The Suffrage Postcard Project: A Replica Archive

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by guest contributor Ana Stevenson

At the 2017 Australian Historical Association Conference, in a panel about digital history, Professor Victoria Haskins discussed what she described as a "replica archive." Haskins' research is concerned with Indigenous domestic servants in Australia and the United States – women whose lives, she rightly notes, are often difficult to uncover in the archives. Technology, however, has fundamentally changed the relationship historians have with archives. Following the hours and hours of archival research undertaken across her **long and distinguished career < https://www.newcastle.edu.au/profile/victoria-haskins>** , Haskins has amassed copious photographs and photocopies which feature the voices of these women. Bringing together these photographic fragments from many archives, Haskins suggests, creates a new archive – a replica archive.

[The Suffrage Postcard Project < http://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/>](http://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/) can likewise be seen as a replica archive. Women's suffrage postcards, though considered ephemeral at their time of production, were numerous. Postcard scholar Kenneth Florey suggests that more than 1000 suffrage-related postcards were printed in the United States during the 1910s and approximately 2000 in Britain.[1] Suffrage memorabilia more generally was received enthusiastically by the American and British public, especially in the years prior to World War I.[2]

The majority of the women's suffrage postcards were printed during the 1910s, a decade which would see the acquisition of qualified suffrage for British women in 1918 and the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in the United States by 1920. This era is broadly described by scholars as the "golden age" of picture postcards.[3]
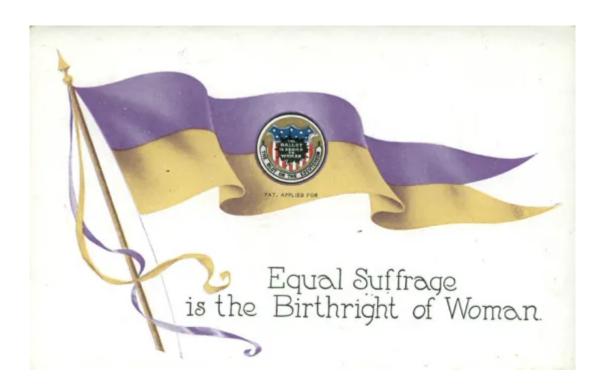
Image courtesy of the Catherine H. Palczewski Postcard Archive, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

Women's suffrage postcards were so numerous, in fact, that even today such ephemera is not inscrutably hidden in the archives. Many archival collections, especially those which focus upon women's history, hold large collections of suffrage postcards – for example, at Harvard University's Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America and the Women's Library at the London School of Economics. Such collections feature both pro-suffrage and anti-suffrage postcards, which were predominantly produced during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Suffrage organizations and commercial publishers alike produced women's suffrage postcards.

But the partial nature of such collections, together with the geographical dispersion of the archives themselves, means scholars can only ever gain a fragmentary perspective. Though archives such as these are partially digitized, they are often largely inaccessible to the public. Aware of such limitations, Florey published his seminal work, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards: A Study and Catalog* (2015). Bringing together digitally as many women's suffrage postcards as possible, The Suffrage Postcard Project goes a step further.

The Suffrage Postcard Project is therefore an attempt to bring together as many women's suffrage postcards as possible, and thus create a replica archive. It features < http://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/acknowledgements> postcards from the personal collections of Catherine H. Palczewski < http://www.uni.edu/palczews/NEW%20postcard%20webpage/Postcard%20index.html >, Joan Iverson < https://drjoaniversen.com/womens-suffrage-postcards/> , Ann Lewis < http://lewissuffragecollection.omeka.net/> , and Kenneth Florey < http://womansuffragememorabilia.com/> , as well as postcards from various special collections in the United States. This replica archive centers upon women's suffrage postcards in a way that fragmented collections cannot and is also easily accessible to the public.

Image courtesy of the Catherine H. Palczewski Postcard Archive, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

The postcards are now available as an ever-expanding digital corpus. The field of digital humanities has presented other pertinent questions for conceptualizing such a digital corpus, specifically in relation to the nature and meaning of "the archive." Historians, literary and feminist scholars, and library and archive professionals have very different understandings of what constitutes an archive. "In a digital environment," Kenneth M. Price concludes, "*archive* has gradually come to mean a purposeful collection of surrogates."[4] Kate Theimer further argues that it is important for digital humanists to understand the differing ways in which archivists understand what constitutes "archive" and how collections are created.[5] Haskins's concept of the replica archive might help

reconcile these disciplinary, methodological, and conceptual differences, as it forces practitioners' cognizance of the created and curated nature of the digital archive.

