Kym Brindle

Wish I Was There

Economies of Communication in Annie Proulx's *Postcards* and "Brokeback Mountain"

"I went to the little two-by-four post office and wrote my aunt a penny postcard. We went back to the gray road."

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)

Abstract: Annie Proulx exploits the narrative possibilities of the picture postcard in the novel *Postcards* (1993) and in the celebrated short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1999). Ideas of place, landscape, journeying, and longing for home are encapsulated in picture postcards that symbolise geographic distance and emotional alienation. Postcards, freighted with extra-textual meaning derived from picture and place, symbolise spatial and emotional distance between sender and addressee: they are testimony to restless fragmented lives on the road. Proulx exploits structural irony with messages that symbolise the inescapable pull of home and a need to connect whilst remaining largely empty of any truth of experience. Avoidance and liberation from conventions of epistolary exchange are necessary functions for Proulx's regional narratives of exile and alienation.

1 Introduction

American novelist, Annie Proulx exploits the narrative possibilities of the picture postcard in her first novel *Postcards* (1993), which was the first novel written by a woman to win the PEN/Faulkner award. A postcard is also significant in Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain", which became part of the 1999 collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* and was then adapted for film in 2005.¹ Both novel and story develop the pictorial and souvenir possibilities of postcards. The form's self-reflexive potential is more prominent in the novel and is therefore more extensively explored in this essay. Postcards may, as Jeffrey Meikle observes, be "an ephemeral category of material artefact" (Meikle 2009: 112), but as an embedded epistolary strategy they serve two essential narrative functions for Proulx. Firstly, they subvert iconographic ideas of an American landscape tamed and reduced to national images or romanticised pastoral settings and,

1 The story was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1997.

secondly (specific to *Postcards*), they visually organise a fragmented tale of travel and separation. Proulx's regional narratives of exile and alienation stem from her observation that "the story will come from the landscape" (Skow 1999: n. pag.), and both texts discussed here typically focus on place, landscape, and journeying. Proulx evokes tensions between an idealistic tourist gaze and the harsh reality that subjugates those compelled to scrape an agrarian living from unforgiving territory. This chapter will consider the role of postcards for journeying, which I propose draws energy from the American road narrative. Postcards are epistolary emblems of travel; as Daniel Gifford observes, "postcards are almost instinctively imagined as by-products of travel" (Gifford 2013: 5) and, as such, they testify to restless lives "on the slow move" (Proulx 1993: 254) for Proulx's protagonists, Loyal Blood in *Postcards*, and Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist in "Brokeback Mountain".² For Loyal, abruptly severed from roots and home, a sheaf of identical picture postcards symbolises his fugitive status where "you don't get anywhere except to a different place" (*PC*: 195). For Ennis, a souvenir picture postcard testifies to one special place – a paradise lost, whilst others in the story illustrate the hazards and delays of postal communication. This chapter will consider the ways in which the postcard – that most condensed of epistolary forms³ – contributes to contemporary conceptions of America and its myths of road, travel, and self-discovery.

Road fables have a long-standing presence in popular American culture, as noted by Ronald Primeau (1996: 1), who claims that "since the 1950s readers have been fascinated by who goes on the road as well as why, when, and where they go and what they discover along the way". Theodore Dreiser's 1916 *A Hoosier Holiday* is usually identified as the first 'automobile road book', but, of course, the most well-known example is Jack Kerouac's 1957 American Beat generation novel, *On the Road*, with its iconic counterculture celebration of individualism. Travel stories tend to focus on the romance of the road, developing ideas of adventure and freedom, often with a focus on masculinity and liberation. The genre is grounded in pioneering ideals of 'going West' supported by the pervasive ideology of the American Dream that includes "the importance of: individual and national freedom, independence, and mobility; democratic space in a simultaneously present and vanished frontier" (Slethaug and Stacilee 2012: 4). Notions of freedom and individualism, and ideas of spiritual growth and quest are a driving force in road tales founded on frontier mythology, with the frontier famously explained by Frederick Turner in 1893 as "the outer-edge of the wave – the meet-

² Hereafter referred to parenthetically as (*PC*) and (*BM*).

