclusion in the book, though he had originally considered them. He edited them out, possibly because he considered their connotations too emphatic, and therefore inconsistent with what he wished to convey in the volume. I am not sure that he was correct in that assessment. *The Americans* is underwritten by the signs and signage of everyday life, not unlike the work of Walker Evans before him and William Eggleston after, and the photographs are redolent with both. They are what the photographer and critic Nathan Lyons has described as "social landscapes," which is to say, photographs that take a self-consciously ironic and critical approach to documentary material. They even include the aforementioned flag, the bunting of American patriotism, which is a recurrent motif in *The Americans*.

Since it was first published in 1972, Frank's *Hoover Dam, Nevada* and its variations have attracted substantial commentary. This may be in part because the photographs are photographs of other photographs, sequenced in a way that invites narrative interpretation. It is possible that Frank altered the sequence, and hence the narrative, himself. Although the postcard sequence looks random, the photographer may have reshuffled the deck, changing its order by sleight of hand. What looks like a chance arrangement may be carefully deliberated. But even if the arrangement were carefully deliberated, it remains difficult to find a single, stable narrative in the photographs. Instead, the sequencing tells many narratives; the photographs are plural representations. The published stories and readings that have been given to the images attest to their unfixity, and extend from the historical to the sublime to the apocalyptic.

According to several readings, the photographs are an encapsulation of the changing American West in the 1950s. They represent the impact of postwar modernity on the contemporary uses of the landscape, in which the sequential organization of the cards puts forward a commodified touristic panorama, a source of energy for human consumption, and "the figurehead of the exuberant new Atomic Age." Another reading sees them as representations that combine the imagery of nature worship, patriotism, and mushroom-cloud symbolism to produce the "atomic sublime." In this reading, the manufactured destructive force of the bomb and the material histories that accompany it are subsumed beneath the colors and shapes of the mushroom cloud. Yet another understands them as a metaphor for the United States—its hopes, realities, nightmares—that offers viewers a choice between unadulterated nature, industrial advancement, and nuclear catastrophe. And a further reading views them as an elliptical narrative of potential catastrophe, turned comically upside down.

The comedy identified in Frank's photograph strikes me as leaning in the right direction. It seems to me that by having the story of nuclear annihilation played out by postcards on a stage made of plywood, a roadside stand, Frank's images situate themselves as prime expressions of postwar absurdity. Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon would not be out of place waiting and watching at this American roadside stand. What we see is a flimsily mounted nuclear drama presented for the pleasure of tourists who may not come, and if they do come, may not appreciate the absurdity of what has been staged for them. The small built-in archive of postcards in the photographs was, of course, assembled in the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a tragedy only ten years past, while down the road at the Nevada proving grounds nuclear weapons many times more powerful than those detonated in Japan were being tested. Here in the American Southwest, as Marx commented about the Second Empire, history was repeating itself as farce.

The photograph derives part of its complexity from the juxtaposition of postcard imagery and residual war imagery. The tension is between the message of "wish-you-were-here" and the message of "glad-you-are-not-here." In the sense that a postcard connects a receiver-subject to an object-sender, Jacques Derrida observes in his book *The Post Card*, it is a materialized form of a Lacanian screen. The image on the front of a card comes in the form of a proposition, according to Derrida, deciphering the receiver in advance of its arrival. The preexisting group of symbols of nature, engineering, and atomic force that constitutes the "screen" projected onto viewers in Frank's photograph, by this reading, deciphers viewers before they encounter it. Above all, they are constructed by the mushroom cloud. (It is worth remembering that mushrooms can be either nutritious or poisonous, and the spores they throw, like the radioactive isotopes emitted by atomic explosions, are invisible.)

By shooting with monochromatic film, Frank converts the compulsively overheated Kodachrome palette of the postcards into the tonal properties of a black-and-white photograph. Or, to put it in terms of photographic aesthetics, he converts the high-chroma imagery of the American consumerist vernacular into the monochrome contrasts and shadings demanded by art photography in his era.
Whatever else it was in the 1950s, art photography was not rainbow-colored, and Frank had no desire to contravene the dominant aesthetic of black and white. Even Walker Evans, who sometimes deployed color in his photographic work for *Fortune* magazine after the war, decried the “screaming hues” that in his opinion debased most color photographs. They were, he said, a “bebop of electric blues, furious reds, and poison greens.” In the years leading up to the war, color had become coded as the photographic medium particular to Madison Avenue and popular magazines. It was associated with a commercialized vision of modernity, and such a vision was anathema to serious photography.