This format enables scholars to apply new research methods. Tagging the themes which appear in women's suffrage postcards necessitates finding language to describe visual themes. Jacqueline Wernimont and Julia Flanders discuss the process whereby they encode literary texts for the Women Writers Project. This process, they argue, entails "many of the same difficulties encountered when reading it." Indeed, issues relating to "categorisation, explication, and description [are] central to digital text markup, forcing the digital scholar to grapple consciously with formal issues that might otherwise remain latent."[6]

So how do we identify the visual themes in the postcards? The process is called "tagging," wherein specific words are used to identify repetitive themes. Our **preliminary response < http://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/fall-2015>** was to consider how to apply thematic tags such as "public" versus "private," "domestic space," "wife" or "woman" versus "mother," "husband" or "man" versus "father," and the subtle but nonetheless significant semantic differences associated with each individual choice. Even the application of seemingly clear-cut concepts such as "pro-suffrage" and "anti-suffrage" could sometimes be nebulous. As my co-founder **Kristin Allukian < http://english.usf.edu/faculty/kallukian/>** and I worked together and alongside our research assistants, our discussions led us to expand upon how we initially conceptualized our **approach to tagging < http://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/methodology>** the visual themes.

Such digital methods, then, enable scholars to ask unprecedented research questions about the early-twentieth-century women's suffrage movement and its many detractors. This also provokes new questions, as well as the reconsideration of old assumptions.

For example, observable trends become incontrovertible when analyzed using digital methods. A scholar might discern that upper-middle-class adult white women are the primary subjects of suffrage cartoons. However, when this impression is considered across hundreds of postcards, other trends emerge: children and animals are ubiquitous; men often appear as the subject of debate; white working-class people are depicted somewhat regularly; racial stereotypes about Irish and Chinese immigrants are evident, although rare; and African Americans are conspicuous due to their absence. Scholars

were not formerly unaware of such trends, but a digital humanities approach provides stronger evidence for such thematic claims.
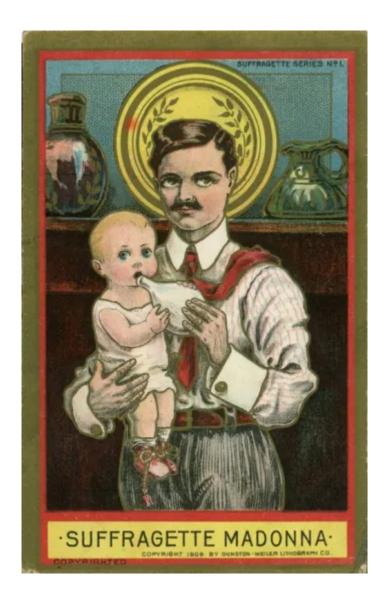

Image courtesy of the Catherine H. Palczewski Postcard Archive, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

Such research will contribute to the fields of women's history and feminist visual culture, but also has significance for the interpretation of images in intellectual history. My fellows and I are using digital humanities methods to gain new insights into questions of

print pigmentation, gender, race, class, and parenthood as represented in women's suffrage postcards.

The Suffrage Postcard Project also presents undergraduates with opportunities for intellectual development. Since 2015, undergraduate and masters research assistants from the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of South Florida have supported the digitization of the postcards. In addition to acquiring valuable digital humanities and public history skills, these students have based research projects around the women's suffrage postcards.

At the University of South Florida's 2017 **Undergraduate Research and Arts Colloquium < http://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/spring-2017>** , the 2016-2017 research assistants undertook an interview with **The Intersection < https://www.intersectionpod.com/>** podcast.

https://soundcloud.com/ashely-tisdale/thats-how-we-dh < https://soundcloud.com/ashely-tisdale/thats-how-we-dh>

The Suffrage Postcard Project is always looking out for new additions to our digital corpus, contributions which can enrich our replica archive. Should any interested reader have women's suffrage postcards from a personal or institutional collection they might like to share, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Our twitter handle is @Suff_Postcards .

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[1] Kenneth Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards: A Study and Catalog* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015).

[2] Kenneth Florey, *Women's Suffrage Memorabilia: An Illustrated Historical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013).

[3] Catherine H. Palczewski, "The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in 1909 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards," *Quarterly*

Journal of Speech 91, no. 4 (2005): 365; Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards*, 4.

[4] Kenneth M. Price, "Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What's in a Name?" *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (2009).

[5] Kate Theimer, "Archives in Context and as Context," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2012).

[6] Jacqueline Wernimont and Julia Flanders, "Feminism in the Age of Digital Archives: The Women Writers Project," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 29, no. 2 (2010): 432 and 427-428.