³ With the possible exception of the telegram.

ing point between savagery and civilization” (Turner 1893: n. pag.) Proulx’s insistent preoccupation with Turner’s unstable line between savagery and civilization challenges the myths associated with the American frontier. Her fiction subverts ideals of frontier conquest dismantling notions of a mythological West of opportunity and personal freedom. “Brokeback Mountain”, with its deterministic depiction of “country boys with no prospects” (*BM*: 284), highlights the failure of key concepts of the American Dream, as does the struggle of the Blood family in *Postcards* who haplessly watch the disintegration of family and farm.

Proulx aligns postal culture with the tradition of the American road narrative. Post and road are indeed inextricably linked; as Esther Milne (2014: 306) observes, “metaphors of transportation and travel, of arrival and departure, of traversing distance and imagining presence define the epistolary register”. On their introduction in the late nineteenth century postcards offered a cheap and fast form of communication. Plain cards evolved in Austria and Germany in the 1870s, with picture postcards spreading across Europe and reaching England in 1894. They provided a new and condensed physical space for text that demanded a different style of writing and economic use of language. The 1893 Chicago Exposition stimulated the first widespread use of privately printed picture postcards in the United States, with Rural Free Delivery established in 1898. As Rosamond Vaule (2004: 48) points out, “at a time when the telephone was not yet an integral part of the American household, postcards provided both a visual and written link, whether from across town or across the nation”. Rise in popularity of the picture postcard reflects the expansion of the United States from small town rurality to an urban, consumerist superpower.⁴ Postcards were, as Allen Freeman-Davis (2002: 1) argues, very much part of the “emerging world of consumption, advertising, and accelerated communication”. Davis further suggests that “to travel and not buy postcards is almost to deny that you went on a trip. Postcards enabled the tourist to preserve the memory of travel, and to put those memories in order” (Davis 2002: 4). There were concerns that the postcard’s missing envelope exposed the epistolary message to potential unauthorized reading; postcards may have gained the convenience of brevity, but they lost confidentiality and the postcard had to be accepted as an open form of communication that mutates the epistolary privacy pact. The key fact that postcards offer a semi-public form of address that is personal, but not private is not, however, a problem for Proulx’s reticent men of few words.

⁴ George Eastman’s development of photographic equipment fuelled the postcard boom and cards became widely available in general stores across the country. Kodak facilitated the printing of private photo cards and the tourist industry, encouraged by the railways, promoted souvenir cards.

Typically succinct and often evasive, postcards are an ideal epistolary vehicle for Proulx's 'dirty realist' representation of tough, terse masculinity. Outlined in 1983 by Bill Burford, dirty realism was explained as a new type of writing with "a different scope" that focussed on "the belly side of contemporary life", "devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture [...] strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies" (Burford 1983: 4). What is particularly pertinent for this discussion is Burford's claim that the genre's stylistics are characterised by sentences "stripped of adornment, [...] it is what's not being said – the silences, the elisions, the omissions – that seem to speak most" (Burford 1983: 5). Elisions and omissions are also essential characteristics of postcard communication, with limited space offering ready excuse for those who prefer to say little. David Henkin (2006: 174) points out that "the postcard tendency was the reduction of correspondence to formal gestures", a point echoed by Bernard Siegert, who argues that "in principle, the postcard was therefore nothing but a stamp that could be written on; it reduced the materiality of communication to its bare economy" (Siegert 1999: 154).

