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Still bodies in traveling images: anthropological reflections on ambiguous postcards from Argentina

Abstract

Well before the digital age of today, when images have specific characteristics in terms of intangibility, immediacy, pervasiveness and diffusion, postcards constituted visual messages that portrayed something in the long-distance conversation between people in different parts of the world. This paper critically investigates the ambiguity of postcards depicting indigenous subjects in Argentina, which traveled to Europe and were produced from photographs that show native peoples mostly as 'docile' and exotic bodies, immobilized at a time of irreversible transformations in their way of life. In fact, the photographs were taken between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a historical moment when the geographical and identity definition of nation-state was formed through military campaigns, which aimed at the extermination or domination of native groups present on national territories. Paradoxically, photography visibilizes subjects at the moment of their physical or symbolic invisibilization.

Photography is an inherently mobile medium: by its very nature it changes context; as it migrates, its meaning changes along with its functions. In this sense, what kind of historical memory do these images evoke and what role do they play within the complex construction of 'exported' national identity? What is the role of these 'traveling' images in the formation of knowledge related to indigenous societies in the permanent tension between the shown and hidden, the near and far?

This paper is based on ongoing research that combines archival ethnography with fieldwork and conceives of the digital as a space in which images can be put back into circulation, shared and discussed, also with source communities.

Keywords

Postcards; indigenous people; plantation; visuality; Gran Chaco; Argentina.

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> The power of the still photograph lies in its spatio-temporal dislocation of nature and the consequent decontextualization of those that exist within it, arrested in the flow of life and experience and transposed to other contexts. (Edwards 1996: 200)

> Photography's capacities to fix a moving subject in space and time and to disseminate images and ideas have, for over a century, made it a powerful tool through which to reflect on human migration and (im)mobility. (Sheehan 2018:4)

Moving images between materiality and immateriality

The paper presents the results of an ongoing anthropological study on image repertories depicting native subjects of Latin America, particularly from two border regions to the north and south of Argentina: the Gran Chaco and Tierra del Fuego.[1] By intertwining ethnographic experience with the study of photographic corpora preserved in both physical and digital archives, the aim of this investigation is to question these images, considering them as 'visual territories' that can be explored on various levels and dimensions. Historically, photographs of native societies are valuable for their testimonial nature, much like other sources for the reconstruction and study of the past. From the perspective of their materiality, however, they express a density that requires a close and informed gaze, as well as an interpretation that is as critical, dialogical, and reflective as possible.

I began this research in 2020, during the pandemic, when, unable to go into the field, I delved into various digital archives, open source and subscription, belonging to public and private institutions, particularly those of some European museums and

[1] Research in these two regions of Argentina has developed at different times and through different methodologies: alongside the long-term ethnographic study conducted in the Gran Chaco from 2009 to 2022, primarily funded by the South American Mercosur Ethnological Mission, a new research project began in April 2024 in the Isla Grande of Tierra del Fuego. This research is part of the project titled "Italian Ethnographic Museums with Non-European Collections Facing the Decolonial Challenge: Digitization as a Tool for Sharing and Co-Constructing Knowledge", funded by PNRR funds as part of the project "CHANGES - Cultural Heritage Active Innovation for Next-Gen Sustainable Society". In this article, I will focus exclusively on a repertoire of images related to the Gran Chaco.

I would like to express my gratitude to Bruno Riccio and Chiara Pilotto, for generously including my contribution in the special issue they curated, entitled "Moving images across borders: visual and digital resonances of human (im)mobilities". I also thank the anonymous reviewers for the kind comments that helped me improve it, and for the less gentle ones, which reminded me that the anthropological journey through the images is still a long one. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my colleague Davide Domenici, who took the time to read and comment on my text.

missionary archives that have digitized parts of their collections, and now partially accessible (though not always easily) online. During these digital searches, I came across several series of postcards frequently and ambiguously referred to as 'ethnographic' depicting native societies from the late 19th to the early 20th century. I quickly realized that I had likely underestimated the value of careful observation of the available material online; often focusing on the photographs, I had carelessly overlooked the postcards, considering them merely as 'copies' of the original photos I intended to study.

I later came to understand that it was precisely the social life of these reproductions that was highly revealing. On the one hand, they unveil the irrefutable testimonial value of photography, which Barthes (1980) summarized with 'this has been' and undeniably has been so. On the other, their ambiguity pushes us to ask: what do (don't) we see when we look at these illustrated postcards? If we turn them over, what do we find on the back? What do those apparently trivial objects reveal that no other medium can convey?