Color television, after it was introduced in 1954, was also associated with a commercialism mistrusted by serious photographers. The corporations involved in developing the medium, which included General Electric and Westinghouse, were the same corporations receiving defense contracts to develop the American nuclear program. As Joyce Nelson points out, “the twinned ideological interests” of the corporations intersected where television sets and warheads met. Both devices emitted massive levels of ionizing radiation, levels denied both by the corporations and the government. Some television sets manufactured by General Electric gave off one hundred thousand times the recommended standard. Corporations also commissioned made-for-television films on the benefits of nuclear power, which they then provided free of charge to domestic television stations. In the decade or so after President Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” speech in 1953, which promoted “the sunny side of the atom,” nuclear postcards and films such as *The Atom Comes to Town* (1957) and *The Atom and Eve* (1965) were common fare (fig. 13.3). The latter film promoted nuclear-generated electricity for the home by following a housewife through the now-made-easy tasks of her electrified day, all of it presented in living color.

### Atomic Visibilities

“Black and white is the vision of hope and despair,” Robert Frank wrote. “This is what I want in my photographs.” In a peculiar way, *Hoover Dam, Nevada* draws color and monochrome photography together, just as it draws popular and art photography together. The image critically appropriates three postwar color postcards, commonly known in the trade as chromes, as signifiers of the present. Both the postcards and Frank’s photograph, I would suggest, are also signifiers of the current nuclear era.

Writing shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Marshall McLuhan observed in *Understanding Media* that “if the cold war in 1964 is being fought by informational technology, that is because all wars have been fought by the latest technology available.” Color photography is as much a medium of informational technology as monochrome photography, and it is important to recognize that both participated in the ideological conflicts of the time. Photography symptomatically engages the technological with the social. You would be hard-pressed, however, to discern any acknowledgment of such a symptomatic engagement in reviews of a 2003 book of photographs devoted to nuclear test explosions. This is partly because the book presents itself as a coffee-table volume, notwithstanding the useful information it contains. Entitled *100 Suns* and written by the artist Michael Light, the book reproduces one hundred photographs of atomic test detonations, many in double-page spreads, conducted from 1945 to 1962 on the atolls of the South Pacific and in the deserts of New Mexico and Nevada. Of the 216 atmospheric tests conducted by the United States, *100 Suns* documents 69. The photographs have been drawn from the U.S. National Archives and the archives of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and include formerly classified material taken by a secret unit of film directors, cameramen, and still photographers based at Lookout Mountain Air Force Station in Hollywood. The startling revelation that Hollywood was “at work in the fields of the Bomb,” to borrow Robert Del Tredici’s evocative phrase, demonstrates that from the outset the American entertainment machine was training its cameras not only on fictive but also on actual weapons of mass destruction. Working with the U.S. Army and the Atomic Energy Commission, Hollywood helped to mediate how atomic tests were received visually.

As one might expect, Hollywood performed its task with an emphasis on cinematic production values and with a flair for the melodramatic. The photographs, or at least those edited down for inclusion in the book, frame the nuclear age in terms of grand spectacle. A notice on the book in the *New Yorker* follows the lead suggested to it by *100 Suns*. It gives a whole page to one of the most aesthetically compelling photographs, “Climax, 61 Kilotons, Nevada, 1953,” but only a few sentences to the book itself (fig. 13.4). The illustrated photograph represents the blast shortly after detonation, showing the white cloud of the mushroom cap about to meet its orange-gray stem. The rising smoke trails on the left are from rockets fired for the purpose of making photographic measurements of shock waves. The magazine notice comments that “the apocalyptic visual narrative in ‘100 Suns’ escalates...to the over-the-top splendor of Wagnerian nuclear sunsets on the Enewetak and Bikini atolls.”