Significantly, Proulx explains that postcards were a narrative device that enabled her to "enlist the aid of the reader in filling in the blanks" (Bray 1992: n. pag.). Here, the narrative possibilities of the postcard as an epistolary medium become clear: truncated missives promote strategies of close reading inviting recipients to read between the lines and speculate beyond limited content. In this way, readers piece together a tale of separation and perceive different realities and viewpoints. As Janet Gurkin Altman argues "the narrative discontinuity inherent in the epistolary form affords interesting possibilities for elliptical, allusive writing, the creation of suspense, and juxtaposition of contrasting views or episodes" (Altman 1982: 183). Postcards frame sections of narrative and provide context for each chapter as well as visually highlighting epistolary relations to similarly sustain a focus on distance, travel and separation throughout the novel. The postcards frame chapters in dissimilar ways to epigraphs, which tend to make room for voices of historical authority or literary intertexts. They are examples of Gérard Genette's paratexts: "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold" (Genette 1997: 1). As "thresholds" visually distinct from the body of text, but narratively informative, they cause, as Bernard Duyfhuizen suggests, "the framing narrative and the framed tale to merge in interpretively significant ways" (Duyfhuizen 1992: 159). Abbreviated messages and abstracted meaning frustrate recipients and leave them puzzling over what is not said rather than simply accepting the economy of sparse words on the card. In this way, Proulx organises themes of alienation and distance – both geographic and emotional.

2 Postcards – Fragmentation and Irony

In Proulx's novel, material images of postcards form one element of a fragmented narrative. The novel depicts the decline of a farming family in post-war America. The first chapter opens with a murder scene and is headed by a postcard dated 1944; a final card dated 1988 prefaces the penultimate chapter. Forty-nine of the fifty-eight chapters are, in fact, prefaced with an image of a postcard. (These are mostly handwritten and often difficult to read.) Ten intermittent chapters, all with the same title "What I See", do not have a preface, and one further chapter is framed by an extract from a Fire Marshall's Report instead of a postcard; two more postcards appear mid-chapter. The Report extract is perhaps afforded preface privilege because, as Proulx's explains, the novel was, in fact, inspired by a Vermont fire marshal's report from the 1930s in conjunction with an actual picture postcard. A stack of cards with pictures of escaped convicts originally circulated as sheriff alerts was given to Proulx by a friend. In interview with Rosemary L. Bray of *The New York Times*, Proulx states: "I had a few and found them haunting, absolutely disturbing" (Bray 1992: n. pag.). The character Loyal Blood was spurred on by the "arresting" face on one particular card and her fictional "character jumped forward at once" (Bray 1992: n. pag.).

As prefaces, cards in *Postcards* are written by various correspondents ranging from officials and doctors, to an opportunist neighbour turned realtor, and a relative of murdered Billy's querying her disappearance. All the Blood family write postcards at some point, with eleven signed by Loyal and a further unsigned anonymous card in his handwriting. The postcards provide snapshots of individual family characters: aggressive, blunt communication from violent, bullish patriarch Mink Blood, indicative of his "monotonous ideas and narrow corridors of toil" (PC: 19); (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 "Mink's Revenge"

His wife, Jewell Blood, “crushed [by him] into a corner of her life” – a domestic life of “profound sameness” (*PC*: 143) – writes despairingly to her eldest son, “Come home” (*PC*: 124). Brother Marvin (Dub), ironically the son with “wandering habits” (*PC*: 18), reveals “pent rage” (*PC*: 55) at Loyal’s abandonment of responsibility for farm and family to him; cards detail a spell in prison, a subsequent dubious rise in fortunes, and then “tax problems” that cause these to fall again. And for sister Mernelle, desperate for love and connection beyond the farm, postcards are eagerly awaited, a joyous anticipation of the wider world and passport to a different life; she corresponds first with a pen-pal and then conducts an epistolary romance with a “lonely hearts prisoner” (*PC*: 132) who advertises in the newspaper for a wife. The ironies multiply as the family all receive marketing cards offering wry advertisement for a new consumerist America: “the fancy arm. The prosthesis” (*PC*: 49) for Dub, who lost a limb jumping from a moving freight train; electric fences for Mink – unrealised promise of modernisation for the farm that might have saved it and him; “Rudy’s Car City” (*PC*: 237) for Jewell, who finds brief freedom on the road before a car accident results in her death.

