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Expressing the Self through Greeting Card Sentiment: Working Theories of Authentic Communication in a Commercial Form

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Expressing the Self through Greeting Card Sentiment:

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Abstract:

As mass produced vehicles of sentiment, greeting cards draw attention to the use of socially constructed codes for communicating, even feeling, emotion. This paper describes the results of interviews with fifty-one greeting card consumers, focusing on what makes greeting cards 'personal' for them, despite their mass-produced nature. Consumers negotiate their relationships with pre-printed sentiments differently depending on whether their allegiance is stronger to an expressive individualist understanding of authenticity or a ritual perspective, and these allegiances tend to reflect cultural capital. Specifically, suspicion of pre-printed sentiments is common among people with higher cultural capital, while this is the feature of greeting cards that is most important to other greeting card consumers. I argue that scholars should avoid taking an expressive individualist understanding of authenticity as a standard against which we evaluate mass culture and its consumption.

Keywords:

Authenticity, Sentiment, Cultural Capital, Communication, Self, Individualism, Ritual, Culture Industry, Consumption

Word Count: 7999

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Figure 1 - Adam@Home (c) 1997 Brian Bassett.

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In this installment of the comic Adam@Home, Adam's kids - shopping for a Father's Day card - abruptly realize that they are just another member of the mass audience looking for a card for the 'World's Greatest Dad.' Adam's son says, 'Now I'm really confused. If our Dad is the world's greatest Dad, who are all these other cards for?' Suddenly, their feelings seem a little less special, their gesture less authentic. As June Howard argues, '*sentiment* and its derivatives indicate a moment when emotion is *recognized* as socially constructed' (2001: 218, italics in original). As mass produced vehicles of sentiment, greeting cards draw attention to the use of publicly available, socially constructed codes for communicating, perhaps even feeling, emotion.

Part mass medium, part interpersonal communication, mass-produced sentiment creates cultural discomfort. Elsewhere I consider how and why this communicative form is gendered (West, 2009), how consumers respond to the design elements of cards (West, 2004), and how consumers approach paper cards now that there are electronic options available (West, 2002). Here I focus on

the pre-printed sentiment as a challenge to normative theories of what constitutes 'good' communication.

The use of pre-printed sentiments for personal expression is arguably the aspect of greeting card communication that most worries its many detractors, both scholarly and otherwise (Campbell, 2002; Hobson, 2000; Jaffe, 1999; Martin, 1997; Papson, 1986; Shank, 2004). Critics complain that appropriating pre-written texts is a sign of a decline in writing ability in the general population, and de-values a precious mode of self-expression. They worry that high rates of greeting card use illustrate how the market creates false needs, convincing consumers that they need help in interpersonal communication and that cards will do it better than they could alone. They also see greeting cards as a lazy and less authentic substitute for the best form of interpersonal correspondence, which would be a handwritten note or face-to-face talk. Greeting cards seem to fit with a general trend in consumer culture whereby we look to the market and to experts to fill our needs, becoming deskilled, passive, and dependent on the market in the process.

The most fundamental concern of the greeting card's critics is that sentiments, created by anonymous writers for corporate profit, will deaden our capacity for self-expression and 'speak us.' A form of popular culture like the greeting card may be an easy target for these critiques. After all, it is hardly only in greeting cards that we use social codes of communication, nor is this state of affairs unique to our historical moment. Rather, it is arguably endemic to the human condition. Consider Stuart Hall's (1977) reflection that, 'Language is, as Saussure insisted, fundamentally *social*. The individual can only think and speak by first situating himself within the language system' (328). In fact, D'Angelo (1992) likens the consumer's appropriation of greeting card sentiment to the way we appropriate words in everyday speech, asking 'do not all of the words we use come to us already stamped with the intentions and meanings of others?' (337-338)

The most common scholarly and lay analysis, informed by expressive individualism, is that greeting card sentiment is artificial -- its industrial nature disqualifying it as an authentic mode of communication. Greeting cards attract particular ire for imposing idealized, overly sentimental scripts for communicating emotion on society. They elevate worries about people's vulnerability to the messages of popular culture because their sentiments are not just learned or imitated, they are designed to stand in for our speech. Anxiety about greeting card communication is really anxiety about where the self ends and society begins; where individual thought ends and where socially defined scripts, codes, and performances begin.