The New Yorker's linking of visual apocalypse to Wagnerian Sturm und Drang is part of a narrowly circumscribed tradition of atomic visibility. The photographic spectacle is the main story, the text a sidebar. If it were not for the elevated prose style of the New Yorker article, it could be mistaken for a Life magazine article on the same subject from September 12, 1949, entitled "Biggest Atomic Explosions," in which blast photographs, including a full-page color spread, are accompanied by a brief notice on the measurable force of the latest A-bombs. Frank's Hoover Dam, Nevada breaks with that tradition, as does the work of a small number of other photographers and photo-based artists such as Peter Goin, Emmet Gowin, Richard Misrach, and the members of the Atomic Photographers Guild. The same can be said for Harold E. Edgerton's radiographic photographs of nuclear explosions, many of which have been published and exhibited only recently. But the conventions of how atomic weapons are represented are deeply entrenched. As Scott Kirsch demonstrates in his article "Watching the Bombs Go Off," the "flash and bang" of atomic photographs separates the spectacle from the socially produced environment in which it occurs. It takes "place out of the landscape" (Kirsch's emphasis).

The iconography of atomic explosions began with the first detonation, at the Trinity test site in Alamogordo on July 16, 1946. Approximately one hundred thousand photographic exposures were taken of the explosion, and all but a few of those that survived were in black and white. Those in color blistered and solarized from the heat and light. The only color images to escape immolation were made by Jack Aeby, a technician in a Los Alamos research group charged with setting up radiation detectors near the detonation tower, who subsequently gave a symbolic copy of his most successful print to Enrico Fermi, the Italian-born physicist responsible for obtaining the first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction in Chicago in 1942. Aeby's photograph was released to the media shortly afterwards. It was published as the front cover of the New York Sunday Mirror tabloid, with the following caption: "Atomic Bomb Burst That Changed the World: First Color Photo!" (fig. 13.5). At least the tabloid recognized that something historic had occurred, which was not always the case at the time. A sizable contingent of commentators preferred the kind of rhetoric favored by J. Robert Oppenheimer and William L. Laurence.

After witnessing the explosion, Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan laboratory in Los Alamos and a practiced prose stylist, quoted from the Bhagavad Gita: "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst forth at once in the sky, that would be like the splendor of the Mighty One." And Laurence, the New York Times science reporter who flew on the Nagasaki mission and became known as "Atomic Bill" for his devotion to the nuclear beat, said it was "like being present at the moment of creation when God said, 'Let there be light.'" As I. F. Stone has observed, such references to God were an indication that "Faith in an overwhelming force [was] being made into [the United States'] real national religion." Nuclear tests are almost always presented and received as spectacles of transcendent nature—sometimes divine, sometimes malign, sometimes benign—rather than as planned events that include scientific evaluations of manufactured weapons produced by human engineering. The desire for transcendence is, it seems to me, consistent with the American pursuit of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century, when the sublime gave visual form to the political agenda of westward expansion while effacing acts of dispossession. The so-called atomic sublime represented in blast photographs is
an extension of Manifest Destiny carried into the politics of the Cold War, into the agenda for capitalist expansion under the protection of the Pax Americana, though it is rarely stated in such blunt terms. Relatively few images circulate of the extensive preparations leading up to a detonation of the atom bomb on the ground once the clouds have dispersed. Like photographs of flag-draped coffins of American soldiers returning from Iraq, they have been edited out of atomic visibility by government censors.

The meta-symbol of the nuclear spectacle is the “mushroom cloud.” It is the logo of logos in the nuclear age. The shape of the cloud, which is made up of vapor, steam, soot, smoke, and at the crest ice crystals, was sometimes referred to at the beginning as a “cauliflower cloud,” especially in relation to underwater tests, as well as a mushroom cloud. The cauliflower metaphor did not stick. How the photographic iconography of the mushroom cloud became “firmly embedded in the consciousness (or, more accurately unconscious) of an age” has been examined by Peter B. Hales. As the mushroom cloud became iconic, Hales argues, photographers began timing their exposures “to produce the most spectacularly moody and impressive skies.” While Hales’s general argument holds up, he is mistaken about the procedures of the photographers. Tens of thousands of photographic exposures were taken of each test explosion as a means of verifying the scientific stages of the blast, and only a tiny fraction of them were of grandiose skies. It was the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and not the photographers that decided mushroom-cloud images would be released to the national media as the recurrent symbol of the nuclear program.