A methodological clarification is necessary here. The study of the visual heritage related to the native societies currently present in Argentina is made difficult by its fragmentary nature, distributed across private collections, physical and digital archives located in Latin America and Europe, all with different management systems, negotiations, and specific authorization requests (Priamo 2012). Digital archives might appear to be an exception but, even in this case, open access is not always synonymous with accessibility and ease of use. The problem does not only concern researchers but also, and especially, the communities of origin, due to socio-economic disadvantages that result in unequal access to education, technology, and the Internet.[2]

From my point of view, it would have been very difficult to interrogate the images, and in this specific case the postcards, in their heterogeneity, without an extended study and previous fieldwork experience. What we can see in an image and its many layers of interpretation become meaningful starting from what we do not see, what is excluded, hidden, or concealed in the image but which we can intuit and consider based on stories we have been told, what we have studied, and understood through fieldwork. As John Berger wrote about photographic images: "The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator knowledge of them prior to his seeing the photograph" (1967:19). It may seem obvious, but without prior work in the Chaco region, I probably would not have known how to read those images or would have only considered the most iconic ones, overlooking the rest.

With the intention of broadening the perspective, I continued my research in informal circuits, particularly those related to collecting, where I traced postcards that had traveled to Europe and bore the marks of correspondence between physically distant people. The postcards I studied are numerous and heterogeneous, and can be

[2] I had proof of this during several research experiences in the Chaco, when I shared digital copies of photographs from digitized archives available online, which had been unknown to the people involved until that moment. I reflected on this experience in a recent contribution (Scardozzi 2024), where I discuss the practice known as "photo-elicitation", used in fieldwork both to collect information through images—viewed and discussed together with the participants—and to share knowledge of history and collective memory by showing what is preserved in European archives.

categorized by period, theme, style, subject, and, in the case of those that traveled, by origin and destination, publisher, and, more rarely, by author, as many are anonymous. The ones I analyze here traveled from Argentina to Europe in the early 20th century and differ in formal, content, and biographical aspects. Upon examining them, however, I realized that what they have in common is that they were produced from photographs taken from the late 19th century on the sugarcane plantations in northern Argentina, where indigenous laborers were employed seasonally in semi-slavery conditions. I will relate them to other images from the Archivo General de la Nación (Argentina), the Museo de La Plata (Argentina), and the Musée Quai Branly (France), to analyze the characteristics of the postcards that remain hidden and that blend in with other graphic elements. I will investigate the apparent 'humility' [3] of these visual objects in motion between continents, overlooked precisely because of their omnipresence and their seemingly ephemeral nature (Edwards 1996). In this regard, Sandra Ferguson's words seem particularly significant when reflecting on the academic prejudice that long contributed to the exclusion of postcards for being considered a poor source for research: "the postcard is an incredible chameleon: it can function as a documentary image, correspondence, a lithographic or photographic print, advertisement or ephemera. Furthermore, in any particular instance, it can function as any or all of these documentary forms simultaneously" (Ferguson 2005: 168).

The meaning of the images will be shown to be therefore multifaceted and, if observed with the proper attention, images can stimulate various reflections on photography as an ontologically mobile medium (Andriotis, Mavrič 2013); on the use and dissemination of photographic images; on the relationship between text and images; on the subjects depicted and, of course, on the relationship between the photographer and the photographed, thus touching on the politics of representation. The analysis of the constitutive elements of the postcards can therefore be thought of as a kind of process of disaggregation and reaggregation, informed by fieldwork and a multidisciplinary perspective that, much like in an archaeological dig, reveals the different attributes—explicit or silenced—that make up the images. To use a visual metaphor, it is as if we were using different lenses to focus on different elements that, once reassembled, give us the final - though always partial vision of the object. Of course, it must be kept in mind that the meaning of an image is never univocal or given once and for all, but changes depending on the observer, context, and historical period.

This is even more true for images that were once conveyed through postcards, which traveled between the public and private spheres, changing in value, use, function, place, and meaning. This is "because like all images in the public sphere, meaning is free-floating, operating several possible closures of meaning within a single image as it is bought, consumed and sent, eliciting different readings in different contexts" (Edwards 1996: 213).

[3] Here, I refer to the concept of the "humility of objects" developed by the anthropologist Daniel Miller, who argues that the power of objects lies in their ability to naturalize to the point where we forget about their existence. Precisely because they become familiar, some objects are taken for granted, and it is by becoming invisible and at the same time blindingly obvious that they exert their agency and shape our behaviors (Miller 2009).