In this paper I contrast expressive individualist perspectives with ritual theories of communication that emphasize how public codes and forms bring certainty and a sense of being connected to something 'larger than oneself' to communicative exchange (Durkheim, 1915; Turner, 1957). Pre-existing scripts and performative forms such as ceremonies can bring a sense of legitimacy and permanence to human endeavors. Hochschild (1983) and Goffman (1967, 1959) have demonstrated that apart from clearly designated ritual ceremonies, everyday life is also ritualized to a significant degree. Socially shared ideas about roles and rules of interaction shape our daily exchanges, down to the smallest gestures and pleasantries. Although contemporary culture places a great deal of emphasis on being a unique and singular individual, our most intimate thoughts and feelings are arguably shaped by socially learned codes. Taylor (1989) and Guignon (2004), informed by the dialogical approach of Bakhtin (1981), argue that the authenticity of the self necessarily involves the relationship of the self to others.

A ritual view of greeting cards draws attention to their tangibility – how they function as a 'digital' sign of relationships (Rappaport, 1979: 184). It acknowledges that greeting cards are part of the domestic work of keeping signs of affiliation and connection circulating among family and friends, usually part of 'women's work'. And a ritual view looks beyond the words on cards

themselves to consider how they work as objects. Much of their communicative power comes from how they index the time and effort, both emotional and physical, of the sender who must leave their home, enter the marketplace, select the 'right' card, fill it out, and mail it. Recipients report being moved by this evidence of effort as much as, and sometimes more than, the particular message of the card. Using James Carey's (1989) ritual view of communication, the way greeting cards communicate social meanings in a regularized way through time is more important than the particular message they might 'transmit' across space. From a ritual perspective, greeting card *sentiments* also 'work' because they draw on a socially accepted and understood language for caring and thoughtfulness. Because they draw on public symbolic resources, greeting cards link the legitimacy of the larger culture with the uncertainties of private experience. In the fraught realm of emotions and relationships, publicly, even commercially sanctioned scripts can be reassuring.

Authenticity as a Classed Concept

I've argued that the greeting card is an object of cultural ambivalence because it threatens a perspective on authentic communication informed by expressive individualism. I now argue that such a view of communicative authenticity is significantly classed in Western culture, such that those with high cultural capital are more likely to subscribe to this view of authenticity, while those with low cultural capital are more likely to perceive authenticity through a ritual perspective. We can observe this contrast in past research about lowbrow and middlebrow culture.

In Robert Drew's (2005) ethnographic investigation of karaoke, he explored a tension similar to that found in greeting card communication. Both practices are organized around the re-presentation of mass produced expression as one's own, and both are often labeled an inauthentic form of expression. Drew explains that karaoke's lack of respectability derives from the belief that it is an unoriginal, scripted iteration of a previous performance, and as such lacks the qualities of

originality and spontaneity that might constitute authentic self-expression. He draws attention to how modes of engaging with karaoke are classed, based on his observations in working-class and middle-class bars. Drew (2005) writes:

> From the perspective of a middle-class karaoke dilettante, reworking the lyrics or the vocal style of a song or just behaving bombastically while performing the song is perceived as a way of enlarging karaoke's communicative possibilities. But from the perspective of karaoke's working-class devotees, it is just the opposite. From their view, karaoke offers ample communicative potential as it is. Serious, mimetic performers can express a whole range of things depending on their song choices and the details of their performances, while ironic performers can express only one thing: irony. (380)

Drawing attention to the values that interfere with an unselfconscious enjoyment of karaoke, Drew (2005) writes, 'Valorizing individuality and originality, uncomfortable with the mimetic and the visceral, middle-class karaokists are hard-pressed to submit to such a mode of performance' (381). A similar tension confronts many taste-conscious consumers of greeting cards.

While Drew focuses on the tension between a lowbrow and middlebrow perspective on karaoke, Janice Radway (1997) describes the tension between a middlebrow and highbrow perspective on literature in her study of the *Book-of-the-Month Club*. Whereas 'sentiment' is a dirty word in 'literature,' Radway (1997) found that among the judges who picked *Book-of-the-Month Club* selections, sentimentality could be considered an asset if a book was perceived to extend the 'vocabulary of human emotion' and bring about emotional effects in readers (283). Radway (1997) argues that while highbrow reading is characterized by 'cognition and contemplation,' where the reader keeps the self carefully distinct and separate from the text, middlebrow reading is characterized by 'a sense of absorption and connection' (283-284). While the relationship between reader and book is not imitative, as in karaoke, the connection here is a sense of absorption and

strong identification between consumer and text, similar to the relationship between the sender of a greeting card and its sentiment.