Nuclear testing and the development of increasingly sophisticated camera and film equipment to document what otherwise could not be recorded went hand in hand. Operation Crossroads in 1946, the first Bikini Atoll tests and a staged media event with the world press in attendance, was mounted to dispel reports about the dangers of radiation. Seven hundred and fifty cameras were deployed. Among them were the world’s largest still camera, with a forty-eight-inch focal-length telephoto lens, and an ultra-high-speed motion camera capable of shooting ten thousand frames per second. “The multiplicity of cameras was necessary to insure full records of results,” the Office of the Historian, Joint Task Force One stated, “particularly damage results.” A sizable number of these photographs were released for public consumption; there was even an “official pictorial record,” containing several hundred before-and-after images, in the form of a widely circulated book. The two color photographs reproduced in the book, one as the dust jacket and the other as the frontispiece, are of mushroom clouds. It was the last time the Atomic Energy Commission was so free with its photographs. In the future, the few—the very few—photographs selected for general release tended to be of “moody and impressive skies.” Such images helped to secure the spectacle as iconic—and safe.

The Second Nuclear Age

The past does not reorder itself into words, Walter Benjamin once remarked, but breaks down into images that flash up at moments of danger. Since the turn of the millennium, images of nuclear explosions that had for a time receded into an invalid region have been flashing up in the global mind. Hence the publication of 100 Suns and the New Yorker’s notice about the book, and perhaps the desire to aestheticize the danger represented by the images in the volume. The acceleration of a new nuclear arms race, along with the American plan to conventionalize nuclear weapons, has been designated “the second nuclear age” by Bill Keller, in a New York Times Magazine article of the same name. The nuclear genie has escaped the bottle for a second time, and it is unclear how and when it will be recorked. John Bolton, American undersecretary of state for arms control and international security in the first Bush administration, was the official initially charged with driving the agenda for conventionalizing atomic weapons. His appointment was endorsed by Senator Jesse Helms, who stated at the time of his nomination in 2001 that “John Bolton is the kind of man with whom I would want to stand at Armageddon... for the final battle between good and evil.” The American penchant for viewing nuclear holocaust as an egress to spiritual redemption, in which the sheep will be sorted from the goats and sinners consumed by fire, was alive and well in Washington, D.C.

Helms’s invocation of Armageddon did not raise many eyebrows within the Bush administration. Condoleezza Rice, President Bush’s national security advisor at the time, supported Bolton’s policy initiatives and hard-line stance on North Korea and other rogue states by commenting, “We don’t want to wait for the mushroom cloud.” Even though photographs of American atmospheric tests producing the mushroom cloud all date from before 1963 and the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty on October 10, no one misunderstood the drift of Rice’s comment. Nor did they misunderstand the visual iconography it evoked, an iconography that remains frozen, strangely contained
by Cold War conditioning. This is not to say that the attitudes of the American public to nuclear weapons have been unchanging. On the contrary, they have been highly unstable over the past sixty years, swinging wildly between the extremes of loving the bomb as a guardian shield and of fearing it as an apocalyptic avenger. What has not altered is nuclear iconography.

"Photography is a system of visual editing," John Szarkowski has observed. Mass-media photographic representations of nuclear detonations have entailed visual editing with a vengeance. Less vengeful editing is possible, of course, as indicated by the self-reflexive work of the photographer William Eggleston, about whom Szarkowski was writing when he made his remark. Eggleston's Los Alamos series of photographs, produced between 1964 and 1974, calls up radioactive thoughts without referring to the sublime or the transcendental or even the Los Alamos National Laboratory and its part in the production of atomic weapons. In one of the photographs, now collected in a book of the same name as the series, there is a painted sign warning passing motorists of a school zone. The sign is part red text, part black-and-white startled child, and it is placed in shadows cast by trees falling across an empty sidewalk. It gives one pause: the sign blocks the beholder's view down the street, but to what purpose? Where, one might ask, have all the children gone? In another, stains disfigure the freshly tarmacked surface of a parking lot, streaking from beneath a car. They may be from an overflowing, leaky radiator, or maybe not; perhaps the staining fluid is more toxic. The frontispiece is an untitled photograph of rising cumulus clouds set against a deep blue sky, an innocent skyscape, so it appears, except that the shape of the clouds conjures up the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Postcards at the Edge of Danger