Following the inspiring idea of Kopytoff (1986) regarding the cultural biography of objects and their process of singularization and commodification, I suggest considering postcards as a specific phase in the social life of certain photographs. These images begin as latent images on a medium (first glass plates, then film), are developed using chemical reagents, printed, copied, sold, mass-produced, disseminated, bought, exchanged, inherited, hidden, lost, destroyed, or, as in this case, re-circulated and today sold on websites and in online auctions. This back-and-forth between materiality and immateriality brings us back to the intrinsically migratory nature of the photographic image. Although in contemporary times the mobility of images from one digital environment to another has reached speeds and immediacy previously unthinkable, thanks also to their dematerialization—just think of the millions of images shared on social media, and among them, those that become ' viral' in just seconds through millions of ' clicks' —images have always crossed geographical and socio-cultural borders, moving from one part of the world to another, albeit at a much slower pace and in very different ways than today.

Long before the digital era and the advent of social media, postcards—understood as a combination of texts and images—were the predecessors of our contemporary messaging systems, in which images are an essential component. Just think of how many photos we send and receive daily. It used to be the postcard that made images travel on a massive scale globally. Among these, mixed in with landscapes, monuments, 'cultural typicalities' and various oddities, were also those related to native societies of Latin America, produced from photographic events that were diversely structured but still characterized by a relationship of subordination between the photographer and the subject being photographed.

Sensitive content

Illustrated postcards, especially those that have traveled,[4] are consumer objects with unpredictable life cycles; reconstructing their history and tracing their provenance is often impossible. In my analysis, I found it useful to examine both the object—the illustrated postcard—and its genealogy, trying to understand which 'family of images' each belongs to and how they relate to or contrast with one another. I thus attempted to shift from viewing the photograph as the final stage of an action—in this case, the illustrated postcard—to the photographic event as the starting point: the encounter between photographers and subjects on the sugarcane plantations in northern Argentina. I imagine this encounter and the living conditions on the sugarcane fields also through the voices of people I met during my fieldwork in the Pilcomayo region.[5]

[4] In the context of collecting, they are specifically referred to as "travelled postcards". These are postcards that have passed through the postal system, bearing stamps and postmarks, and are usually valued for the history and personal connections they carry, reflecting their journey and the interactions between the sender and the recipient.

[5] Although other authors have analysed the production and circulation of illustrated postcards in South America (cf. Onken 2014, 2015, Teixidor Cadenas 2023), specifically in Argentina (Masotta 2003, 2011) also offering anthropological analysis bringing together highly heterogeneous materials (cf. Edwards 1996), in my opinion this aspect is crucial because in this case they are unified by a concealed and unacknowledged situation: labor on the plantation. They 'come back to life' only when connected to the voices that speak about it.

When Ariella Azoulay writes about the political ontology of photography, she states that photography is an event, and that the encounter with the photo-object continues the photographic event that occurred elsewhere (Azoulay 2015:67) and adds:

The photograph is a platform upon which traces from the encounter between those present in the situation of photography are inscribed, whether the participants are present by choice, through force, knowingly, indifferently, as a result of being overlooked or as a consequence of deceit. Many of these traces are neither planned nor are they the result of an act of will. That which is seen, the referent of the photograph in other words, is never a given but needs to be constituted to precisely the same degree as the interpretations that have become attached to it. Even when these traces express cultural and social hierarchies that organize the power relations between photographer, camera, and photographed person, they never simply echo such relations nor do they necessarily reflect the point of view of the most powerful figure present in the arena at the time the photograph was captured. This characteristic differentiates the photograph from all other forms of documentation that we know, and renders it a powerful and suggestive source for understanding the political existence of human beings, as well as for investigating their history.

All the illustrated postcards I will show originate from colonial situations in a post-colonial state and carry dominant viewpoints. The majority of photographic images depicting native peoples in the Argentine territory date back to the last decades of the 19th century. This was a time when military campaigns carried out by the Argentine state (1878-1885) in the Pampas, Patagonia, and Chaco regions led to the three-fold territorial expansion from north to south, through the extermination, expulsion, and subjugation of the heterogeneous native population that inhabited these areas. Following the military campaigns known as the *Conquista del Desierto* (Conquest of the Desert), native societies were annexed to the modern nation-state through military and religious dispositive, but also incorporated into various forms of capitalist agro-industrial production and the plantation economy in the northern provinces. The programmatic extermination operations[6] or reduction of native societies into conditions of semi-slavery, were part of policies aimed at reconfiguring the country both territorially and identitarily. This would come through the annexation of new territories still under indigenous control, and operations of *blanqueamiento*[7] (whitening) planned through the simultaneous opening of the country to European immigration, aimed at the 'ethnic' replacement of the local population[8].

