

“Put Your Stamp on History”: The USPS Commemorative Program *Celebrate the Century* and Postmodern Collective Memory

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This essay offers a reading of one of the largest public commemorative projects in recent U.S. history, the Celebrate the Century stamp program, in order to explore the ambivalent potential of collective memory in postmodernity. Celebrate the Century exhibits the tension between aesthetic and political heterogeneity, on the one hand, and the tendency toward commodification and political amnesia, on the other. The essay develops by considering the evolution of commemorative postal iconography and its relation to postmodern simulacra, the process of selection of stamp subjects for Celebrate the Century, and the array of display strategies that helped to frame the collection as a commodity, the public as tourists, and history as progress toward consumer democracy. Key words: collective memory, postmodernity, postal stamps, iconography, consumer democracy

Against the backdrop of the global fear of electrical blackout and prophesies of the end of the world, the end of the millennium occasioned retrospection, including recollections of famed individuals, museum exhibits, anthologies of photographs, and even comic strips. The United States Postal Service's *Celebrate the Century* promised to become “one of the nation's largest and most inclusive commemorations of the 20th century.”¹ The program's scope—150 stamps were issued over a two-year period to honor the most significant people, events, and trends of each decade of the century—was matched by unprecedented public involvement and an array of promotional activities. The stamps representing the first five decades were chosen by members of the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee appointed by the Postmaster General; the public selected the images representing the second half of the century. Ballots were available at post offices nationwide. In the balloting for *Celebrate the Century* all those interested, including schoolchildren, could vote an unlimited number of times provided proper postage was affixed to each ballot.

Much financial and organizational effort was exerted to excite and sustain public interest in this commemoration. Post offices across the nation were transformed into mini-museums featuring electronic panels that counted days, hours, and seconds remaining until the year 2000. On their way to the clerk's window visitors were greeted by colorful panes of stamps issued under the aegis of *Celebrate the Century*. In February 1998, as the ballots for the 1950s arrived, the USPS issued commemorative sheets for the decades of 1900 and 1910 and sponsored a series of unveiling ceremonies across the country, dubbed “thirty stamps in thirty days.” Schoolchildren in some 300,000 classrooms were encouraged to “stamp history” as they learned about earlier decades from the “Celebrate the Century Kit.” Before the series of ten panels was completed, stamps issued to date were integrated into a train exhibit, “Celebrate the Century Express,” a four-car museum that traversed the country from coast to coast, inviting visitors to “experience a century's worth of achievement and tragedy, entertainment and innovation, grit and greatness.”²

Celebrate the Century was as much about remembering and celebrating as it was about reminding adults and children about what to remember. Commemorative postal

stamps, like other artifacts of memory, have a problematic relationship with history because they identify and amplify certain people and events and consign others to oblivion.³ Stamps, however, always speak on behalf of the entire nation and as such claim to represent crucial aspects of national identity to citizens and outsiders alike.⁴ Stamp subjects and designs, therefore, are a matter of cultural politics.

Celebrate the Century is particularly illuminating as a case study of the production of collective memory in postmodernity. *Celebrate the Century* manifests a postmodern shift in the aesthetics and the politics of commemoration in several ways. The program's most conspicuous feature is a lack of discrimination between representations of historical events or persons and pop culture. Thus, the series is a mnemonic device in a cultural situation in which saturation by images or simulacra, to use Baudrillard's term, threatens a stable sense of history and identity.⁵

By the same token, the program relies on this volatility and fragmentation of the image to promote itself as a novel way to commemorate. That half of the icons were chosen by popular vote emphasizes popularity as the mark of their historical significance and political legitimacy. Despite *Celebrate the Century*'s success as a popular program, however, its professed inclusiveness veils the process through which the public's political agency as co-creators of history is manipulated to benefit private, corporate interests. Although it was promoted as the result of a popular and open selection process, *Celebrate the Century* uses that process as a strategy to authenticate a hegemonic narrative. Accordingly, the politics of inclusion became a strategy to assimilate "vernacular" interests into "official" ones.

To show how *Celebrate the Century* exemplifies a postmodern shift in the aesthetics of commemoration, I first trace thematic and stylistic transformations in commemorative postal iconography and its relation to postmodern simulacra. Because contemporary icons serve an important emotional and political function in an ever-accelerating culture of obsolescence, they constitute a visual lexicon out of which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations of history may emerge. Next, I depict the politics of stamp selection as a struggle between official and vernacular interests to suggest that the public's participation in the process, although potentially disruptive of official culture's hegemony, ultimately was appropriated by official and corporate interests. Finally, I focus on several display mechanisms that helped to frame the collection as a commodity, the public as tourists, and history as progress toward consumer democracy.

From "Civil Religion" to Consumer Society: the Evolution of Commemorative Iconography

The evolution of commemorative aesthetics in general and postal iconography in particular forms the backdrop against which *Celebrate the Century* stands as an example of postmodern collective memory-in-the-making. Some observers have frowned on the "pop" character of the series in which somber photographs of child laborers and the "Migrant Mother" share iconic status with neon-bright images of consumer products from crayons to Barbie dolls.⁶ That a collective memory project should be so closely entwined with popular culture is not simply a matter of taste.

The current postal iconography can be seen as one of many manifestations of a transformation in individual and collective experience of history in the West. Whether described as postmodernism, postnationalism, or post-Fordism, this change has affected the way citizens in liberal-democratic societies relate to past, present, and future.⁷ In the United States, this shift was felt, in part, as a disenchantment with the legitimizing myth

of “civil religion,” itself a blend of religious faith in the nation as a chosen people and a civic republican ideal of the state as social covenant. Robert Bellah coined the term in 1967 in the midst of social upheavals of the Vietnam War era, when the symbolic fabric signified by the term already had begun to unravel.⁸ Bellah defined civil religion as “the myths that have developed to help us interpret who and what we are in America.”⁹

For over a century, U.S. postal iconography dramatized the dialectic of self-determination and destiny, stewardship and conquest.¹⁰ Stamps promulgated the heroic imperative of leadership: presidents, statesmen, military leaders, and explorers remained the dominant themes of celebration well into the 1950s.¹¹ The style of depiction contributed to the sublime aura of the images. Statesmen often were shown in profile in the manner of Roman busts. Heroes of the American Revolution were leading their troops to victory. Explorers were landing triumphantly on the shores of new territories or ascending mountain peaks. Thus, whether the subject is the landing of Columbus, Marquette’s crossing of the Mississippi, or Fremont’s scaling of the Rocky Mountains, the composition of the images and the postures of those featured convey the momentousness of the event and the superhuman status of the central character, thereby establishing a kinship between the legendary conqueror of the New World and nineteenth-century pioneers.