In this way, postcards organise the dark thread of irony that stitches the fragmented novel together. As Linda Hutcheon (1994: 35) explains, “irony is a ‘weighted’ mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid”. As a narrative strategy, postcards realise Proulx’s fascination for “watching for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them” (TMR 1999: n. pag.). The ‘skew’ takes shape with irony realised as the “silent and the unsaid” of postcards’ elliptical gaps. Bleak, typical Proulx mischance forces swift and unpredictable change for Loyal Blood, who echoes pioneer ideology when he abruptly announces his departure from the family farm: “we’re pullin’ out and going out west, someplace out there, buy a farm, make a new start” (*PC*: 10). This is dishonest and ironic, on all levels. The novel has opened with a murder – possibly accidental – we never know, but this event forces Loyal’s involuntary exile from the farm he loves to an unhappy life on the road.⁵ With no desire to venture further than the fence line of his own property – it was, in fact, girlfriend Billy, who longed to escape a future “on your goddamn farm” (*PC*: 81), holed-up in a world she scorns. Now dead and secretly buried by Loyal, she ironically stays behind on the land that Loyal loves and is consequently exiled from.

⁵ Details of the tragedy remain ambiguous to the end of the novel: we know that Billy suffocated in the mud during sexual intercourse/rape, but it is unclear whether this was because Loyal blacked out or succumbed to the “The Blood temper” (*PC*: 18).

In rare internal recognition of irony, Loyal sets out “down on the town road he thought it was a sour joke how things had turned out” (*PC*: 13).

Postcards highlight a contradiction between appearance and reality by revealing a gulf between Loyal Blood’s life as represented in infrequent messages home, and the reality of the world he, in fact, experiences on the road – the world we read about in the main body of text. Irony is further developed as readers become privy to unrecognised catastrophes in the world he writes back to. With no dreams of freedom or frontier, Loyal’s road narrative is less quest and more dismal recording of estrangement from home. With no itch to escape (unlike brother Dub, and sister Mernelle), no desire for travel or new experience, he suffers greatly from what Proulx has elsewhere termed “the substitution of the steering wheel for the curve of the earth” (Proulx 2008: 23). In permanent exile, he is condemned to a restless geographic odyssey with no planned destination. “He didn’t think where he was going, just heading out. It seemed to him there didn’t have to be a direction, just a random travelling away from the farm. It wasn’t the idea that he could go anywhere, but the idea that he had to go somewhere, and it didn’t make any difference where” (*PC*: 26). He did not want to leave his rural heritage – his ambition and identity are bound and fixed with the farm, and he remains forever ‘loyal’ to the memory of it. Alienated from home and family, the road for Loyal is hence always identified as the “wrong road”; “a back road”; “a dusty road;” “empty dirt roads”; a “lonely road”.

Proulx’s neo-Regionalism comprehensively distorts the road narrative tradition. For Loyal, what becomes of his life and what forms the bulk of the narrative is not the lost family farm or the soured dream of a new one, but his perpetual journeying: “He’s not sure where he is. So many roads look the same, the repetitive signs, the yellow stripe to the horizon. The same cars and trucks are repeated over and over” (*PC*: 308). In a discussion of travel and landscape, Proulx reveals distaste for the automobile:

The invention and manufacture of the automobile and paved high-ways provided the national psyche with a surrogate frontier. By 1927, 26 million cars stank and jarred around the country, each driver a pioneer. For the following generation, the mythic drive from coast-to-coast became a rite of passage; and the road book, an important American literary form. (Proulx 2008: 17)

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the protagonists of her fiction are focussed on survival rather than redemptive travel experience. Poverty and hardship remove them from ideals of social protest and they take to the road purely for economic survival. The “unsecured scaffolding” (*PC*: 253) of Loyal’s rootless wanderings include prospecting for uranium; trying to scrape a bare living as a bone digger, then trapper,

and a brief experience of farming his own land. Realising the cherished dream of land ownership goes literally up in smoke, as his farm, just like his home, burns to the ground uninsured. “Brokeback Mountain”’s “pair of deuces going nowhere” (*BM*: 285) similarly depicts economic plight and, more significantly, social and cultural outlawing of taboo love. These are dirty realism’s “stories not of protest but of the occasion for it” (Burford 1983: 5).