Both Drew and Radway's work illustrate a general contrast that scholars of cultural consumption have observed between people with different kinds of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1984) observed that lower-middle and working class people embrace a popular aesthetic because of how it 'makes sense' for their lives lived on or close to the borders of necessity. This economic reality leads them to have a 'natural' preference for cultural objects that are useful in everyday contexts, bring pleasure, and draw on widely shared cultural codes. Whereas the popular aesthetic is associated with pleasure and real-life experience, the pure aesthetic of the higher classes is meant to be disinterested and to connote intellectual appreciation from a distance (Bourdieu, 1984). These different habitus can lead to different consumption practices and preferences in different cultural contexts, but the *logic* of the contrast between the pure and popular aesthetics should still hold.

Douglas B. Holt (1997) used Bourdieu's theory in his research on American cultural consumption, contrasting the consumption practices of people with Higher and Lower Cultural Capital (HCCs vs. LCCs). Holt (1997) argues that, 'HCCs experience the homogenizing potential of commodity goods to a far greater extent than do LCCs, and, so, are more energetic in their attempts to individuate their consumption…' (113). In contrast, for consumers of Lower Cultural Capital:

> Because for LCCs subjectivity does not require asserting individuality in relation to mass culture or normative local tastes, there is no contradiction between subjectivity, mass consumer goods, and the conventions of mass culture. In fact, mass goods and conventions often provide useful resources from which a local identity is constructed. (Holt, 1997: 114)

Building on the empirical findings and theoretical perspectives of these scholars, I argue that an inquiry about authenticity in consumption and communication must attend to cultural capital. It is tempting to view 'authenticity' as an essence, or a universal, but I demonstrate how notions of

authentic communication differ among people with different habitus. The field of greeting card communication provides a space to view notions of authenticity in play; these views guide consumption choices and are also a by-product of consumers' negotiations between the self and the mass-produced offerings of the market.

This essay examines greeting cards – an expressive form often assumed to inauthentic – in terms of the working understandings of authentic communication that consumers use. Consumers negotiate their relationships with pre-printed sentiments differently depending on whether their allegiance is stronger to an expressive individualist understanding of authenticity or a ritual perspective, and these allegiances tend to reflect cultural capital, as assessed mainly by formal education. Higher cultural capital is often associated with a desire to keep the self separate and distinct from culture, especially if it's mass-produced. In other words, consumers with higher cultural capital approach mass culture through the lens of distinction, while consumers with 'less' cultural capital are more likely to approach it through the lens of communication. In the realm of greeting cards, the latter consumers are more often willing to 'commune,' or feel deeply connected to pre-printed sentiments, and in turn to use these mass-produced missives as representations of the self in interpersonal communication.

I approach the theoretical debate about authenticity in an age of mass consumption through a relatively simple question. What makes a greeting card - a mass-produced sentiment available to anyone - personal to consumers? A number of my respondents, especially those from the 'higher cultural capital' end of the spectrum, rejected the idea that greeting card sentiments could be personal at all, and some reacted negatively to any pre-printed text on a card. They responded with discomfort to the idea that their unique feelings could ever be captured, not just by another person, but by a corporate entity that produces cards designed to be used by thousands of others. These consumers were more likely to see the cards they send as an opportunity for displaying aesthetic

taste and for original self-expression, through the words they compose on the card. In contrast, the perspective of those on the lower end of the cultural capital spectrum focused less on opportunities for creativity, and more on the use of greeting cards as a code that is distinct from everyday communication but operates by 'rules' with which they and friends and family are familiar. They were motivated more by the sociality of cards – their relational function, as well as the way sentiments can evoke and communicate feelings – than seeing cards as a 'blank canvas' upon which they can imprint their expressive selves. This approach emphasizes the connective qualities of culture rather than viewing it as a resource for distinction. Through these different card preferences and explanations of card consumption from across the spectrum of cultural capital, I locate consumer logics that conceptualize communicative authenticity quite differently.

The Study

This paper is based on field work with both consumers and producers of greeting cards in the United States. I carried out fifty-one face-to-face interviews with consumers from 2002 to 2003, primarily in the Philadelphia and Boston metropolitan areas. Informants ranged in age from their early twenties to their nineties. Forty-six of my informants were women (the vast majority of greeting cards are purchased by women), I interviewed 42 white consumers and nine people of color, and my informants represented a range of educational and occupational backgrounds. Table 1 illustrates how my interview respondents were distributed among the two variables I have mainly considered as indications of cultural capital: level of education attained (this variable is simplified into those who do and do not have a college diploma) and occupation (following as much as my data allow the formulations of Bourdieu (1984) and Holt (1997)).