In the meantime, stamps bearing icons of the industrial age carried the story of progress. The locomotive, the steamship, the automobile, and the bridge—the images marking the Pan-American Exposition issue of 1901—assume a sublimity unrivaled by human beings. Representation of these technological wonders in the commemorative context acquires the aura of a national myth. A particularly vivid example is the stamp, “Landing of Cadillac in Detroit 1701–1951,” in which the image is formed by the juxtaposition of a familiar iconic scene of a hero’s “landing” with Detroit’s modern skyscrapers lurking in the background. Thus, the center of the U.S. automobile industry and the birthplace of the assembly line is mythologized by its retroactive inclusion into the pantheon of the nation’s civil religion.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s, the subjects and iconography of postal stamps replicate other commemorative practices of the era of nationalism. As John Gillis observes, “on both sides of the Atlantic, national commemorations were largely the preserve of elite males, the designated carriers of progress”; by contrast, “the role of women was largely allegorical,” and workers, minorities and younger people “gained admission to national memories at an even slower pace than they were admitted to national representative and educational institutions.”¹²

By most accounts, the sixties were a watershed decade that transformed memory practices throughout the world. After the establishment of the Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee in 1957, postal commemoration entered a new era, as official memory became more open to influences from ordinary people. Although the final word still belonged to the Postmaster General, all citizens could now suggest postal themes and designs.¹³ Official anniversaries continued to provide commemorative themes, but their representation no longer uniformly followed the heroic aesthetic of the nationalist era. For instance, a laconic image of a broken chain—black links against a navy blue background—hails the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. The abstract character of the image connotes a non-hierarchical value system without leaders or followers, wherein all are equally liberated via the freeing of an oppressed group. In the commemoration of the American Revolution’s bicentennial, populist motifs mingle with the official icons of the Founding Fathers. Issued over a six-year period, four stamp

series—"Colonial Craftsmen," "Colonial Communications," "Contributors to the Cause," and "The Spirit of '76"—exemplify a shift toward reconsidering crucial events of U.S. history from the perspective of a common citizen.¹⁴

The popular turn also is signaled by the inclusion of mundane subjects expressing the seemingly apolitical interests of regular Americans. Alongside space exploration, achievements in electronics, the Civil War centennial, and the U.S. bicentennial, stamps of the sixties and the seventies salute amateur radio, professional baseball, and college football. In the post-bicentennial period, stamp subjects draw on popular culture more than on the patriotic lore of the nationalist era. In the eighties and nineties especially, commemoration runs the gamut from Will Rogers to Elvis to Comic Strip Classics to Classic Movie Monsters. Not only were women and minorities admitted to the national tableau, but a whole range of places, objects, holidays, and pastimes also acquired iconic status. This proliferation of icons is a symptom of the increasing speed of obsolescence and of the increasingly sophisticated capacity to preserve the past. As Gillis remarks, "On one hand, the past has become so distant and the future so uncertain that we can no longer be sure what to save, so we save everything. . . . On the other hand, never has the past been so accessible on film, on tape, and in mass-produced images."¹⁵ Reproduction of mass-produced images on commemorative stamps captures the paradox of preservation and forgetting that is the mark of contemporary historical sensibility.

According to Aaron Betsky, "part of our twentieth-century loss of faith has been a loss of the kinds of icons that are unapproachable, semidivine apparitions."¹⁶ Nowadays, as Betsky puts it, "icons are all around us": "some of the most normal, run-of-the-mill objects we use in the United States have become iconic."¹⁷ Ubiquity and ordinariness entail a corresponding aesthetic. In place of polychromatic and multi-layered compositions reminiscent of nineteenth-century painting and neo-classical sculpture, today's postal iconography favors the bright, glossy look of a color photograph. Images are supposed to convey the feeling of three-dimensional verisimilitude. This insistence on "hyperreality," as Umberto Eco notes, "suggests that there is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy."¹⁸ If technology saves fragments of material culture from oblivion, their commemoration as fetishistic objects saves them from trivialization.

In *Celebrate the Century*, for example, pop icons have the same ontological status as representations of significant past events. Showcasing the preceding decades from the perspective of the present, the series highlights the popular and mundane along with major events and outstanding individuals. All ten panels contain the same five categories of subject matter: people and events, arts and entertainment, science and technology, sports, and lifestyle. Thus, even the earlier decades include a gallery of artifacts and pastimes supposedly accessible to all Americans at the time. On the 1900s panel, for example, a still from the movie *The Great Train Robbery* is sandwiched between President Teddy Roosevelt and a box of Crayola crayons, and W.E.B. Du Bois is next to the "Teddy Bear" stamp.

The principle of photographic verisimilitude is evident as well, although a number of stamps preserve the "authentic" look of original posters, sketches, and cartoons. Americans are introduced to the fashion world of the 1900s through an original sketch of a "Gibson Girl," to U.S. involvement in World War II through the "I Want You" poster of Uncle Sam, to the jazz era of the 1920s through a cartoon "Flappers do the Charleston," and to women's contribution to the war effort through the poster of "Rosie the Riveter." Such stamps invoke an aura of the period "through stylistic connotation,

conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image.”¹⁹ Other stamps present a faithful copy of a person, artifact, event, or trend. Images of presidents Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Harry Truman depart from the iconography that once presented U.S. leaders as static profiles or larger-than-life heroes. Roosevelt resembles a businessman at a board meeting, Wilson is holding on to his top hat at an outdoor rally, a grinning Truman is lifting up the *Chicago Daily Tribune* with a headline “Dewey Defeats Truman.” A Model T Ford on the 1900s panel is authentic red. The image of Jackson Pollock, symbolizing the emergence of abstract expressionism in the 1940s, is based on a 1949 photograph of Pollock at work on one of his drip paintings.

The icons assembled under the aegis of the “American century” do not privilege a particular event as constitutive or a particular person as more important than others. There does not seem to be a grand narrative of origin, but rather a host of random historical snapshots, in which all images appear to be of equal significance. A collage such as this, in which small-scale and large-scale history mingle and dissolve into one another, fits Frederick Jameson’s description of the postmodern historical project as a “vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum.”²⁰

The prospect of authenticity is not doomed simply because the manufactured “past” of mass culture substitutes a “simulacrum” for a real experience of history. Against the Platonic condemnation of images as false reality and Marxist critiques of “society of the spectacle” as a negation of history and fabrication of “present frozen time,”²¹ I maintain that icons constitute a visual “vocabulary” whose meaning is continuously negotiated and adjusted. Because certain images become icons as a result of circulation and “condensation,” icons act as “magnets of meaning”: they “change appearance depending on how you look at them, from what angle, in what context, or what you bring to your looking.”²²

The Politics of Inclusion: At the Intersection of Official and Vernacular Interests

Until the late 1960s the selection of persons and events to be honored on postal stamps had been the privilege of the political and intellectual elites. Postal commemorations, like other official memory practices, “were largely for, but not of, the people.”²³ *Celebrate the Century* appears, by contrast, to be an expression of popular will. To quote Postmaster General Marvin Runyon,