3 Postcards – Function and Form

Altman’s point that “within the epistolary work the letter has both a dependent and independent status” (Altman 1982: 167) is similarly applicable to the postcard. Dependently, they work to contextualise chapters and fill gaps in the main narrative, but independently, and visually, they remind of distance – literal and metaphorical. The content of the cards may initially appear somewhat random, but, as prefaces, they organise Proulx’s distinctive black irony – the “discomforting and sometimes elusive irony” that Burford identifies as the stylization of dirty realist stories (Burford 1983: 4). Independently, they offer minimal information in coded messages that require active, close, and speculative reading alert to sub-textual messages; they promote a style of reading that may generate misreading on very little information. Dependently they are linked to the topic of each chapter signalling often abrupt shifts in direction to emphasise that this is a work of textual fragments. As fragments, they offer no overt continuity, but Loyal’s do chart a broad chronological guide to a wandering life: his eleven postcards plot a simple linear (if deceptive path) through an unhappy life in exile. They are marked by repeated expressions of ironic hope that the farm is “doing good” (*PC*: 56), illustrating stark irony between postcard sentiment and reality. His postcard messages barely skim the surface of a chaotic world of random misfortune on the road, and lack of exchange leaves him blind to home disasters: fires, lost farms, lost babies, both parents lost to suicide and accident – incalculable loss and no gain – dirty realism’s strange and fated stories.

As Loyal’s only link with home, postcards provide fragmented and deceiving testimony. Dufhuysen posits that “the framed tale, we often discover, is centered on questions of human contact and transmission” (Dufhuysen 1992: 158). In this case, Proulx’s focus is on motion and movement away from the centre, with the postcard a slender and unsatisfying transmission of human contact. A shuffle of illgotten postcards – all with the same image of the “thick-bodied bear with a red snout coming out of the black trees” (*PC*: 33) become Loyal’s only point of contact with his family. For Loyal, the road stretches longer, places become many, and connection with home more and more distant, but the bear postcard remains con-

Figure 2: “Shotguns”

stant. As intermittent, but persistent contact with family, the card’s epistolary journey is always homeward and it repeatedly drops into the Blood family mailbox. Gifford argues that postcards seldom carried a substantial linear message and Loyal’s reflect this with spare and evasive messages that throw new emphasis on the picture. The bear represents Loyal’s enduring psychic return to an unbearable, profound loss. The relationship between sender and image thus provides a symbolic and material medium for the condition of exile. Hunted and “unbalanced in mind” (PC: 36), the bear was a popular tourist attraction before suddenly disappearing from view. Captured on film by an amateur photographer, the bear, as a postcard image, signifies careless consumer sentiment – the natural world unsympathetically hijacked by a greedy, unthinking tourist gaze. The history of the card is explained in a brief dedicated chapter entitled “A Short, Sharp Shock”, with a postcard preface dated 1926. The card closes a narrative gap to explain the bear’s disappearance – a victim of rural modernisation, the information that the bear is electrocuted exemplifies the function of the postcard as preface (see figure 3).

Figure 3: “A Short, Sharp Shock”

4 Picture Postcards – Image Based Messages

As visual media, postcards supply an aesthetics of the post in Proulx's novel; there are no postmarks, but dates are usually given, and most cards are handwritten. Handwriting has always been bound up with ideas of authenticity (an abiding concern of Proulx's). Simulated handwriting emulates ideas of a verifiable trace of paper to body; as Johanna Drucker (1995: 62) maintains, "personal writing' is always an inscription of the individual within the symbolic". The postcard bear symbolises Loyal's alienation from his natural habitat, where "the smooth fields were echoes of himself in the landscape" (*PC*: 85). His brief, undetailed, and dissembling written messages are not explicit and the postcard image is misunderstood and not read symbolically or even sympathetically by family addressees. The handwritten cards may visually suggest "inscription of the individual" (Drucker 1995: 62), but fundamentally they accentuate a paradox of contact and separation. Their multiplicity and constraints of epistolary form further add to their frustration: "another bear postcard for Jewell, written in Loyal's handwriting, so small it was a nuisance to read it" (*PC*: 40–41). Cards begin with the signature, "son Loyal", later condensed to "Loyal", and eventually reduced forty-three years later to an impersonal "L.B" – an erosion of 'loyalty' and 'blood' ties that indicates widening material, if not emotional, distance.