[6] The analysis of the hostility and violence of the Argentine state towards indigenous societies has led some Argentine authors to speak of genocidal policies (see Delrio et al. 2010, Trinchero 2006).

[7] *Blanqueamiento* refers to a specific nation-building project aimed at "whitening" the indigenous population existing prior to Spanish colonization, as well as Afro-descendants and "mestizos" present in Argentine territory at the time. For a deeper understanding of the notions of *blanqueamiento*, purity, and mestizaje in the Argentine context, see Briones (2002).

[8] European immigration had already begun in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is mentioned in Article 25 of the National Constitution of 1853, which stated: "The Federal Government shall promote European immigration; and it shall not be able to restrict, limit, or impose any taxes on the entry into Argentine territory of foreigners whose purpose is to work the land, improve industries, and introduce and teach sciences and arts". For a systematic discussion of the history of immigration in Argentina, reference is made to the important work of Ferdinando Devoto (2003).

In this historical moment of profound change, photography reached the native populations of northern and southern Argentina, 'freezing' them in photographs produced more or less consciously and for different purposes by soldiers, travelers, missionaries, government officials, scientists—including anthropologists—and commercial photographers. The official production of images naturally makes the conflict invisible (Giordano 2011) and depicts 'docile and miniaturized bodies' (Masotta 2003), creating a visual repertoire that serves a discourse which is simultaneously universalist, classificatory, and racializing (Masotta 2011), also supported by the studies of physical anthropology that employed anthropometry, which I will address later.

These are undoubtedly 'sensitive materials', and I wondered for a long time whether it was worth showing these illustrated postcards, whether it was correct to publish them, and whether it was possible to circulate them again without running the risk of participating in the exposure of nonconsenting subjects, reproducing, under altered conditions, the gaze that had produced them. Despite being public messages, they should also be considered "sensitive content" for the individuals involved in the communication, whose names are displayed?

The provisional conclusion I have reached is that images are inherently risky. Acknowledging their intrinsic ambiguity as a starting point means having an opportunity to try to understand them and make them resonate differently. Potentially, it would make it possible to narrate stories that have yet to come to light and offer new interpretations, perhaps beginning with the curious gaze of someone among the million or so people who today in Argentina identify as descendants or members of *pueblos originarios* (indigenous peoples)[9], or of people in Europe who recognize in the displayed images traces of their own existence or that of their ancestors.

This idea became even more convincing when, while conducting research in the digital archive of the Ibero-American Institute in Berlin, I came across a series of photographs that could not be viewed because they were covered by the image I present below, which is typically used as a warning rather than as a replacement of the image itself:

[9] According to data from the 2022 Census, 1,306,730 million people in Argentina identify as indigenous or descendants of indigenous peoples (INDEC 2024).

Figure 1 Sensitive content.

I asked myself, when something is hidden in a (digital) archive, from whom is it being concealed? Which eyes must not see it? Who could be offended viewing the image? And, above all, for whom are the hidden contents sensitive? What untold stories might the images we cannot see tell?

I do not believe there is a universal rule that can be applied to all case studies regarding images with specific histories and subjects, but I think that we must look at these postcards precisely to allow ourselves to be disturbed and even scandalized by their paradoxical, sadistic, and sometimes grotesque staging, for what they explicitly say and for what they selectively or unconsciously conceal. I also decided to show them in the 9x14 postcard format to ensure the reader experiences the original image-object size.

Undoubtedly, these are clearly colonial records, but this is only one of the possible levels of interpretation. They are symbols of the economic success of a region, souvenirs of the propaganda of a nation that sought to present itself as civilized and progressive, tangible evidence of the real possibility of 'domesticating and civilizing' the savage indigenous peoples, visual messages traveling between worlds, items from private collections, pieces of European material culture from the early 20th century, museum objects, historical sources, and testimonies of indigenous resistance.