Through *Celebrate the Century*, Americans can save the past as they look toward the future. U.S. postage stamps have been integral to the fabric of American life since the founding of our great country, and they continue to be a source of learning and pride for all Americans. Capturing history on stamps is a part of the Postal Service’s proud heritage. What makes *Celebrate the Century* such a unique continuation of this heritage is that for the first time, the public will play a major role in determining the stamp subjects that will become a permanent record of the passing millennium.²⁴

This amalgamation of personal remembrance and collective history-making confirms what social historians have been observing about commemoration in postmodernity. Gillis points out that memory work has become open to many and has shifted from national centers to local communities and living rooms: “Every attic is an archive, every living room a museum.”²⁵ Although this “democratization of the past causes some anxiety among professionals,” and “conservatives decry Americans’ lack of factual knowledge about their national history,” argues Gillis, “there is good evidence to show that ordinary people are more interested in and know more about their pasts than ever

before, though their knowledge is no longer confined to compulsory time frames and space of the old national historiography."²⁶

The proliferation of sites of memory work and corresponding identities does not, in and of itself, bring an end to official commemoration. Rather, as analysis of the *Celebrate the Century* program reveals, official commemoration has found it vital to reinvent itself as part of the trend Gillis terms "democratization of the past," to craft an appearance of consensus, or at least of compromise, among historical and political interests of diverse publics. Accordingly, commemorations should be viewed as "official and vernacular expressions." According to John Bodnar, official culture articulates the views of "leaders or authorities at all levels of society," whose primary interest is promoting "social unity, the continuity of existing traditions, and loyalty to the status quo," and "relies on 'dogmatic formalism' and the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms"; vernacular culture, on the other hand, "represents an array of specialized interests" of diverse and shifting groups, and conveys "what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like."²⁷ These definitions underscore the traditional aesthetic contrast between the "high" culture of political and intellectual elites and the "popular" culture of ordinary people. As some critics have argued, however, commemorations in postmodernity have become struggles over the meaning of the *same* artifacts. The vernacular character of commemorations, then, depends not so much on a particular aesthetic standard, but on the degree to which a sign from any level of culture is appropriated to meet the idiosyncratic needs of the user.²⁸

Nowhere has the meeting (or the clash) of official and vernacular interests been more pronounced than in the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Although the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been analyzed through a variety of critical lenses, most scholars regard it as a symptom of a break with the era of "dogmatic formalism" and as a symbol of a new political aesthetic that is more accommodating to small-scale, idiosyncratic memories, while retaining the capacity to symbolize large-scale patriotic abstractions.²⁹ If the Vietnam Veterans Memorial functions as a mnemonic magnet open to multiple interpretations, then the sheer cornucopia of images of the *Celebrate the Century* should be an even greater opportunity for the expression of both official and vernacular interpretations of the past. Although *Celebrate the Century* was designed and promoted as a product of a pluralistic selection process, *Celebrate the Century* uses this process as a strategy to authenticate a hegemonic narrative of the American century. The politics of inclusion becomes a strategy to assimilate "vernacular" interests into "official" ones.

From the beginning the selection process was marked by a division of labor between representatives of the official culture and the "general public." The Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC), composed of professional historians, business leaders, marketing specialists, and celebrities, selected subjects to represent the first five decades and suggested a list of designs out of which the public chose the icons capturing the 1950s through the 1990s. This division between the elites and the masses was justified by "extensive market research" that "showed the public was more familiar with events from the latter part of the century."³⁰ Presumably, through education and ease of access to archives, the elites could reconstruct the decades that the majority of the population did not experience firsthand; personal recollections would add an authentic touch to the mosaic of national icons from the remaining fifty years of the century.

As ballots for the last five decades began to appear in post offices, people realized that they could stuff the ballot box in support of their favorite icons, provided that they paid

the postage to mail in their votes. Although the menu of images (thirty for each decade) consisted of nationally recognizable persons, events, and trends, some images became the focus of enthusiastic grassroots campaigns. Residents of Brockton, Massachusetts, fought to commemorate their local hero Rocky Marciano, an undefeated boxing champion.³¹ Marciano was one of five sports figures and events listed in the stamp selection ballot for the 1950s; however, for the people of Brockton, he is an example of a successful tough guy who always remembered his blue-collar roots. At George's Café, a family restaurant owned by Marciano's boyhood friend, walls are covered with black-and-white photographs of his famous fights and of his frequent visits to his hometown. A framed first-day cancellation of the Rocky Marciano stamp occupies a place of pride, yet it is one among many images of the boxing legend.³² Marciano is now part of official national history, but here he lives in local memory.

Postal customers could choose only from subjects recommended by the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee. Because records of the CSAC deliberations were sealed from the public, the extent of outside lobbying to put particular subjects on the ballot is uncertain.³³ A notable exception is the National Council on Disability's effort to urge the Postal Service to issue a stamp commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act as part of the *Celebrate the Century* series. Posted on the NCD website, a letter to the CSAC Chairperson Virginia Nolke outlines the reasons for turning ADA into a national icon: "ADA is also distinctively American. It embraces several archetypal American themes such as self-determination, self-reliance, and individual achievement. ADA is about enabling people with disabilities to take charge of their lives and join the American mainstream."³⁴ Although such a stamp would have celebrated a crucial milestone in civil rights legislation for 54 million people, it was not considered for inclusion. Under the "people and events" rubric, the 1990s ballot offered "Improving Education," "Cultural Diversity," "Sustained Economic Growth," "Gulf War," "Recovering Species," and "Active Older Americans."

What, then, was the official intent behind the series? Government leaders, historians, and educators saw *Celebrate the Century* as an educational program to involve teachers, schoolchildren, and parents in a conversation about the nation's past and present. In its official press releases, the USPS stressed its alliance with the Department of Education's *America Goes Back to School* program, "a coalition of more than four thousand business, community, religious and educational organizations nationwide," and promised to give teachers "the opportunity to take their students on a fun and interesting field trip through the twentieth century."³⁵ Not coincidentally, perhaps, "Improving Education" was one of the finalists for the 1990s, although it signified a collective commitment rather than an achievement. Then Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley summed up the lofty aspiration of the program's government sponsors: "Exposure to the people and events of the twentieth century that will be honored on this series of stamps will give a dose of inspiration to the children who will some day perform great deeds of the twenty-first century."³⁶ The patriotic and practical aspects of *Celebrate the Century* reflected an official concern about how to teach young Americans "not to forget something they had neither known nor remembered in the first place."³⁷

The program's goal of promoting a positive image of U.S. history to the younger audience can be gleaned from commentaries in the national press that followed *Celebrate the Century* for almost three years. Critical coverage highlighted two troublesome aspects of the collection: exclusion of some traumatic episodes of the century and positive modification of serious events that made the final cut. Commenting on the 1950s ballot,

a *Boston Globe* writer noted with some sarcasm: "We can't choose stamps commemorating nuclear testing in Nevada, or the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, or the McCarthy hearings, or any of the more memorably awful events of the decade."³⁸ Reporters also were quick to point out that the Postal Service had put "a positive spin on some bad events: the Iran hostage crisis becomes 'American Hostages Freed,' the Depression becomes 'America Survives the Depression'."³⁹