"Brokeback Mountain"'s postcards are the epistolary means of closing what is in many ways an insurmountable social and geographic distance. The text is less overtly structured by postcards than the novel, but they do supply the necessary epistolary medium to organise Jack and Ennis's long-distance, thinly-stretched relationship. For a love affair marked by hiatus, postal communication is vital to arrange infrequent meetings that barely bridge "the great gulf" (*BM*: 287) between the lovers.⁶ A fragile epistolary chain of communication typifies a relationship characterised by delay, waiting, anticipation, with time lapses often felt interminable: "never enough time, never enough" (*BM*: 307). In this way, the story's cards draw on a more traditional epistolary exchange, echoing strong links to sentimentality and the genre of romance of letter tradition in its early formation. In this guise, postcards more closely manifest the conditions of epistolary presence and absence, what Anne Bower suggests is "so essential to letters – an agonizing pull between here and there, intimacy and separation, bonds and barriers, time present and future (or past and present), the tangible and the intangible" (Bower 2014: 16; original emphasis). It is by postcard that ab-

⁶ Jack's first contact with Ennis after a four-year gap is by letter. Postcards are their means of communication thereafter.

sence is made final and barriers become permanent when Ennis learns of Jack's death by post: "Ennis didn't know about the accident for months until his postcard to Jack saying that November still looked like the first chance came back stamped DECEASED" (*BM*: 311; original emphasis). Such abrupt closure of epistolary presence as third-person impersonal despatch of devastating news is similarly emphasised in *Postcards*, when Jewell and Mernelle write in a vain attempt to Loyal to let him know that his father has died, with a card addressed to "Mr. Loyal Blood (works at mines) General Delivery, Colorado" (*PC*: 124). The card is unsurprisingly returned: "ADDRESS UNKNOWN" (*PC*: 124; original emphasis), a poignant illustration that Loyal truly is "lost out in the world" (*PC*: 128).

In different ways, therefore, both texts reflect ideas of epistolary presence, as posited by Esther Milne (2010: 2):

presence is a term that need not refer always to *material, corporeal* presence. Rather presence is an effect achieved in communication (whether by letters, postcards or email, for example) when interlocutors imagine the psychological or, sometimes, physical presence of the other.

However, this argument is based on epistolary dialogue – a component missing from the Blood family postal transaction. With no return address (excepting the final vague "Coffee Pot, Michigan", (*PC*: 330), the bear image consistently anonymises location, thereby denying presence and continually frustrating recipients: "'How come he don't put no return address on these things,' asked Jewell, turning the postcard over and frowning at the bear. 'How does he expect us to answer him? How are we supposed to tell him anything that's went on'" (*PC*: 42). As the family disintegrates and the farm is destroyed by fire, all Loyal's immediate family rail against the 'empty' communication of his postcards

'Bloods been running on empty since Loyal lit out. Damn him, sends his damn postcards every year or so but never lets us know where to write. You realise he don't even know Pa's dead? ... Sends his dumb bear postcards. How many of those bears have we got to see? What makes him think I want to hear from Him? I don't care about his damn postcards'. (*PC*: 249)

The key difference between Loyal Blood's multiple "dumb bear postcards" and Ennis Del Mar's single picture postcard is the absence of location; the two texts therefore diversify ideas of the image based message. Unlike Loyal's stack of postcards, Ennis buys just one. Declaring "one's enough" (*BM*: 317), his card is not destined for postal transaction like Loyal's, but is kept and treasured as a souvenir of place to support imagination and memory. Ennis's card, to borrow Mark Asquith's phrase is "landscape reduced to postcard sublimity" (As-

quith 2009: 29) that fixes nostalgic memory and idealisation of place and the past.⁷ It is treasured as an *aide-memoire* that in some small way closes an impossible gap in space and time. Susan Stewart suggests, “the souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia” (Stewart 1993: 135). Materially embodying symbolic meaning and fashioning memory as a sacramental object that feeds nostalgia, the picture postcard is all that remains of the “imagined power of Brokeback Mountain” (*BM*: 316). In this way, the absolute focus on place for Ennis’s souvenir image contrasts with Loyal’s absent location and denial of postal contract.