The work of the images, the images of the work

Starting from 1870, the *ingenios azucareros*, the sugar mills in northern Argentina, began to modernize with the introduction of steam-powered machinery for crushing sugar cane, transforming the mills into full-fledged agro-industrial complexes that followed the factory-plantation model.[10] The territorial control of the *ingenios* expanded over vast areas of recently conquered land, and the size of these estates was so large that they were referred to as 'States within the State' (Lagos 1993), with effective systems for controlling circulation and communication routes, aimed at creating a domesticated and controlled

[10] For a historical overview, reference is made to the work of Campi, Moyano, Teruel (2017).

socio-productive space. This production model was not exclusive to Argentina but was part of a capitalist expansion cycle that drastically and irreversibly altered the landscape of vast indigenous territories in South America, effectively turning them into zones designated for agricultural production.[11] The *ingenios* became places where different migratory paths intersected: thousands of people from various groups, including Wichí/Wheenayek,[12] Toba, Pilagá, Chorote, and Chiriguanos from various regions of the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco, and later Kolla from the Andean region, made seasonal migrations to work on the plantations. There, they were employed primarily for the *zafra*, the grueling labor of sugar cane harvesting. The indigenous workforce also included natives who had been enslaved during military campaigns in southern Argentina and forcibly brought to the north. As Argentine anthropologist Diana Lenton argued, regarding the *Conquista del Desierto* in the south, in the regions: "The 'Conquista del Desierto' did not end with the military occupation of indigenous territories; instead, it was closely connected to the plantation economy of the northern provinces, which became the privileged destiny of the peoples defeated by the advance of the army and capital, and which constituted a possible model for regional economics" (Lenton, 2010:59, my translation).

Indeed, the indigenous labor force became the main 'engine' of the factories in Ledesma and La Esperanza (Jujuy province) and San Martín de Tabacal (Salta province) at least until the mechanization of the harvest, which began in the 1960s (Teruel 2005). Migration from the Chaco region primarily occurred during the winter, when forest resources were scarce. It is worth noting that entire households migrated seasonally to work on the plantations. Men, women and children of all ages populated the camps (see, for example, fig.2). Some children were born within the space of the *ingenio*, as Daniel Mananses tells me in a conversation during my fieldwork: "Mi abuela naciò en el ingenio La Esperanza, naciò allà. De ahì nace el nombre de ella 'Esperanzai' le decían, porque era del ingenio La Esperanza".[13]

The collective memory of the long migrations and the hard work in the *ingenio* was still vivid among the elderly people I met in the early years of my research along the Pilcomayo River.[14] Some of them worked for a few years n in the *ingenio*, like Sixto, a spiritual leader from San Luis indigenous community, who worked in San Martin de Tabacal for seven years:

[11] Starting from the mid-19th century, there were indeed similar experiences in the so-called "lowlands" of the South American continent, such as rubber extraction in the Bolivian and Peruvian Amazon, as well as wood and tannin extraction in both the Argentine and Paraguayan Chaco (Cordoba, Bossert, Richard 2015).

[12] In the following pages, reference to this group is made through the use of the exonym *Mataco*, which appears both on illustrated postcards and in classical anthropological literature up until the 1990s (cf. Alvarsson 1988; Braunstein 1990; Métraux 1956). It has since fallen into disuse due to its derogatory and discriminatory connotations.

[13] "My grandmother was born in the La Esperanza sugar mill, she was born there. That's where her name comes from – 'Esperanzai'- people called her that because she was from La Esperanza mill". Daniel Mananses, Comunidad Indígena La Puntana (2011).

[14] Most of them have passed away in recent years, and I feel extremely honored to have had the opportunity to converse with them several times during my research. All the conversations reported refer to 2011.

Venía un contratista[15] de Tabacal, del Ingenio San Martín, y cada año lleva gente al ingenio y no tenemos documento nada, nada! Ahí recién hemos conocido calzados, pantalones, camisa. […] Estábamos muy sufridos, pero hemos ganado mucha ropa. ¡Hemos cortado postes, cosechado cañas, un montón de trabajo!

¿Como les pagaban? ¿Con ropa? ¿O con plata?