Table 1

To observe patterns in how orientation to greeting card sentiment articulated with cultural capital, I split my sample of 51 between those who did and did not have a college diploma, leading to 33 people designated as 'higher cultural capital' (I included the five college students currently studying) and 23 as 'lower cultural capital'. Of course, this kind of categorization can be reductive, and indeed, this distinction does not capture situations such as my informant with a college degree who worked in a management role in a manual labor setting, or distinguish between the different kinds of white collar work that people did. Nevertheless, level of formal education completed is relevant when it comes to the question of appropriating the words of others to express oneself, given the emphasis on manipulation and mastery of language both in formal education and in the more professional occupations that more formal education may lead to.

Although the cruder typology of 'higher' and 'lower' cultural capital did correlate with some interesting differences in perspectives on greeting card sentiment at the aggregate level, at the individual level there are exceptions and complexities that defy the simplicity of a binary based on cultural capital. Familial, gender, generational, racial, ethnic, and professional identities were also relevant to individual responses to greeting card sentiments, and intersected with class habitus in important ways. I include as much of this context as is practical in order to provide a more nuanced image of individual habitus. Unsurprisingly, there were some individuals with college degrees who displayed a popular aesthetic when it came to greeting cards, and some individuals without college degrees who leaned towards a pure aesthetic. These 'crossovers' were more common in the former category than the latter, highlighting how a pure aesthetic orientation to greeting cards may serve as a fairly effective marker of distinction.

Each interview began with an exercise in which I showed informants six sets of cards, organized by occasions, and asked them to respond to them. Each set of three or four cards varied on a particular attribute or dimension, such as the style of design and the length of the sentiment. Then, I proceeded with questions about their card and correspondence habits, encouraging informants to think of particular stories or examples that illustrated the place of cards in their lives.

Distaste for Sentiment

Because sending greeting cards is a communication ritual that mainstream etiquette demands be sent, many 'higher cultural capital' consumers find cards and ways of using them that allow them to feel that their individuality shines through. Many of these informants maintained a distance between the self and mass-produced sentiments (recalling Radway's characterization of a highbrow approach to literature) by looking for pre-printed sentiments that were brief or simply stated, and focusing on their own written message, even within cards that have pre-printed sentiments.

Tina, a white mother of four and former schoolteacher, said she is sometimes attracted to longer sentiments, but that generally her preference is for the shorter, simpler sentiments that leave room for her to 'personalize it,' by which she means add her own message. 'Simple' refers to shorter sentiments that avoid poetic flourishes, such as rhyming or elaborate metaphors. For example, a Hallmark card that read 'Hope your birthday is very special…just like you' was often praised by my college-educated respondents for being simple and direct, and for leaving room for a personalized message.

The desire for 'simple' messages among my respondents resonates with industry attention to creating messages that are 'simply stated'. Certainly, the shorter and more concise the sentiment, the less likely it is to include feelings or details that don't apply to the occasion or the relationship, so the more 'sendable' it will be for more consumers. In addition, a shorter, more direct sentiment may

seem more sincere than a long, 'flowery' sentiment in which some consumers fear they come across as hiding behind the words of others. Both of these ideas appear in the response of Amanda, an Asian-American college student, to my query about how long the ideal greeting card sentiment would be. She replied:

> I think like two to four lines is okay. But I think when it says too much it kind of takes away from your personal meaning of it. And, it makes it harder to buy 'cause, it's more specifically saying something if you buy something with a lot of words in it.

Emma, a white married mother and white collar worker with some graduate education, also feels uncomfortable with longer sentiments but is quite happy to use shorter, more succinct ones. She prefers:

> …really simple text, like nothing too flowery or, I sometimes feel when the cards say a whole lot that they're trying to speak for me rather than letting me speak for myself. So I like the ones that are really simple.

The taste for 'simple' and 'brief' sentiments mirrors the taste for understated, 'clean' visual aesthetics on cards that many of these respondents also expressed.

In general, the respondents from the higher cultural capital end of the spectrum emphasized the importance of the greeting card as a vehicle for their own self-expression. They echoed the values and romantic ideals (rarely realized) of high culture when they invoked the importance of creativity and individuality in the textual components of cards (Becker, 1982). These consumers find products that signal high cultural capital, such as cards with literary quotes, or ironic and humorous cards, in order to signal their distance from the mass market, even while they continue to participate in it. Otherwise, they look for cards that are blank, or have brief sentiments that they can extensively add to, in order to make each card what they consider to be an authentic expression of themselves. They define this authenticity through writing their own thoughts rather than allowing the card to