In dissimilar, and less material ways, cards nonetheless function as a metaphor to tie memory to place in *Postcards*. On the day that Loyal unwillingly sets out on the road, he ‘fixes’ the familiar landscape in his memory with a final glance at the farm. Place is already reshaping in the form of a tourist image suggestive of an elemental trinity of sky, water, and land framed as an idealised postcard image. This will shape memory as narrative to be revisited again and again over long time:

The place was as fixed as a picture on a postcard, the house and barn like black ships in an ocean of fields, the sky a membrane holding the final light, and there were the blurred kitchen windows and up behind the buildings the field, the rich twenty-acre field propped open toward the south like a Bible, the crease of the water vein almost exactly in the centre of the ten-acre pages. (*PC*: 14)

The production processes of nostalgic memory are thus made visible. Loyal believes that “the unsecured scaffolding of his life rested on forgetting” (*PC*: 253), but the imagined picture postcard is imprinted on his memory as a story-book memory of the past. It illustrates pure landscape unpolluted by the highway and Proulx’s “stinking and jarring” automobiles. It reflects Hutcheon’s outline of nostalgia whereby “the simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present – which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational” (Hutcheon 1998: n. pag.). Perpetually in motion, Loyal’s ‘home’ on the road is a contaminated, difficult, and ugly present: an anarchic jangling of sounds far removed from the elegiac lost landscape: “cow-boy bars were his living rooms and he had a thousand from Arizona to Montana”

7 Actual picture postcards were subject to much reshaping of reality. Hyperreal colours fed technicolour memories putting a bright slant on what might have been a less vivid reality. See Jeffrey Meikle (2016) on the Curt Teich company’s production of linen postcards.

(*PC*: 253); their sounds – “jukebox, click of cues, cooler door slamming, chair leg scrape, talk” were “home sounds for him” (*PC*: 254). Hutcheon suggests that nostalgia is “rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” (Hutcheon 1998: n. pag.). Shaped by unhappy journeying, Loyal idealises the past in nostalgic (but deceptive) memory and the present and the road are purely an extended passage of mourning for his loss.

The final one of ten naturalistic chapters entitled “What I see” revisits the postcard-styled image that Loyal retains in memory. In the beginning the land was shaped as a biblical narrative, but at the end of his life it is his one time travelling companion, Blue Skies, and the palimpsest of his book – “the Indian’s book. His book” (*PC*: 109) – that rewrites landscape as “the close-stitched earth, the root, the rock” (*PC*: 340). This text is a more authentic record than the unadorned framework of his postcards. He tentatively becomes confident to write: “things he planned to do, song lyrics, distances travelled, what he ate and what he drank” (*PC*: 109), as a more detailed, honest, and private record of journeying than the sparse, allusive postcards with their mystifying symbolism.

5 Conclusion

Postcards occupy a special place in epistolary culture forging connections between letter writing and digital communication. The brevity of reduced, often cryptic messages anticipates adaptations of epistolary culture that have become commonplace in subsequent texting and message technologies. Postcards may be freighted with extra-textual meaning derived from picture and place, but they are also in many ways imperfect and flawed motifs of epistolary communication. Any epistolary transmission is inherently fragmented, but further fragmentation of the message is driven by the spatial constraints of postcards, which compel writing to be modified for a condensed postal transaction. As Altman observes “epistolary narrative is by definition fragmented narrative. Discontinuity is built into the very blank space that makes of each [postcard] a footprint rather than a path” (Altman 1982: 169). Brevity of form and typical one-way communication may, in fact, come to symbolise geographic distance and emotional alienation as much as reinforce connection between sender and addressee. The gestures and economy of postcard writing therefore dovetail with the halting and evasive style of communication that tends to characterise Proulx’s torturous relationships. In a rough-and-ready western world that comprehensively debunks the Western mythology of the cowboy, the frontier, and pioneer spirit, personal relationships are typified by the restricted formality of postcard epistolary trans-