The regulation of photographic meaning is controlled by framing devices. Sometimes such devices are deployed with historical rigor, more often they are not. By pairing framing devices with "historical rigor," I mean to emphasize the photographer's (or editor's or publisher's) critical engagement with the varied practices of the medium, not excluding the selection of subject matter, such as nuclear landscapes. Processes of enframement encompass not only the selection and visual editing of individual images, but also the selection and arrangement of groups of photographs that are presented in books, such as The Americans by Frank or Los Alamos by Eggleston, or in exhibition spaces, such as those of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, or in popular magazines, such as Life. Ways of seeing the bomb shape ways of knowing it.

Variations on the mushroom-cloud form reproduced on postcards during the 1950s helped Americans to know the bomb as a spectacle rather than as an agent of destruction (fig. 13.6). The postcards on the metal rack photographed by Robert Frank were manufactured in Berkeley, California, by Mike Roberts Color Production, using a Kodachrome process, and were distributed by the Desert Supply Company, Las Vegas. The information is printed on the reverse side of the atomic card, which is no longer in production but may be purchased with persistence on eBay, under the category "Militaria." The postcards come in two sizes, regular and jumbo. The bottom card on the rack is the jumbo card "Atomic Explosion: Frenchman's Flat, or Yucca Flats, Nevada," and customers of the time who wanted to reorder it were supplied with the stock number J563 printed on the reverse side, in which the "J" stands for "jumbo." A small textual slice on the back of one of the cards is just legible in Frank's photograph. Squeezed between the concrete buttress of the Hoover Dam in the middle card and the nuclear fireball in the bottom card are the words "Natural Color Card from Kodak." The legend on the postcard reads: "One of the many atomic detonations that have been released in the large Atomic weapons testing area of Southern Nevada."

Nowhere on the postcard is there any information about which atomic test is represented or which official body released the image for public use. This heightens the image's detachment from reality, its removal from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, its distance from the American program of building a larger and deadlier arsenal of nuclear weapons than that possessed by the Soviet Union. The image was almost certainly sold to Mike Roberts Color Production by the U.S. Army Photographic Signal Corps under the aegis of the Atomic Energy Commission, but even now the particular test represented remains unidentified. The authorities refused even to say whether the explosion was at Frenchman Flat or Yucca Flats, Nevada. The emphasis is on spectacle at the expense of information and discussion. This was part of the Atomic Energy Commission's stated strategy in 1950 "to make the atom routine in the continental United States and make the public at home with atomic blasts and radiation hazards."
York, depositing a white radioactive blanket on its film-manufacturing plant. Photographic stock was ruined. The company traced the fallout to Operation Ranger, more than eighteen hundred miles away to the southwest. Eastman Kodak considered suing the government, but instead struck a deal that provided it with privileged information about future tests. There are no postcards of the plant at the time of contamination or of the individuals working at the plant during the snowfall. And there are no officially approved postcards of the tests themselves.

Atomic blast postcards were produced in sizable quantities. What can be said about the hopes and desires they fulfilled for their object-senders and receiver-subjects? Here is a beginning: the atomic jumbo postcard was suitable for framing, or so a handwritten message on the back of one of the cards indicates. The message reads:

Dearest Freda,

Knowing you like I do, I know that you will have this picture framed. That is why I am sending it to you. I have said most of what I wanted to say in a letter. Suffice it to say that we miss you and the rest of the family. God bless and keep you all.

Love & kisses

Fiord & family

This note to Dearest Freda from Fiord & family represents a codified act of intimacy, the meaning of which is not easily deciphered. A postcard mailed to family and friends requires a handwritten message to be complete, for without a supplemental written narrative it is a homeless object rather than an item of memory and desire capable of marking an experience. But what does the message on this card convey? That the picture should be framed as a source of pleasure, or that it should be framed as a source of caution? Even though it may have been the former, there is no way of ascertaining that, for the letter referred to in the postcard message could have instructed otherwise. Another message, on the back of a second eBay card of the same subject, refers obliquely to the community of soldiers, workers, scientists, and photographers employed in the vicinity of ground zero: “Where this was set off is where Elmo use [sic] to work when they were here in Las Vegas.” In atomic photography we rarely see Elmo, unless he is a mannequin or a soldier with his back turned to the explosion or the camera. Images are not released of generals pressing the red button to set off the bomb—a fantasy device that retains its currency in the popular imagination because there are no other images to contradict it—or of scientists and workers designing and manufacturing the device. Like the bomb’s potential victims and the radiation produced by it, they too are invisible.