'speak for them.' Carrie, a white college student who expressed clear distaste for greeting card sentiments, tries to send very few cards and explicitly connected her wariness of greeting cards with her attitude to mass media in general. Recalling a commercial she had seen, she said:

> But I mean, and it was like, you know 'Just what you want to say.' For Hallmark, something like, 'it's so personal, it's exactly in your words' even. And I'm like, you just can't, that's like the difference. That's why it not like that, it is mass media trying to be personal, but you can't actually cross that, and that's what they were doing in the commercial…

Pam, a white college-educated administrator in her twenties, also explained why she resists greeting card sentiment, displaying her suspicion of its commercial, mass-produced nature, saying:

> I never buy things that say, 'To a great friend' or something like that. And I never buy anything that has all these words on the inside of it. I always buy things with really simple messages, and every time I see something like 'For a friend like you', I just feel like there should be like warm music playing in the background….I like to use my own words, I don't, I don't you know like to rely on, Hallmark or whoever, to write out what I think.

For Pam and Carrie, greeting cards are made personal by the specificity of the handwritten message, which draws attention to the singularity of the relationship and the individuality of both sender and recipient. Like many of my college-educated interview respondents, they discounted the idea that the 'personal' can be found in the marketplace, and quite deliberately distanced themselves from mass-produced sentiment.

Finding the Personal in Greeting Card Sentiment

The very aspect of greeting cards that many critics and some consumers find most worrisome, their pre-printed sentiments, are what many, if not most consumers value in this form of communication. The importance of the sentiment is reflected in industry statistics, such as the fact

that 'greeted cards sell 3 to 1 over blank cards, because most people like to add their names to a pre-printed message' (Kelley, 2002: 34), or the conventional industry wisdom that while a card's design might convince a consumer to pick it up, it will ultimately be the sentiment that sells it. While higher cultural capital respondents are more likely to focus on the choice of design and their own written message, lower cultural capital respondents are more likely to locate the personal in the pre-printed sentiment itself.[1] Certainly, the correlation in this relatively small sample is not one-to-one, such that every respondent with a college degree prioritizes design over sentiment. However, out of the 38 respondents who were willing to say whether they prioritized either design or sentiment in their greeting card choices (and a number insisted on 'both'), those with college degrees leaned towards design (fourteen prioritized design, ten sentiment) much more clearly than those without, for whom thirteen out of fourteen identified sentiment as the most important factor in choosing cards.

Betty, an African-American married clerical worker with a college diploma, generally prefers 'greeted' cards, and explains why, saying:

> I enjoy the process [of shopping for cards] and I also like personal messages. I mean, not so much that I wrote them personally, but the messages in cards that you buy from the store, it just seems, if I read the words and I feel it, feel something for that person that I'm sending the card, I like to pick cards out like that.

Here Betty says outright that a message can be personal even if she did not write it 'personally'. She explains that greeting card sentiments are even more meaningful and emotional for her than notes or letters that people write themselves, saying:

> I think cards are, it's a sentimental thing. It just makes you feel good. When I receive a card, it makes me feel good, even - you send me a letter I might read your letter - but if I read a card, it just does something to me on the inside.

While Betty sees longer, more effusive sentiments as more personal, she still likes cards that have 'simple,' brief sentiments, but interprets their brevity as being impersonal. She identifies cards that are 'simply stated' as the kind she might send to co-workers or people she doesn't know well, while the more elaborate ones she would send to close friends. Out of the three Thanksgiving cards that I showed in our interview, Betty said she liked all three cards, but would send the ones with longer sentiments to family and close friends, and the card that reads just 'Happy Thanksgiving' to a co-worker. Although Betty has a college diploma, in general my informants with more formal education expressed a stronger preference for the simply stated card for all potential recipients; in fact, eleven out of the fourteen people who identified this card as their favorite fall into the higher cultural capital half of the spectrum.

Similar to Betty, Jeanette, an African-American wife and mother who has attended some college and runs her own business out of her home, thinks longer sentiments are more personal. She would prefer to receive a card for any occasion, including an apology or other sensitive type of sentiment, in place of a letter. Betty and Jeannette's preference for longer sentiments was reproduced among many of my respondents with less formal education, including many white respondents. Of course, for Betty and Jeannette their racial identity also informs their greeting card choices and orientation to sentiment. Certainly my African-American respondents expressed an appreciation for cards that communicate 'cultural specificity', whether through design or sentiment. However, other systematic differences between an 'African-American' view of sentiment and a 'white' view of sentiment were not apparent among my informants.