Sì, con plata. Pero poquito. Cada mes daban más o menos 5 pesos nomas, pero valía mucho la plata. ¡Vos sabes que trabajábamos un día entero, 15 centavos…15 centavos! Si uno no terminaba esta tarea, no iba a cobrar nada. ¡Espera mañana! Recién le da una boleta. ¡Que sufrimiento! (Sixto Barrozo, Comunidad Indigena San Luis, 2011).[16]

The narratives regarding labor on the plantations, passed down from generation to generation, ranged from the dangers of the long migrations on foot,[17] to the suffering caused by the hard labor and poor living conditions, and the great novelty of the material goods received at the end of the season: firearms, clothing, various tools, previously unknown foods, *los vicios* (the vices -alcohol, coca leaves, cigarettes), which were things from the 'white world' that would enter definitively into the material culture of various groups.[18] A major testimony of the ambivalent memories associated with life in sugar mills was expressed by Laureano Segovia, the first Wichí historian, during a conversation that we had in the village of Misión La Paz, on the banks of the Pilcomayo River:

La gente empezó a conocer la mercadería de los criollos[19] en el tiempo de ingenio. Entonces el ingenio azucarero ocupaba gente de acá en Chaco y los llevaba allá para hacerlos trabajar. Recién la gente conoce el trabajo, entonces el patrón azucarero los paga jornal. La gente no conocía la ropa como tenemos ahora, nada. Las mujeres cuando llegan al ingenio el patrón le daban ropa a la gente, camisa, antes no usaban pantalón. El ingeniero sabe que ellos no usan pantalón, le daba corte de tela, para envolver, como antes decían "chiripa", esto usaban. Entonces la gente ahí

[15] According to the Argentinian anthropologist Gastón Gordillo, who worked on the memory of the *ingenios* with some Toba groups from western Formosa province, as early as 1890 the sugar mills began sending recruiters (*contratistas*) to the Pilcomayo region. These were indigenous men, also known as "Indian hunters", who travelled through the area announcing that people could earn weapons, horses and clothing on the *ingenio* (Gordillo 2005: 50-51).

[16] "A contractor from Tabacal, from the San Martín sugar mill, would come every year and take people to the mill. We didn't have any documents, nothing, nothing! That's where we first got to know shoes, pants and shirts. […] We suffered a lot, but we earned a lot of clothes. We cut posts, harvested sugarcane, so much work! / *How did they pay you? With clothes or with money?* / Yes, with money. But very little. Each month, they gave us about 5 pesos, but money was worth a lot back then. You know, we worked an entire day for 15 cents…15 cents! If you didn't finish the task, you wouldn't get paid at all! Wait until tomorrow! Only then would they give you a receipt. What suffering!" (Sixto Barrozo, San Luis indigenous community, 2011, my translation).

[17] The journey to reach the *ingenio* was made on foot and could last up to two months, during which people were exposed to all kinds of dangers. Among others, a tragically emblematic case was the massacre of Nuevo Mundo (Salta) in 1902, when around 130 Wichí men, women, and children, returning from the Ledesma sugar mill, were killed by the Argentine army.

[18] For a discussion of material culture among Wichí groups, see Montani (2015).

[19] For the use of the term *criollo* by the indigenous communities currently present in the Pilcomayo Salteño region, see Scardozzi (2020).

aprende a vestir, aprende a comer la comida de los criollos, hasta el día de hoy. (Laureano Segovia, Misión La Paz, 2011).[20]

Although it is not explicit, among the evidence indicating that the images on the postcards were taken in the sugar mills were precisely the subjects dressed in European-style clothing -garments they acquired while working in the *ingenios* - and posed in front of huts made from the leftover leaves of sugarcane processing (Fig. 3-4; 10-11).

In Segovia's first book (2005), he collected stories of local memory from people belonging to different communities in the area, and one of these stories, transcribed in *wichí lhamntes* (the Wichí language) and translated into Spanish, was told by David Mananses (Daniel's father), a prominent leader from Pozo El Mulato, who provides a detailed account of the plantation experience:

Cuentan que el trabajo era muy duro, lo hacían hasta las 5 de la tarde, entonces median los surcos, que tenían que tener 40 cm. de profundidad, 25 cm. de ancho por 100 metros de largo, entonces les pagaba con vales. Al que tocaba una parte con piedras, la tarea no le resultaba fácil y les hacían repetir el trabajo hasta que quedaba bien. Después de 8 meses terminaron el trabajo, las mujeres ya habían sembrado la caña, entonces el dueño criollo les pagó. Alguna gente sacó 45 pesos por los 8 meses. La gente no conocía la caña, no sabían que de ella se obtenía el azúcar. Tampoco había tractores ni fábricas. También les pagaron con escopetas calibre 16, revólver y ropa, caramañola, olla de hierro y aquellas mujeres que trabajaban mucho recibían ropa. […] La gente regresó cuando terminó el trabajo […]. Al año siguiente la gente regresó al ingenio Ledesma, porque allí se conseguía trabajo. (David Mananses, in Segovia 2005:55)[21]