It is characteristic of the two messages that they are written in the approved language of their medium, the postcard. Messages on the backs of cards are almost invariably positive, like the photographic images on the front of them, not excluding those picturing nuclear detonations. Rectos and versos, fronts and backs, tend to reinforce one another’s reassuring tone. Were Elmo sick with “A-bomb disease” and seeking compensation for maladies caused by nuclear testing in Nevada, as some soldiers and civilians were doing at the time, it is unlikely the message would have mentioned it. Even postcards mailed at the edge of danger rarely stray from a lingua franca of mandated cheerfulness. As Susan Stewart has observed, souvenirs and postcards speak in the nostalgic language of longing. They provide a miniaturized, hold-in-the-hand colored spectacle that domesticates what is pictured, even if the pictured is implicated in traumatic historical events. If the authority of the state is identified with vastness, the bourgeois subject is associated with miniaturization. Here pleasure displaces anxiety. Photographs of nuclear explosions released by the Atomic Energy Commission were intended to make “you think all the world’s a sunny day,” in
the melancholy phrasing of Paul Simon's song "Kodachrome." If the public wished to frame them for display, then the agency's program of "making the atom routine" was succeeding.

One of the most widely circulated mushroom-cloud postcards from the 1950s was "Atomic Bomb Explosion, Mushroom Cloud, Yucca Flats, Nevada," published by H. S. Crocker Co., Inc., San Francisco, one of the largest printing companies in California at the time. The back of the card states where the test took place and also that the color photograph was supplied to the company by the U.S. Army. As with the previous card, however, there is no information on which test is represented. (By chance, I have been able to narrow the test down to one that occurred in 1951 or 1952, and have learned that the photograph was taken by the Signal Corps from Camp Mercury.) A handwritten message on the back of this chrome, mailed by Betty to her sister, Miss Agnes Julian of Kansas City, on August 16, 1954, says, "Dear Sis, Having a wonderful time with Bud and Emma—really swell to be here." The sentiments of the message and the picture would seem to run together. The trademark Mirro-Krome reproduction of a spectacularized atomic explosion matches Betty's assurances to her sister that she and Bud and Emma are having a swell time. Just in case senders and recipients of the card might misunderstand the message of the image, the publishers produced a version of it with greetings emblazoned in red letters across the top of the image: "Greetings from Los Alamos, New Mexico" (fig. 13.7).

This is not an image of the atomic sublime. Like Robert Frank's photograph, it is a representation of the ludicrously improbable, of the farcical inversion of tragedy, though in this case the farce and the tragedy are unintended. The greetings might just as well say, "Greetings from Formosa" or "Greetings from Hiroshima." Absurdity is rarely absent from popular images of nuclear explosions, as yet another atomic chrome demonstrates. Las Vegas, a new type of urban form constructed in the name of postwar commerce and tourism, as the authors of Learning from Las Vegas point out, is no more than sixty-five miles south of Yucca Flats, the principal atomic test site. The spectacle of "watching the bombs go off" was one of the attractions Las Vegas offered tourists from 1951, when above-ground testing resumed in the United States, until 1962, when it stopped. A 1957 travel guide informed its readers that "the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada test program...extend[s] through the summer tourist season, [and] the AEC has released a partial schedule, so that tourists interested in seeing a nuclear explosion can adjust their itineraries accordingly." Sights and itineraries attract not only tourists, but also markers of what has
been seen. Benny Binion's Horseshoe Club, a casino-saloon-restaurant in "downtown Las Vegas" known for the gimcrackery of its marketing schemes, commissioned a postcard in the early 1950s depicting an atomic blast in five serial stages, photographed from the top of Mount Charleston not far from the city. It was a courtesy card, manufactured in Boston using the "ShiniColor" process—more shiny than colorful, which is perhaps why the process failed commercially—given away free to customers (fig. 13.8).