What the critics found most disturbing, however, was the manipulation of a Jackson Pollock photograph in order to match the atmosphere of the "smoke-free, drug-free, 98 percent fat-free, child-friendly 1990s."⁴⁰ The image chosen to represent abstract expressionism on the 1940s collage, an original *Life* magazine picture of Pollock working on his "Number 1, 1949," was subjected to a series of alterations, including the removal of a cigarette from Pollock's mouth, before it became the picture on the stamp. CSAC chair Virginia Nolke, a history professor at Angelo State University in Texas, reasoned that the smokeless version was inoffensive historically and politically: "I think only a small percentage of the American public is going to be aware of that photograph—they're not going to realize there is even an issue here. If you leave the cigarette out, you're not giving a public message one way or another. If you leave it in, you are."⁴¹ This compromise arguably sums up the motivation behind the entire series: a desire to preserve the historical verisimilitude of images without losing control over their potentially unruly significations.

If the inclusion of a cigarette constitutes an implicit endorsement of tobacco, what can be made of the many images of commercial Americana? Acknowledging that the program included a great many commercial products, Professor Nolke suggested that public participation, rather than corporate lobbying, was responsible for this decision: "When you open things up for a public vote," she said in a telephone interview, "you end up with what is popular, not necessarily with what is important."⁴² To be sure, today popularity is often synonymous with commercial success. The Postal Service apparently agrees because *Celebrate the Century* broke one of its rules for subject selection by commemorating a host of commercial subjects, ranging from Barbie dolls and automobiles to electronics and computer technology. Once the precedent was set, however, the rule was amended to permit commemoration of "commercial products or enterprises . . . to illustrate more general concepts linked to American culture."⁴³

Private business interests stood to gain from the series through implicit image politics; however, the deployment of *Celebrate the Century* as an educational program depended on the active involvement of corporations. In particular, Microsoft and its search engine "msn.com" were integral to developing the "Celebrate the Century Education Kit" for teachers of grades three to six. The purpose of the kit, besides motivating children to explore contemporary U.S. history by searching *Encarta* encyclopedia for background information on each stamp, was to encourage stamp collecting. The Postal Service's educational plan was a clever marketing strategy; because the program was to be implemented in some 300,000 classrooms nationwide, revenue prospects for both Microsoft and the USPS were significant.

The key to the marketing success of *Celebrate the Century* was a belief that stamp collectors, as non-professional "history buffs," would cherish a chance to decide which stamps would become the permanent record of the passing era. Because schoolchildren could vote on stamp subjects along with the general public—student ballots were included in the educational kit—they were more likely to join the ranks of collectors. As *Promomagazine* commented on the "pop-culture-tinged lunge after young collectors," the

Postal Service had become a “competitor in the \$4 billion collectibles market, doing battle not with Federal Express and Airborne, but with Beanie Babies and baseball cards.”⁴⁴

Pop culture icons had been recognized on postal stamps even before millennial nostalgia set the stage for their commemoration en masse, yet soliciting the public’s mandate for doing so is a recent marketing invention. The precedent was set by the popular vote for the Elvis stamp in 1993; given the choice between a “young, studly King” and “the older, rhinestone-studded version,” millions of Americans cast their ballots in favor of the young Elvis.⁴⁵ Nostalgia drew masses of non-collectors to post offices to buy stamps, and the USPS apparently drew its own conclusions about personal remembrance and commodification. Rather than calling on abstract patriotic values, *Celebrate the Century* elicited sentimental identification with material signs of popular culture. This identification, whose perceived authenticity marked the program as a genuinely collective commemoration, validated the process by which commodities are mythologized and history commodified. *Celebrate the Century*, on its face, is a commemoration by the people for the people, but on closer inspection the professed inclusiveness turns out to be a shrewd cashing-in on the public’s desire to make history.

Yet some citizens refused identification, thereby proving that commemorative images also are politically charged representations of who we are as a people in the present. One case that attracted the attention of the national press was the protest against the proposed “Godfather” stamp, meant to honor one of the most popular film epics of the seventies. The Sons of Italy, a group representing the interests of Italian Americans, launched a “national-get-out-the-vote campaign” to oppose the stamp on the grounds that the portrayal of Italian Americans as Mafia killers would be unfair and inaccurate. Arlington lawyer Joseph Scafetta, Jr., chairman of the Sons of Italy’s stamp committee, told the *Washington Post* that he organized “a national campaign to get the fraternal organization’s 450,000 members to vote for any proposed design other than ‘The Godfather’.”⁴⁶ Notably, this fraternal organization consistently has protested popular culture’s depictions of Italian Americans while investing effort and money in support of positive national commemorations such as the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. The success of the Italian American protest against “defamatory” portrayals suggests that oppositional interpretations of mass culture’s messages are more likely when message “receivers” are a relatively advantaged group with greater “access to oppositional codes.”⁴⁷ To re-politicize a seemingly innocuous memento of pop culture requires effort and political visibility. By contrast, no organized protests were mounted against the stamp representing the popular nineties sitcom *Seinfeld* despite its many jokes at the expense of less advantaged ethnic minorities.

Displaying the Century: Icons “In Context” and “In Situ”

The public could accept or reject individual images, thereby exercising a degree of control over the visual vocabulary of the series. The rhetoric of the series, however, was shaped through various strategies of display and promotion. Hence, it would be a mistake to focus on the semantics of individual images in isolation. The critic’s task, as Roland Barthes points out, is “rather of a syntactical order”: one needs to go beyond the mythological lexicon to decipher “which articulations, which displacements constitute the mythic fabric of a mass-consumption society.”⁴⁸ It is the “syntax” of the collection

as a whole, not the specific images of pop culture and commercial Americana that punctuate it, that shapes the reader's relationship to these icons.

The different strategies of exhibition of the *Celebrate the Century* program fall between two approaches, known to critical ethnographers as "in context" and "in situ." The "in context" approach is traditionally used by museums: "Objects are set in context by means of long labels, charts, diagrams, commentary delivered by earphones. . . . Objects are often set in context by means of other objects, often in relation to a classification or schematic arrangement of some kind, based on typologies of form or proposed historical relationships."⁴⁹ Ten collectible panels of stamps of *Celebrate the Century* in which images are ordered thematically and chronologically through visual and verbal means are an instance of "in context" display. "In situ" installations, on the other hand, recreate an environment in which the object is only a part. They "privilege 'experience' and tend to thematize rather than set their subject forth."⁵⁰ Unveiling ceremonies for individual stamps were executed in this mode. The two modes are not mutually exclusive; the traveling exhibit "Celebrate the Century Express" incorporates both.