Val, a single, African-American college-educated manager in the Manual Labor area, reacted negatively to one of the cards in my sample because of its brevity. This card featured the words 'Thank you' written in calligraphy in the background in very large print, and the phrase 'It meant so

much' in bolder, small print on the right hand side. Val explained why this card, for her, failed as an expression of gratitude, saying:

> It just looks too, um, it's just sort of dull. It just looks too…well, it just looks like too quick. Like Thank you – It meant so much, boom. You know, it's just, there's not enough in there, and it's not enough heartfelt. That looks like one of those oh, I gotta get a card on my way, okay that one, thank you yes, okay that'll work.

For Val, a card with a more elaborated sentiment that has been carefully chosen with the recipient in mind will say 'more.' Similarly Howard, who is white, married, college-educated, and a former police officer, responded to one of the blank cards featuring an Impressionist style painting of flowers negatively, saying 'it has no thought to it.'

Even among my respondents who look for 'personal' sentiments, they were all clear that they must mark a card with their own writing to complete the process of personalizing a store-bought card, whether it is with their signature or a brief greeting or message. White retired clerk Elizabeth, who has a high school diploma, points out that she likes to underline words that seem especially important to her. The more common way of personalizing cards reported was by adding a note to the pre-printed sentiment. Opinion differed among my respondents on how much one needs to write in order to 'personalize' a card. Some emphasized that what was needed was a salutation, and then following the verse 'Much love' or 'Peace' and then their signature. Sharman Robertson, archivist at Hallmark Headquarters, remarks how in the countless boxes of saved greeting cards that are regularly donated to the archive, the vast majority of cards are merely signed very briefly by the sender, a finding replicated by my own observation of saved cards as well as by Shank (2004). While this was a common description of personalization among my informants, respondents with higher cultural capital were more likely to describe writing a few sentences before their signature in addition to the existing sentiment.

Hallmark founder Joyce Hall (1979) contended that a pre-printed sentiment 'adds value' to a card, as many consumers don't see their own handwritten thoughts holding as much value, nor do they think their own words suit the formality or distinctiveness of this form of communication. The responses of many of my respondents and of the 'fans' at Hallmark Writers and Artists on Tour events (a public relations initiative) seem to confirm this perspective. An elderly white man who attended a stop of the tour in Kansas City, MO told the Hallmark employees that his least favorite kind of card is a blank one. While he explained that he likes to have some room inside to write his own message, he wants something in addition to what he himself writes. Most of the audience nodded in agreement, and writer Barbara Loots explained that Hallmark has been making greeting card sentiments longer, more personal, and more specific than ever so that consumers can find cards that say 'just what they feel.' This response was similar to a number of my own interview respondents, some of whom didn't have anything to say about the set of blank cards that I showed them because they would be so unlikely to use them.

Respondents who prefer greeting cards with sentiments were careful to draw attention to the process of looking for the perfect message and their determination not to settle, especially on important occasions, for cards that do not capture how they feel or provide the message they want to convey. Those most invested in greeting card sentiments are clear about distinguishing cards that are 'flowery,' 'hokey,' or overly sentimental from those that capture the kinds of things they want to say. As Eileen, a white grandmother with a high school education says, 'I'm particularly careful to have it say what I mean…..So it isn't one of these flowery ones that I don't mean any of it.' Similarly Maude, also a white grandmother with some college education, describes what she looks for in greeting card sentiments: 'You just have to be astute, when you're sending a card like that I think. You don't want it to be too cold, but you don't want it to be too flowery, and something that is coming from you.'

My respondents talked about the sense of recognition and reward they feel when they find a sentiment that captures exactly what they feel. Daisy, an African-American clerical worker with some college education, explains how finding an appropriate card makes her feel, saying:

> You'll be like, oh my gosh! I mean, if you read the card, you'll be like, that is me! You know or, that sounds just like you. You know, so, but it is amazing how they just put it down and you're like, wooh, I could have said that!

Lesley, a mixed-race college student who loves cards, describes the lengths she'll go to in order to find the perfect card, going from store to store. She explains:

> Normally I'm hunting right. That's why I like the *Between You and Me* cards [a card that I used in my sample], like, they really do say a lot and, I like that. It's not because I don't want to think for myself, I don't want to say it, but it's just, it's so cool to find something that actually expresses what you're feeling.

The search for the most appropriate card applies not just to the sentiment itself but to the specificity of the caption, such as 'To my grandmother on her birthday'. Lise, a white retired clerical worker with a high school diploma, who describes herself as a 'card person', often buys several cards a week for various occasions and remembrances. She is very particular about finding cards specific to the sending situation, and so she keeps her eye out for Congratulations cards for getting a driver's license or a new car, for example, as she likes to send cards for these life events and they are not easy to find.