Being contracted annually as 'unskilled workers' within the hierarchy of the factories meant that the indigenous groups from the Chaco region had to perform the hardest and lowest paid tasks, often in precarious living conditions. According to various sources, this led to extremely high mortality rates among the makeshift camps that sprang up around the *ingenios azucareros* at the beginning of the 20th century (Gordillo 2006). Considered solely as a labor force, controlled and sedentarized, the indigenous people of northern Argentina were spared the programmatic extermination, as it was considered

[20] "People began to learn about the goods brought by the *criollos* during the time of the sugar mills. Back then, the sugar mill would recruit people from here in the Chaco and take them over there to work. That's when people first came to know what work was – The sugar mill owner would pay them a daily wage. People didn't know about clothing like we have today, nothing. When the women arrived at the mill, the owner would give them clothes – shirts; they didn't wear pants back then. The engineer knew they didn't wear pants, so he gave them cloth to wrap around themselves, which they used to call *chiripà*, that's what they wore. So, it was there that people learned how to dress, and how to eat *criollo* food, up to this day" (Laureano Segovia, Misión La Paz, 2011).

[21] "People say the work was very hard. They did it until five in the afternoon, then they measured the furrows, which had to be 40 centimetres deep, 25 centimetres wide, and 100 meters long. Then they were paid with vouchers. Whoever had to work on a section with stones found the task not easy, and they made the, redo the work until it was done properly. After 8 months, the work was completed, and the women had already planted the sugarcane, so the Creole owner paid them. Some people earned 45 pesos for the 8 months. The people didn't know about sugarcane, they didn't know that sugar was obtained from it. There were no tractors or factories either. They were also paid with 16 gauge shotguns, revolvers, clothes, canteens, and iron pots, and the women who worked the hardest received clothing. […] People returned when the work was finished […]. The following year, people returned to the Ledesma sugar mill because that's where they could find work" (David Mananses in Segovia 2005:55, my translation).

economically unfeasible (Lagos 2002).[22] Despite this, they were victims of various forms of violence, exploitation, and repression. In a conversation that took place in 2013, Asencio Pérez, a younger *cacique* of the indigenous community Alto de La Sierra, told me:

Hemos sido esclavizados; si hablamos de ingenios yo hoy en día se bien el mal trato que nos han hecho. ¡Hasta han inventado un "familiar" que era mentira![23] Indígena que reclamaba, ahí nomás lo mataban. ¡Hasta eso! […] En los ingenios nos han tratado así, nos han matado, ¡mucha gente se ha muerto! ¡Chicos! Muchas familias la han dejadas muerta ahí…y esta es la verdad y yo creo que todos saben. (Asencio Pérez, Comunidad Indígena Alto de La Sierra, 2013).[24]

We do not know whether everyone was or is aware of it, as Asencio argues. Undoubtedly, for some, the situation was not only broadly accepted and tolerated but also considered beneficial from both an economic and scientific perspective.

In fact, the controlled space of the *ingenios* also became a point of contact between indigenous people and those who wanted to photograph and study them, allowing them to approach the 'savages' in a protected and safe space. As Argentine anthropologist Carlos Masotta, one of the first researchers to take an interest in postcards produced in Argentina, stated: "Photographing Indigenous people in those sugar mills was common as the exploitative, concentration camp-like context made it easier to access Indigenous individuals who posed docilely. These places were regularly used by photographers from the postal company until 1940" (Masotta 2011:13, my translation). The newly constructed railway made travel less complex, and photographers could easily reach their subjects in these establishments, having them available in exchange for a small amount of money or through the pressures of those supervising the labor on the plantations, which had an internal police system. It was on these occasions that, for

[22] In contrast to the indigenous populations of southern Argentina, in the Chaco, the State appeared to act differently, avoiding extermination for purely economic reasons. As Lagos (2002) states: "The State acted with discretion in the Chaco not for humanitarian reasons, but out of strict economic convenience: a dead Indian is of no use as labor […] In this sense, it is important to clarify the differences with the case of the country's south, where what was considered the "real Indian problem" was located. Here, indigenous people were not seen as potential workers in the expansion of crop and livestock farming, and where, ultimately, violence unfolded without restraint" (Lagos 2002: 102, my translation).