The narrative structure of *Celebrate the Century* is formed by the chronological progression of panels from the 1900s through the 1990s and by the interaction of visual and discursive components constituting each of the ten commemorative panels. The stamps, each bearing an identifying title, are arranged diagonally in several rows against a background image. With the exception of the 1990s pane (where stamps are superimposed on a collage featuring U.S. currency and the steep graph symbolizing economic boom), all background images are decade-specific photographs. Each stamp sheet also features a title caption, a short description of the key events and trends of a given decade, and a list of new words that appeared during the period. According to Barthes, verbal elements perform two functions, "anchoring" and "relaying." Anchoring occurs when the linguistic message (such as the title of each stamp) "fixes the floating chain of signifieds" by directing the reader "among the various signifieds of the image . . . ; through an often subtle dispatching, it teleguides him [*sic*] toward a meaning selected in advance."⁵¹ Relaying refers to a complementary relation between language and image: "the words are then fragments of a more general syntagm, as are the images, and the message's unity occurs on a higher level: that of a story, the anecdote, the diegesis."⁵²

The background images for each panel also can direct the reader by suggesting the "title" moment of each decade. Thus, the first decade is summed up by the photograph of *Kitty Hawk*, the first of the Wright brothers' planes. Besides visually amplifying the image of the plane in flight, the photographic image anchors the meaning of other stamps on the 1900s sheet, from the debut of the Model T Ford to the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. The first decade of the century is about progress in diverse areas of U.S. experience. Although one might perceive ideological tensions among the individual icons, say between the Ford and new immigrants (expensive commodity versus cheap labor), or between the Ford and John Muir's advocacy of preservationism (technological progress versus the environment), these contradictions are palliated by the unifying aura of the background image.

The ambiguity of the collage is further reduced by the panel's discursive components, the caption and the short narrative. The 1900s are called "the Dawn of the Twentieth Century," and the story of the first ten years is punctuated by achievements signaling the beginning of a more technologically developed, more just, and more prosperous society. Among the stated achievements are President Roosevelt's protection of national forests, the Pure Food and Drug Act, the exposure of corruption in industry by muckrakers Ida

Tarbell and Upton Sinclair, and the beginning of the NAACP's struggle for equal rights for African Americans. Even the description of Ford's contribution to the decade—he “made automobiles more affordable with the Model T”—sounds unequivocally laudatory.

Importantly, the first installment of the collection is set up as the beginning of a series of transformations leading to the technological and social state of grace at the century's end. This pattern is distinct from the old national mythology of civil religion that seeks to relate the present to a constitutive moment in the past, be it the landing of Columbus or the Revolutionary War. Instead of a historical and mythical beginning, the progression of the narrative is dictated by its end.

The final decade establishes the narrative teleology, thereby authorizing the mythical trajectory of the century. Images in the nineties collage connote the material and social success of the national experience at the end of the century. The stamps are set against the backdrop of a pile of cash and a soaring graph of the stock market, and the caption reads: “In final decade, Cold War ends, economy booms.” The stamp subjects resonate with the theme of post-Cold War U.S. lifestyle. Curiously, many of them are not uniquely American: the World Wide Web, cellular phones, and sport utility vehicles are tokens of affluence around the globe. Blockbusters *Titanic* and *Jurassic Park*, although bearing a distinct imprint of Hollywood, were distributed worldwide. Even baseball, an all-American pastime, is now a global phenomenon. The narrative role of these signifiers of prosperity and leisure becomes clearer in their articulation with images denoting social, environmental, and military concerns in the last decade. The domestic issues chosen for the collection—the threat of extinction of certain species of raptors and the decline in education—appear as positive strides thanks to upbeat captions “Recovering Species” and “Improving Education.” Together with the stamp honoring the anniversary of the Special Olympics, these icons depict the nation's domestic concerns as a matter of protecting its nature and its future (children being the conventional symbol of the future). From the paucity of contemporary domestic issues one might surmise that social and economic disparities at home have been resolved and that Americans have achieved a state of contentment and abundance. Not incidentally, the “Cellular Phones” stamp depicts the user of the technology as an African American male in a business suit, thereby connoting the overcoming of racial inequality. The Gulf War stamp, on the other hand, suggests that the causes of our discontent lie elsewhere, which occasionally call for U.S. involvement in military conflicts overseas.

This inference is reinforced by the accompanying verbal description, which buttresses the link between national domestic progress and international leadership: “The Soviet Union collapsed, effectively ending the Cold War. Troops were deployed by the United States in the Persian Gulf, in Somalia and in the Balkans.” At home, too, the nation was becoming more democratic: “In 1992—often called the Year of the Woman—a record number of women were elected to political office.” Women also approached parity with men in athletics: “The U.S. women's softball, soccer and basketball teams proved themselves the best in the world.” This narrative complements and augments the cumulative message of the stamps, that material prosperity and democracy go hand-in-hand. It also reassures Americans that they deserve their abundance and that their way of life is an example to other, less fortunate and less democratic countries.

If the nineties represent a historical and narrative climax, the preceding decades build toward it. The eighties highlight the space shuttle, the fall of the Berlin Wall, which “presaged the end of the Cold War,” and the increasing closure of the gender gap in the

workplace. Along with these momentous events, the stamps salute cable TV, video-games, personal computers, compact discs, cabbage patch dolls, and entertainment hits. On the seventies panel, the U.S. bicentennial (The Statue of Liberty), Earth Day, and the Women's Rights Movement icon mingle with "Smiley Face," "70s Fashions," "Monday Night Football," "Jumbo Jets," and VCRs. The "rebellious sixties" is announced as the "decade of extremes," which signals that it was an aberration, a ripple in an otherwise steady flow of history. The panel elaborates the theme of "extremes" by juxtaposing the icons of rebellion and its chief source ("Woodstock" and "Peace Symbol" versus "The Vietnam War") with those connoting positive and unifying achievements ("Martin Luther King, Jr.," "Man on the Moon," and "The Peace Corps"). Considered from the vantage point of the nineties, however, even the rebellious counterculture of the sixties appears as one among many stylistic options, evidenced by the transformation of the peace symbol into jewelry and the staged spectacle of Woodstock's twenty-fifth and thirtieth anniversaries. Nostalgia-laden pop icons—the Beatles, *Star Trek*, the Ford Mustang, the Barbie doll—contribute to the toy-box aesthetic. The fifties, the first decade for which the public selected the representative images, recreates the atmosphere of the pax Americana era of Eisenhower with its stereotypical ideals of suburban housing, nuclear families, and the living room TV set. Many of the fifties images—tail fins and chrome cars, teen fashions, drive-in movies, and rock-n-roll—seem to have sprung directly from George Lucas's nostalgic film *American Graffiti*.

The collage of the last five decades presents a chronological arrangement of images whose historical value has been transformed by multiple repetition and commercial usage. One might argue that they are an elaboration on the same theme that "culminates" in the nineties, but a similar modification of the past is evident in the "historical" reconstruction of the first five decades by the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee.