Many greeting card consumers are quite comfortable in claiming greeting card sentiments as their own communication, and don't seem worried that the sentiments and card categories available in the marketplace determine or shape the way they communicate their feelings, or their feelings themselves. In response to this kind of critique they point to the effort that goes into finding the 'right' card, and the fact that most cards will be rejected until an appropriate one is found. When I

asked Lesley how she felt about the idea that her feelings were being captured by an unknown greeting card writer, her response contained not concern, but enthusiasm. I asked, 'Do you ever feel like, this is amazing, this person in Kansas City who I've never met has written this whole long thing, like two pages, and that says exactly what I think?' Lesley replied:

> Yeah, I think a lot of the, even the *Blue Mountain* cards too and the *Between You and Me* cards [both lines appeared in my sample], exactly, like they just know exactly what to say. Maybe something might be completely off, like even if one line is off or whatever, like it'll make me look for a different card, because usually they'll have something in like, 'I know you're the one,' right, and you're like no, a little over the top.

The rightness of the greeting that the sender chooses to use is highlighted by the wrongness or 'not quiteness' of all the other cards in the marketplace.

Fans of greeting card sentiment don't see the available sentiments as limiting or guiding the way they communicate emotion because they see their own choices as active and discerning, and experience a sense of recognition in the sentiments they choose because of how they capture what they would like to say. People who like greeting card sentiments, then, don't see the sentiments that *they* pick as 'flowery', a derogatory term for ornamental language that is devoid of meaning. Rather, finding a pre-written sentiment that captures their feelings, emotions, or circumstances is a kind of 'consumer victory' that will have more impact than their own written words.

The Ritual Logic of Greeting Card Sentiment

Pre-printed sentiments 'make sense' as a form of interpersonal communication from a ritual perspective which places value on publicly available symbolic forms, seeing them as capable of providing more impact than one's own words. Many consumers who seek out greeting card sentiments want them to deliver what they believe themselves incapable of, the elusive 'perfect

words' that capture and communicate a feeling or relationship. They explained that they like using card sentiments because they don't feel confident in finding the 'right' words to express themselves, providing evidence that some consumers do find that greeting cards 'help me express myself better than I can alone' as the American Greeting Card Association reports (GCA, 2004).[2] Some interviewees reported either that they find it difficult to express themselves through writing in general, or that in particular for emotional messages they find it hard to summon the words. Madeleine - white, high-school educated and retired from clerical work - explains that greeting card sentiments can be an important aid to communication, saying:

> It'll say what you feel in your heart but you can't express. Not everybody can express their feelings, you know. But you come across a card and you find sometimes in life there's two or three cards that you'll always remember, as very special to you. You're always looking for one. Thank god for cards, that's all I can say (laughing).

I asked Ginny, a white mother of four who works in a technical field and is college-educated, why she felt intimidated by blank cards or ones with short sentiments that require her to write her own sentiments. She explained:

> Um, it's the flow of the words, I don't feel that I have great writing skills. So that, just to come up with, without rambling, or without being too short, I like that somebody's thought it out, and maybe they rhyme, or they kind of go together. I don't feel like I'm capable of writing them, I'd rather somebody else did.

Some of my respondents explicitly raised the usefulness of greeting card sentiments for fraught moments in relationships, such as an apology or expressing condolences. Jeanette, introduced earlier, described a card that helped her make up with a friend after a fight:

> Me and one of my friends had a disagreement, about her moving to DC. I bought a card, and it said everything that I wanted to say that I probably wouldn't have been able to write myself. When I bought the card, it was everything. I didn't have to…I just bought it.

Jeannette shows appreciation for cards for helping her find the perfect words to mediate this interpersonal exchange, the precise scenario that many critics of greeting card sentiment deplore.

Certainly 'It's Hard to Express Myself' or 'It's Hard to Find the Words' appear frequently as greeting card themes. In fact, Hallmark has labels for these kinds of sentiments because they are used so commonly, such as 'More Than Words Can Say,' or a 'Seldom Say'. These verses highlight the idea that communicating feelings to others is difficult, especially for those who don't find it easy to express themselves through writing in general. The greeting card industry trades on the idea that as the experts they can provide the words and phrases to make the connections that many people can't make on their own.