action. Moreover, Proulx's ready acknowledgement of a writing strategy of elision where "the reader writes most of the story" (Bray 1992: n. pag.) readily coincides with the gaps and delays of postcard transmission. Proulx's theme of landscape and dirty realist techniques draw on epistolary strategies as clear links to travel, home, and the land seen from the perspective of those who suffer and work it, emphasising, as Ennis del Mar concludes, "if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (*BM*: 318). Failing this, take to the unhappy road.

Works Cited

- Altman, Janet Gurkin. 1982. *Epistolarity. Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Asquith, Mark. 2009. *Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" and Postcards. Continuum Contemporaries*. London: Continuum.
- Bower, Anne. 2014. *Epistolary Responses. The Letter in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Criticism*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Bray, Rosemary. 1992. "The Reader Writes most of the Story". *New York Times Books*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/23/specials/proulx-postcards.html>> [accessed 20 July 2017].
- Burford, Bill. 1983. *Granta 8: Dirty Realism. New Writing from America*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Davis, Allen F. 2002. *Postcards from Vermont. A Social History, 1905–1945*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Drucker, Johanna. 1998. *Figuring the Word. Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics*. New York: Granary Books.
- Duyfhuizen, Bernard. 1992. *Narratives of Transmission*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Genette, Gerard. 1997. *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gifford, Daniel. 2013. *American Holiday Postcards. 1905–1915. Imagery and Context*. Jefferson, NC.: McFarland & Company.
- Henkin, David. 2006. *The Postal Age. The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1994. *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1998. "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern". <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>> [accessed 2 February 2017].
- Kerouac, Jack. 2000/1957. *On the Road*. London: Penguin.
- Meikle, Jeffrey L. 2009. "Pasteboard Views: Idealizing Public Space in American Postcards, 1931–1953". In: Miles Orvell & Jeffrey L. Meikle (eds.). *Public Space and the Ideology of Place in American Culture*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 111–133.
- Meikle, Jeffrey L. 2016. *Postcard America. Curt Teich and the Imaging of a Nation, 1931–1950*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Milne, Esther. 2010. *Letters, Postcards, Email. Technologies of Presence*. London: Routledge.

- Milne, Esther. 2014. "Postcards". In: Merriman & Mimi Sheller (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*. London: Routledge. 306–315.
- Primeau, Ronald. 1996. *Romance of the Road. The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Proulx, Annie. 2003/1993. *Postcards*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Proulx, Annie. 2000/1999. *Close Range Wyoming Stories*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Proulx, Annie. 2008. "Dangerous Ground: Landscape in American Fiction". In: Timothy R. & Wendy J. Katz (eds.). *Regionalism and the Humanities*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 6–25.
- Siebert, Bernhard. 1999. *Relays. Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Skow, John. 1999. "On Strange Ground". *Time Magazine* May 17. <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/09171,990992,00.html>> [accessed 13 February 2017].
- Slethaug, Gordon E. & Ford Stacilee. 2012. (eds.). *Hit the Road, Jack: Essays on the Culture of the American Road*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.
- Staff at TMR, 1999. "Interview with Annie Proulx". *The Missouri Review* 22. <<http://www.missourireview.com/index.php?genre=Interviews&title=Interview+with+Annie+Proulx>> [accessed 13 February 2017].
- Stewart, Susan. 1993. *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1893. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". *Modern History Sourcebook*. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1893turner.html>> [accessed 13 February 2017].
- Vaule, Rosamond B. 2004. *As We Were. American Photographic Postcards, 1905–1930*. Boston: David R. Godine.