I began my account of the syntax of *Celebrate the Century* with the 1900s, noting that most achievements presented therein foreshadow the resolution of social problems and the triumph of technology at the end of the millennium. The next four decades follow the same narrative dynamic. In addition to icons of social progress (the regulation of child labor, the League of Nations, the ratification of women's right to vote and so on), signifiers of enriched leisure, whether or not they were iconic at the time, provide a thematic leitmotif that climaxes in the post-WWII era. The collage anticipates the postmodern collapse of the line between "high culture" and "mass entertainment." The 1900s display Crayola crayons, motion pictures, ice-cream-eating children at the St. Louis World Fair, the teddy bear, and "Gibson Girl" style. The teens feature Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp," avant-garde art at the Armory Show, the first crossword puzzle, and construction toys. The "jazz age" is represented by the stamps "Gatsby style," "Flappers do the Charleston," the "Jazz Club" musicians, radio, American realistic painting, and electric toy trains, while the verbal description mentions the first talkies and the first Academy Awards. During the Depression years, icons of entertainment abound: Monopoly board games, the movies *Gone With the Wind* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, comic book hero Superman, and the photojournalism of *Life* magazine. The WWII decade also accommodates the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, the Broadway play based on Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*, jitterbug dancing, the Big Band sound, the "Slinky" craze, and the emergence of TV as the nation's entertainer.

To sum up, the serious and light subjects of the first five decades set in motion a progression towards a greater society and more democratized leisure, to be followed by

a similarly optimistic trajectory from the fifties through the nineties. This popular history lesson, however benign its overall purpose, modifies the account of the passing century to fit the dominant ideological message, in which social controversy is effaced in favor of a consensual consumer democracy.

The chronological arrangement of *Celebrate the Century* narrows the signification of icons to a distinct teleology. In the case of unveiling rituals and the traveling exhibit, one might argue that the hegemonic totality of the collection would dissolve into fragments, as the cognitive control of the narrative is replaced by more environmental and supposedly less constraining experiences. Even if these experiences seem more interactive and spontaneous, however, they are by no means neutral because the environments in which they occur convert visitors into tourists in search of collectible heritage. In other words, “in context” and “in situ” displays of *Celebrate the Century* are complementary discursive strategies for positioning audiences as tourists and consumers.⁵³

Because a particular place confers depth and an aura of authenticity on what appears to be a mere succession of glossy surfaces, the collection’s stamps were unveiled separately in a variety of symbolically significant locations. The unveiling rituals reenacted constitutive images of the century by making present a particular association or memory in a charismatic scene. In the words of Greg Dickinson, these sites “suggest the ways the spatial mnemonic triggers memories that come with a whole host of associations (this indeed is their rhetorical power), and the ways the mnemonics serve to cover over other absences.”⁵⁴ Or, to use Kenneth Burke’s terminology, each of these locations is a symbolic container that conditions, if not dictates, an appropriate response.⁵⁵

The stamp “Immigrants Arriving” from the 1900s set, for instance, was uncovered at Ellis Island, New York, concurrently with a naturalization ceremony, thereby renewing the “land of opportunity” message in the present along with the message of inclusiveness extended to new immigrants. Rebuilt thanks to corporate philanthropy and now a museum, Ellis Island signifies a friendly passage point into the “new world,” rather than a vigilant border post. The site’s narrative, however, excludes immigrants who bypassed the island, and those who are still barred from entering the United States by current immigration laws.⁵⁶ In this sense, the location’s “spatial mnemonic” both reveals and conceals. Although the hostility and suspicion toward new waves of immigrants was as serious at the turn of the twentieth century as it is today, Ellis Island’s inclusion in the tableau of all-American icons is secure and uncontroversial, as opposed to locations along the U.S.–Mexico border.

Unveiling rituals were “containers” in yet another sense; they simultaneously invoked and contained identities of the diverse publics commemorated by the stamps. Consider two occasions: the unveiling of the peace symbol at a famous 1960s nightclub in West Hollywood and of the Gulf War stamp at MacDill Air Force Base. Admittedly, these two events drew on incompatible political allegiances. The ceremony at the counter-culture haunt Whisky A-Go-Go conjured the oppositional identity of anti-Vietnam protesters, while the honoring of Gulf War veterans celebrated the sacrifices and patriotic commitment of military personnel who fought to protect what former President George Bush called “our American way of life.” Each occasion and place constituted a rhetorical situation, an epideictic moment of affirmation of a distinct group identity and political values.

It is tempting to hail this diversity of rhetorical enactments of identity as a welcome symptom of postmodern fragmentation of a unified national past, but we can do so only

if we bracket the unifying mythology of the *present*, the mythology of U.S. consumerism. The epideictic context of unveiling framed these stamps and assured each audience of its historical agency and political legitimacy within the larger historical context, but it also foreclosed questioning the temporal and mythical logic of commemoration. The peace symbol ceremony is particularly instructive in this regard: while acknowledging a representation of “the voice of a generation who spoke out for peace and humanity during a decade of social unrest,” speeches by postal officials referred to the stamp as a “wonderful example of the diversity and richness of our *Celebrate the Century* stamp and education program” and described the purpose of the program as paying tribute “to the colorful events that have touched all of our lives in the history of this great nation.”⁵⁷ By locating the peace movement and its political exigencies safely in the past, this framing neutralizes its political legacy. At the same time, in place of political radicalism, the commemoration substitutes a desire to possess the radical past in the present through “colorful” souvenirs—clothing, jewelry, and musical recordings. Similar to the commodification of other historical figures and social movements, the act of nostalgic consumption of counter-culture insignia “plays its proper role as a legitimating citation for the commodity system as a whole.”⁵⁸

Not all unveilings succeeded in fixing the political in the past, however. At the uncovering of a stamp featuring Martin Luther King, Jr., Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell stressed the continuity between Dr. King’s civil rights crusade in the sixties and current struggles of African Americans and other minorities. At the moment when Atlanta’s affirmative action program was threatened by a civil suit from the Southeastern Legal Foundation, the Mayor chose the ceremony to call attention to unresolved social and economic injustices: “Let us not let anyone, any organization or any movement stop our struggle for justice. We will continue to fight like Dr. King. Affirmative action is our Selma. It’s our Edmund Pettus Bridge.”⁵⁹ The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* labeled Campbell’s intervention “Mayor gets political at MLK stamp event” as if to emphasize its incongruity with the pathos appropriate to such an occasion: “The imagery Campbell used in his brief comments contrasted sharply with the scene in the hall at Atlanta’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, and a member of the Postal Service’s Board of Governors released a royal blue banner to uncover the first-class stamp as a recording echoed the final words of King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech: ‘Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last’.”⁶⁰

Whereas rituals of unveiling helped to authenticate the icons by their association with particular locales and people, “Celebrate the Century Express” combined “in context” and “in situ” modes of display. The traveling museum capitalized on its symbolic association with “whistle stop” tours of political leaders of the past, reinforced by the inclusion of President Harry S Truman’s 1948 car in the four-car Amtrak train. With its restored vintage Railway Post Office car and an exhibition car housing the interactive displays of stamps, the museum exuded historical authenticity. The *St. Louis Dispatch* described visitors’ reaction to the exhibit: “Fran and Bob Watson . . . liked the one of a laughing Truman holding aloft the *Chicago Tribune* front page announcing ‘Dewey Defeats Truman,’ and were thrilled to learn the original scene actually took place in the St. Louis station just two cars down.”⁶¹ Because Railway Post Office cars were discontinued in 1977, visitors were invited to experience what was no more: the working conditions of postal clerks as they sorted, processed, and delivered the mail. The exhibit did not offer technological and economic reasons for their discontinuance; the car was

fashioned into an attraction to be marveled at, not a lesson in the politics of obsolescence.