At Benny Binion's, the spectacle of recurring nuclear detonations took its place at the same table as eating, drinking, and gambling. If the conditions of modernity have brought about a fragmentation of the human sensorium, in which the senses have become increasingly isolated from another, Benny Binion's must count as a prime instance of the phenomenon at work. Accompanying such fragmentation has been the compartmentalization of information amassed in technocratic societies. The secrecy and ultimate success of the Manhattan Project depended upon it. The "self-alienation" of mass audiences under these conditions, Walter Benjamin observed in 1936, with an eye on the rise of fascism and the likelihood of war, "has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order." The mix of pleasures offered at Benny Binion's does nothing to contradict Benjamin's observation.

In an article entitled "Nagasaki Was the Climax of the New Mexico Test," "Atomic Bill" Laurence drew on the properties of color to describe his reaction to the explosions. "Bluish-green light" illuminated a sky in which there were "white smoke rings" and a pillar of purple fire. "As the first mushroom cloud floated off into the blue," he continued, "it changed its shape into a flowerlike form, its giant petal curving downward, creamy-white outside, rose-colored inside." The chrome postcards I have been discussing are the pictorial equivalent of Laurence's purple prose. They facilitate disavowal, substituting bathos for whatever else might be said or pictured. They are visually excessive and conceptually impoverished. They smooth the way for public misinformation, such as that issued by John Foster Dulles in 1955, to the effect that atomic bombs directed at "military targets" pose no threat to "civilian centers." They offer up an unchanging spectacle of the bomb as nature, caught in a pacifying web of visual containment where time and history are collapsed. In the face of recent nuclear developments, these postcards from the past are flashing red with danger.
Chapter 12: Nelson

See also "Material Lyrics: The Vexed History of the Wartime Poem Card," American Literary History 16, no. 2 (2004): 263–89, which contains some overlap with this essay.

5. Weinberg, World at Arms, 673.
10. James R. Bender, Postcards of Hitler's Germany (San José: James R. Bender, 1995), 1147.
12. Ibid., 307.

Chapter 13: O'Brien

The initial version of this chapter was delivered as a paper at the Editing (Out) the Image symposium, University of Toronto, on November 7, 2003. Subsequent versions have been presented at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; the University of Washington, Seattle; Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver; and the University of California, Berkeley. While undertaking research for the essay, I benefited from discussions with Claudia Beck, Iain Boal, Richard Cavell, Mark Cheetham, Elizabeth Legge, Carol Payne, and Jeremy Boros. Jeremy Boros also located many of the images. For some years, I have taught courses on postwar photography at the University of British Columbia, and I am indebted to students for contributions to my ideas, especially Juan A. Gaitán, Angela Johnston, Peter Mintchev, and Kate Steinmann.