In addition though, accounts from consumers of why greeting cards work highlight how this form of communication takes place in a ritual or performative frame that announces its separateness from everyday forms of communication, and operates according to a somewhat different logic. The separateness of greeting cards from routine, mundane forms of communication is part of what makes them seem 'special', just as rhyming, versed, or otherwise formalized forms of speech are used across cultures and time to create a sense of ritual efficacy (Bell, 1997). While the separateness of ritual or performance frames can allow for playful inversions of existing power relations, they also frequently create space for formal reaffirmations of sacred stories or relationships. Greeting cards seem to function this way as well. They provide a formal structure within which declarations of relational ties are allowed, and even expected. The kinds of statements made in greeting cards, either in pre-printed sentiments or in what users write themselves, are not always the kinds of things they might say out loud or in face-to-face conversation, not just because they might feel shy, but because

it would feel awkward and outside the norms of social interaction. Victoria, an African-American administrator with some college education, alluded to this when she said:

> …you don't on a regular day, someone you see every day, you're not going to tell them, I really respect you, I admire you as a person, you never do that. And a card, it's like a special occasion, you can actually tell them, hey, I really, you know, I like you (laughing).

When people say that they look to greeting card sentiment to say it 'better than they can', the issue is not always comfort with writing per se, but in achieving a sense of distinct and ritualized speech, which allow things to be declared and communicated that everyday ways of talking do not easily allow.

The cultural category of sentiment elicits ambivalence because it connects emotion with conventional, widely shared, rehearsed 'scripts', thereby contradicting the modern ideal of feelings emerging spontaneously and with great originality from the individual. A number of my respondents communicated this concern, such as white college student Jess, who argued that greeting card sentiments seem 'rehearsed' and therefore not 'genuine'. Compare this attitude to Sue, a white, college-educated wife and mother of two who works full-time. Sue explained how she understood the difference between sending a card and expressing feelings in person or over the phone, saying:

> It's an event, and it's an opportunity for acknowledgement. So I treat it as such, and I make sure that I acknowledge them…. And it's different than off the cuff. Off the cuff can be good but, you know, rehearsed is sometimes a little better.

Here Sue alludes to the ritual aspect of greeting card communication, its pre-spoken or pre-inscribed qualities, that 'can be better' in some circumstances than what is so often privileged as the 'best' form of communication according to the expressive individualist perspective: spontaneous, seemingly unmediated talk. The pre-printed, versed, commercial qualities of greeting cards all

contribute to a frame that announces the separateness or distinctness of this message from 'off the cuff' communication.

Authentic Sentiment – A Contradiction in Terms?

As scholars of cultural consumption, we should strive to avoid the trap of taking an expressive individualist understanding of authenticity as an assumption or standard against which we evaluate mass culture and its consumption. If we do not acknowledge the ritual logic of cultural consumption, which appears to be at work in a habitus shaped by the popular aesthetic, then we risk re-inscribing 'symbolic violence' in our analyses - merely reproducing the cultural hierarchies that we should be deconstructing (Bourdieu, 1984: 511). Does this preclude critique of the culture industries and their products? Surely not. In the case of greeting cards, we might notice how the industry promotes itself as the sole source of expertise when it comes to sentiment, and the various ways that it reinforces the notion that people should not risk trying to craft sentiments themselves (West, 2008). We might also notice the limitations or blind spots that the industry has in providing sentiments for a wide range of lifestyles and circumstances (ibid.). Finally, while a ritual logic involves using public symbolic resources in individual expression, it does not necessarily follow that these resources must be commercial and marketized. Our public sphere is somewhat impoverished in truly public symbolic resources and accessible alternatives to the commercial realm. Greeting cards 'work' in part because senders demonstrate their time and effort in locating the perfect sentiment in the marketplace – but this points to how the labor of shopping has become such a privileged index of time and effort, and therefore caring.

A mode of communication organized around appropriating mass-produced images and texts as one's own expression strikes at the heart of the idea that we articulate (and in a sense discover) our individuality through self-expression - that we find the authentic self by turning inward (Taylor,

1989). A revised understanding of authenticity within which greeting card communication 'makes sense' is captured by philosopher Charles Guignon (2004), who writes, '…the problems running through the standard idea of authenticity result from thinking of it solely as a personal virtue. What I will propose is that we think of authenticity as being fundamentally and irreducibly a social virtue' (151). Ambivalence about greeting card communication, and perhaps about our relationships with consumer culture more generally, revolves around the difficulty in coming to an understanding of individual authenticity that takes into account how much of the self is dependent upon the social.

Notes

1 This pattern is even more convincingly demonstrated by Spaulding (1981[1958]) and Illouz (1997) because their samples are purposely clustered around different levels of cultural capital.
2 The Greeting Card Association claims that *most* consumers feel this way, which I cannot confirm with my data.

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