A museum excursion typically culminates in a trip to a museum shop. Through various forms of display and promotion *Celebrate the Century* created an appetite, in a Burkean sense, to complete the “museum” pattern by purchasing a souvenir.⁶² Even before the last commemorative pane was issued, the public was urged to take advantage of this “once-in-a-century” opportunity. Collectors and non-collectors could purchase the entire series as a deluxe coffee-table display—“the special heirloom book,” as the *Postal Service Guide to U.S. Stamps* called it. *Celebrate the Century*, thus, would make its way into a family archive as a collection with instant heritage and into the family room as a ready-made conversation piece. The direct-mail offering pictured an older man contemplating stamp sheets with his grandson, an image linking stamp collecting with memory passed from generation to generation, a nostalgic trope conjuring good “old times” when collectors hunted for rare stamps and when children received history lessons from their grandparents rather than from commercial television and the Internet. The agency of the popular vote was to be consummated and immortalized by acquiring a pre-packaged visual relic.

Postmodern Collective Memory: Political Agency and Political Amnesia

In reading the *Celebrate the Century* program, I have avoided the extremes of unqualified approval and pessimistic rejection that seem to accompany discussions of postmodern cultural practices. As an example of postmodern commemoration, *Celebrate the Century* contains both the centrifugal possibilities of a non-hierarchical image culture and the centripetal tendencies of the culture of marketing. The culture of simulacra generates opportunities for political subjects to enter the discourse of national memory through symbolic portals of their choice and to multiply narrative trajectories in a collective “language game” of history making. In the context of national commemoration, however, memory practices can be subjected to the funneling process of selection-through-elimination as well as a host of display mechanisms. In consequence, what begins as an open museum of a postmodern life world in which “everyone is a curator of sorts”⁶³ ends as a historical amusement park where everyone is a tourist.

As citizens in a republic of signs, Americans could draw on a stock of images that not only appealed to them but also represented some aspect of their identity. In this way the thematic scope and eclecticism of *Celebrate the Century* responded to the fragmented need to remember “serious” historical events and civic achievements as well as nostalgic objects and lifestyles. Yet even if individual and group identities had been fragmented, they were woven into a unified narrative, which was not the old national mythology of civil religion. In the present, Americans could see themselves as world leaders, free from social and political controversies that had divided them in the past, free to enjoy the material rewards of their membership in the consumer culture. Instead of Robert Bellah’s 1967 futuristic vision of “a new civil religion of the world,”⁶⁴ which would grow with “the emergence of a genuine transnational sovereignty,” we have “the consumer’s sublime,” an omnivorous ideology of the marketing culture that encourages fantasy, escapism, and a “rush of simulations.”⁶⁵

At first glance, this conclusion seems to offer a counter example to Lyotard’s thesis about the end of grand narratives in postmodernity. In Lyotard’s thinking, postmodernity is signaled by the decline of putatively universal narratives of science, Marxism, and

the modern nation-state,⁶⁶ but this “incredulity toward metanarratives” does not preclude the formation of new forms of legitimation of social bonds, accomplished through different kinds of language games. I suggest that commemorative activity in postmodernity may be one of those games. *Celebrate the Century* exemplifies a multi-dimensional process by which a new cultural mythology can be constructed in place of an old one. Thus, the narrative of U.S. civil religion is replaced by the transnational mythology of the consumer’s sublime. In this process, participants’ agency as citizens is invoked to authenticate the narrative, although citizens ultimately are transformed into consumers.

The apparent triumph of consumer culture may not have destroyed the postmodern subject’s potential to resist imposition of some sort of teleology on lived experience, even if this experience is already mediated via a variety of representational mechanisms. Commodification does not automatically engender political amnesia. There is still much to be learned from the ways in which private and group memories can challenge quasi-consensual public commemorations, but it is just as important to attend to those commemorative practices that absorb and neutralize the political force of vernacular voices.

Notes

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¹United States Postal Service, *Postal Bulletin*, 6 November 1997, 50.

²United States Postal Service, *Celebrate the Century Express*. (<http://www.usps.gov/ctc/train/what.htm>)

³On the tension between history and memory in commemorative activity, see Pierre Nora, “Between History and Memory: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-25, and Tamar Katriel, “Sites of Memory: Discourses of the Past in Israeli Pioneering Settlement Museums,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (Winter 1994): 1-20.

⁴See David Scott, *European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages* (London: Academy Editions, 1995).

⁵On the disappearance of once “sovereign difference” between representations and referents, see Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983). Baudrillard claims that Marxist assessment of capitalism as production of commodities is obsolete because capitalist production now revolves around the manufacture of signs, images, and sign systems rather than commodities. See Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une Critique de L'Economie Politique du Signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

⁶See, for example, Stephan Kanfer, “The Post Office Stamps Out the 1980s,” *Manhattan Institute City Journal* 10 (2000): 11.

⁷Jean-Francois Lyotard gives a classic if limited definition of postmodernity as “incredulity toward metanarratives” in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv. David Harvey traces a series of cultural transformations associated with postmodernity, especially those linked to post-Fordist economy of flexible accumulation and technologies that increase the turnover of production and consumption, in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

⁸Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1-21.

⁹Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

¹⁰I construct this account with the aid of *The Postal Service Guide to U.S. Postal Stamps*, 27th edition (New York: HarperResource, 2000). This philatelist’s manual contains photographs of all United States postal stamps issued between 1847 and 2000. The first commemorative collection was issued in 1893 in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s landing.

¹¹According to Donald J. Lehnus, “Government and Politics” and “Military” are the groups most often featured on postal stamps between 1847 and 1980; two-thirds of all commemorated individuals lived between 1700 and 1899. See *From Angels to Zeppelins: A Guide to Persons, Objects, Topics, and Themes on United States Postage Stamps 1847-1980* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

¹²John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: A History of a Relationship,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20.

¹³United States Postal Service, *The Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee*. (<http://www.usps.com>)

¹⁴On the change in the iconography of the stamps depicting the American Revolution, see David Curtis Skaggs, "Postage Stamps as Icons," in *Icons of America*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall Fishwick (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1978), 198–208.

¹⁵Gillis, 15.

¹⁶Aaron Betsky, "The Enigma of the Thigh Cho: Icons as Magnets of Meaning," in *Icons: Magnets of Meaning*, ed. Aaron Betsky (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 22.