1. The United States also considered using nuclear weapons in Korea in 1950. When President Harold Truman was asked by Merriman Smith of the United Press whether the atomic bomb was under consideration, he replied: "Always has been. It is one of our weapons." Quoted in Paul Boyer, Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 35.
5. The Bush administration's preparedness to use nuclear weapons in war is consistent with the policies, stated or unstated, of all post-1945 administrations. In 1954, Vice President Richard Nixon summarized the policy: "Rather than let the Communists nibble us to death all over the world in little wars, we would rely in the future primarily on our massive mobile retaliatory power, which we could use at our discretion against the major source of aggression at times and places that we could choose." Quoted in Gwynne Dyer, War, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 2004), 300.
12. Even though the archive is, as Pierre Nora says in "Between Memory and History," Representations (Spring 1989): 8, "the deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memory...a secondary memory, a prosthesis-memory," I am conscious of Allan Sekula's warning that archival memory insistently reproduces dominant cultural norms, even when broken up and reordered. "The Body and the Archive," October,
15. Hales does not refer to Hoover Dam, Between Nevada and Arizona directly, but he is certainly aware of it. He draws on the work of Vincent Leo, "The Mushroom Cloud Photograph: From Fact to Symbol," Afterimage 13 (Summer 1985): 6–12, which devotes several paragraphs to the photograph.
16. Leo, "Mushroom Cloud Photograph," 11.
17. Jacques Derrida, The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Derrida wrote about nuclear weaponry and the arms race a few years earlier in the article "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," Diacritics 14, no. 2 (1984): 20–31. There he describes nuclear weapons as "fabulously textual" (his emphasis) because more than the weaponry of the past, their making and use depend so much on "structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic coding" (23).
21. Ibid., 134.
23. Frank, quoted in Greenough and Brookman, Robert Frank, 54.
26. Michael Light, 100 Suns: 1945–1962 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), n.p. All but twenty-two of the photographs in the book were made by photographers in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, and most were the work of the 1352nd Photographic Group of the U.S. Air Force.
27. Robert De Lenticchio's book At Work in the Fields of the Bomb (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987) contains documentation, photographs, and interviews of the kind Hollywood is rarely able to provide.
33. J. Robert Oppenheimer, as quoted by Light, 100 Suns, n.p.
38. Ibid., 8.
40. Operation Crossroads, 73.
41. Ibid.
43. Jesse Helms, quoted by John Pilger, "Brothers at Armageddon," Web article posted by ibool@socrates.berkeley.edu, August 14, 2003.
44. Condoleezza Rice, quoted by Pilger, "Brothers at Armageddon."
45. Weart (Nuclear Fear) exhaustively charts nuclear debates and "mentalities" in the United States from 1945 to the mid-1980s.
48. Jumbo cards produced by Mike Roberts Color Production were 6 x 9 in. and regular cards were 3½ x 5½ in.
50. The Incident is related in Nelson, Perfect Machine, 128.
51. A postcard is never readily decipherable. A postally used card is a complex semiotic carrying a surplus of imagery—recto picture, verso postage stamp— combined with textual legends and handwritten messages. The signs are often at odds with one another.
52. See Thomas H. Saffert and Orville E. Kelly, Countdown Zero (New York: Putnam, 1982). At some of the Nevada tests in the 1950s, soldiers were positioned less than three miles from ground zero.
54. My colleague Jeremy Borsos found the image on eBay, stamped with a Signal Corps stock number (C-7047).

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61. James Elkins has a favorable interpretation of Laurence's descriptions of atomic explosions, which is at odds with my reading of them ("Harold Edgerton's Rapatronic Photographs of Atomic Tests," 77).

Chapter 14: Van Laar

1. See the background image for fig. 14-5.
2. Two of the most important postcard genres are views ("topographicals") and types (ethnic, racial, and gender). I am only focusing on the former.
3. This is how postcards of motels work so well as advertisements. Enhancing their status as a souvenir, they are playing off of the standard role of postcards as images of important things.
5. I recognize that these things can be both a subject matter and an implied attitude toward a subject matter. There are certainly more than these four. Two much less grand examples are the antique and the pastoral. A less common but related approach incorporates graphic design elements, particularly the glitzy tropes of advertising, to create idealized postcard images that represent all-out consumerist fantasies. These images most often represent cities or beaches.
6. For example, in French Letters, the clichés create a very melodramatic narrative of two lovers, one burning her letter, the other clasping it to his heart. But this
gameboard image can also be read as an accretion of postcards that themselves act as markers of sending and receiving.
7. Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 135.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. My use of the term boring is not the same as its use in Martin Parr's book Boring Postcards. The book lacks a clear statement of what is meant by the term. In fact, many of the cards do not seem boring as much as they seem amusingly kitschy or nostalgic. And many of them seem to be (purported) mistakes of subject resulting in the ironies of the (supposedly) trivial made important. Martin Parr, ed., Boring Postcards USA (London: Phaidon, 2000).
10. Earlier in this essay, I noted that the sublime was one of the standard rhetorical moves of scenic postcard art aspirations. The uncanny developed out of Burkean notions of the sublime, where that terror of the infinite becomes a modern anxiety of the unfamiliar. It would be interesting if failed postcards would offer their unfamiliarity in a rhetorically interesting way as, say, estrangement. Unfortunately, they give us none of the anxious pleasures of the sublime or the uncanny. They're just ordinary.
12. Ibid., 87.
13. Ibid.
15. For a discussion of how this authenticity and innocence are used in outsider art, see Leonard Diepeveen and Timothy Van Laar, Art with a Difference: Looking at Difficult and Unfamiliar Art (Moutain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 2001), 64–92.