¹⁷Betsky, 22.

¹⁸Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 6.

¹⁹Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 19.

²⁰Jameson, 18.

²¹See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

²²Betsky, 31. On the audience's role in decoding the meaning of popular texts, see John Fiske, "Television: Polysemy and Popularity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1986): 391–408. Like Frederic Jameson, I believe that popular culture contains longings that are subversive of the status quo. See Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 130–149.

²³Gillis, 9.

²⁴United States Postal Service, "Postal Service Announces Celebrate the Century Program." Release no. 97-095, November 5, 1997.

²⁵Gillis, 14.

²⁶Gillis, 17. Also see David Thelen, "History-Making in America," *The Historian* 53 (1991): 631–48.

²⁷John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13–14.

²⁸The term "vernacular" has been employed by scholars in many disciplines, and has become a magnet for different meanings. Bodnar, for example, follows Susan G. Davis, who used the label "vernacular culture" to characterize street parades in antebellum Philadelphia. Davis contrasts vernacular communication with "industrial, commercial, and official modes of communication and media" in *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 15. Today, the boundary between "popular" and "commercial" is difficult to sustain or even detect: "there is no pure space outside of commodity culture," as Andreas Huyssen argues in "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 29. Rather than focus on the aesthetics and politics of production, scholars in architecture and critical ethnography have moved to the aesthetics of reception. On this view, "vernacular" can be applied to the reception or appropriation of existing artifacts. See, for example, essays in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III*, ed. Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett talks of "vernacular practices of connoisseurship" in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 259–281. For rhetorical theorists the notion of vernacular rhetoric holds the promise of recovering voices of "publics" that may have been muted by the technocratic discourse of poll-driven "public opinion." See especially Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

²⁹Sonja Foss was one of the first critics to address the persuasive power of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in "Ambiguity as Persuasion: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Communication Quarterly* 34 (1986): 326–40. Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci discuss it as a postmodern "text" that defies a univocal reading and suggest that it "may have altered the public commemorative norm for the foreseeable future" (282). Peter S. Hawkins sees such self-consciously postmodern "monuments" as the NAMES project AIDS memorial quilt as successors to "the intimate tableaux that mourners continue to create within the interstices of VVM" in "Naming Names: the Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenburg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 135. Gillis remarks that "the Vietnam Memorial, with its wall of names, is generally agreed to represent a turning point in the history of public memory, a decisive departure from the anonymity of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and a growing acknowledgement that everyone now deserves equal recognition at all times in wholly accessible places" (13). Boime contrasts the VVM with the Marine Corps Memorial "whose unity of purpose and single-minded perspective represented a nation undivided on the question of war." The VVM, as "an anti-heroic monument dedicated to a war in which there could be no heroes," was "inscribed from the outset by ordinary people capable of reinterpreting the dominant ideological discourse for their own purposes." See *The Unveiling of the National Icons: A Plea for Patriotic Iconoclasm in a Nationalist Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 308–309.

³⁰United States Postal Service, *Postal Bulletin*, 6 November 1997, 53.

³¹See Bill McAllister, "Marciano's Postal Punch," *Washington Post* 6 March 1998, N70; Jeff McLaughlin, "Late Rounds for a Stamp of 'Rocky,'" *Boston Globe*, 22 February 1998, 1.

³²The author visited George's Café in Brockton in January 2002.

³³The Government Relations review of the operations of the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee states that although "confidential minutes of each of Committee's meetings are maintained," they "summarize the individual stamp proposals discussed and their current status," but not "strategic policy decisions arrived at by the Committee." The report noted that "Committee members and Postal Service management officials present at the meetings tried to recall past events and decisions without the benefit of any written documentation. Although officials usually agreed, their individual interpretation of past decisions sometimes differed, which sparked debate as to what had previously

been decided." Among the "significant issues that were impacted by previous policy decisions" was the issue of "recognition of specific interests, sub-groups, and units." See Deborah K. Willwhite, "Review of the Operations of the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee—Management Advisory Report RG-MA-99-005," 27 July 1999.

³⁴Letter to Dr. Virginia Nolke, Chairperson, The Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee," 8 April 1999. (http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/correspondence/usps_4-8-99.html) In a telephone interview on September 18, 2001, Dr. Nolke denied knowledge of this petition.

³⁵United States Postal Service, "Postal Service Partners with the Department of Education's 'America Goes Back to School' Program." Release no. 98-106, 24 September 1998.

³⁶"Postal Service Partners."

³⁷Stephen H. Browne, "Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 176.

³⁸Diane White, "The Sticky Side of Stamp Choices," *Boston Globe*, 19 February 1998, C1.

³⁹Rainbow Powell, "90s Stamps Take Licking," *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 June 1999, 19.

⁴⁰Arthur Hirsch, "Stamp Out Smoking," *Baltimore Sun*, 20 February 1999, 1E.

⁴¹Quoted in David Brown, "Stamped Out," *Washington Post*, 7 March 1999, B1.

⁴²Virginia Nolke, Telephone Interview, 18 September 2001.

⁴³United States Postal Service. *Criteria. Stamp Subject Selection. (Updated 8/01)*. (<http://www.new.usps.com/cgi-bin/uspsbv>)

⁴⁴Al Urbanski, "Don't Mail It In," *Promomagazine*, 1999.

⁴⁵Urbanski.

⁴⁶Bill McAlister, "The Power of the Ballot," *Washington Post*, 13 November 1998, 72.

⁴⁷Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 111.

⁴⁸Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (New York: Hall and Wang, 1985), 67.

⁴⁹Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 21.

⁵⁰Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 3.

⁵¹Barthes, 28–29.

⁵²Barthes, 30.

⁵³The concept of subject positioning (or interpellation) is explored in Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–185.

⁵⁴Greg Dickinson, "Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 18.

⁵⁵Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 3–20.

⁵⁶For a provocative critique of the Ellis Island Museum, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 177–187.

⁵⁷United States Postal Service, "Nancy Sinatra Joins U.S. Postal Service for Unveiling of Peace Symbol Stamp." Release no. 99-086, July 30, 1999.

⁵⁸Kent A. Ono and Derek T. Buescher, "Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpacking the Commodification of a Native American Woman," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 18 (2001): 28.

⁵⁹Quoted in Rhonda Cook, "Affirmative Action Lawsuit: Mayor Gets Political at MLK Stamp Event," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 29 August 1999, 2C.

⁶⁰Cook, 2C.

⁶¹Victor Volland, "Stamp Unveiling Pales Next to Snazzy Train Exhibit," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 16 May 1999, D3.

⁶²I have in mind Kenneth Burke's famous definition of form as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires": "a work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence." See Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 124.

⁶³Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 259.

⁶⁴Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 18.

⁶⁵David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 295–296.

⁶⁶Lyotard ponders what new language games can secure legitimacy after the erosion of metanarratives. He points out that narrative ("the little narrative") "remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention." See *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv–xxv, 60.

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