[23] *El Familiar* – the Familiar – was a non-human mythological figure instrumental in maintaining control over the workers in the sugar mills. He belongs to the factory owner and guarantees him material prosperity in exchange for the sacrifice of human lives (cfr. Gordillo 2002, 2006; Isla 2000). The name suggest that the origin of the myth can be traced back to medieval Europe, when the term *familiar* was used to refer to supernatural and diabolical creatures that accompanied witches. In the context of sugar cane plantation, different social groups have represented it in various ways, frequently as a giant black dog with red eyes, a huge serpent or a shapeshifting creature. For Kirsten Mahlke (2022) the contractual myth re-emerges during the period of mass European immigration from the late 19th century onwards, in the newly industrialized regions of Argentina. On the topic of the Devil's pact, the culture of terror, power relations and commodities fetishism in the Colombian plantations and in Bolivian mines, see Taussig (1980).

[24] "We were enslaved; if we talk about the sugar mills, I know very well today the mistreatment they inflicted on us. They even invented a "Familiar" that was a lie! Any indigenous person who protested was killed right then and there. Even that! […] In the sugar mill, they treated us like that; they killed us, so many people died! Children! Many families were left dead there…and this is the truth, and I believe everyone knows it" (Asencio Pérez, Alto de La Sierra indigenous community, 2013, my translation).

example, most of the portraits of indigenous women, often naked or semi-naked, were taken—these later became postcards halfway between the exotic and the erotic genres. The photos were taken anonymously and produced in postcard format with suggestive captions (almost always 'Bellezas Indias'), reflecting a gaze in which voyeurism, machismo, and racism fused, multiplying violence through serial reproduction that would reach the farthest parts of the world.[25]

As previously mentioned, the plantations also became laboratories for scientific research. One of the most well-known examples in which photography and anthropology came together for scientific purposes is the study by Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, a German anthropologist who arrived in Argentina in 1897, contracted by the Museum of Natural Sciences in La Plata,[26] where he became head of the Anthropology section. In 1906, he conducted a scientific expedition to the sugar mill La Esperanza (Jujuy) together with Carlos Bruch, an entomologist and the photographic record keeper of the research (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

Figure 2 Photo by Carlos Bruch, Indigenous camp at Ingenio La Esperanza (Jujuy), 1906. Museo de La Plata (Argentina).

[25] I have chosen not to show this type of images in this article because the sensitivity of the topic deserves a specific treatment.

[26] Before returning to Germany, Lehmann-Nitsche would remain in Argentina until 1930, making many trips to what was referred as *el interior* (the hinterland) of the country, to differentiate it from the large cities. His goal was to study, from the perspective of physical anthropology, the different indigenous groups present in the national territory, which had been created relatively recently. However, he was also interested in cultural aspects, cosmogony, languages, and the mythology of various groups in the North and South of the country.

Figures 3 and 4 Photos by Carlos Bruch, Ingenio La Esperanza (Jujuy), 1906). The same subjects posed and photographed slightly differently, with a different background, reveal the photographer choice. In this photo (like fig. 9, 10, and 11) it is very clear what Laureano Segovia said about *chiripa*, the cloth used to wrap the lower part of the body. Museo de La Plata (Argentina).

The expedition was facilitated by the friendship between the then-director of the La Plata Museum, Samuel Lafone Quevedo, and the Leach brothers, Roger and Walter, the English owners of the factory since its founding in 1882. Lehmann-Nitsche was convinced of the urgency to document what was 'disappearing', yet in his writings there is no denunciation of the inhumane conditions in which the indigenous people lived in the *ingenios* camps. On the contrary, he believed in the usefulness of indigenous 'hands' to work on the plantations. In the report published the following year in the *Anales del Museo de La Plata*, titled 'Estudios antropológicos sobre Chiriguanos, Chorotes, Matacos y Toba (Chaco Occidental)', he wrote:

Given the rapid extinction of the Indigenous population in South America, it is important to expedite the study of their physical characteristics, as in the not-too-distant future, it will be completely impossible to conduct accurate surveys of many of these tribes. […] During the sugar harvest season, hundreds and thousands of Indigenous people from various tribes flock to the sugar mills of Tucumán, Salta, and Jujuy brought by chiefs and interpreters, to perform tasks that only require basic manual labor. Once the season is over, these people disperse and return to their homes in the Chaco and Bolivia. These people undoubtedly represent an important element in the exploitation of the country's wealth, the promotion of industry and trade in those regions, and, in times of need for labor, they form a highly inexpensive and unpretentious workforce, skilled for performing the ordinary and heavy tasks of the fields and mills, for which the European laborer would be too expensive and incapable of withstanding the humid and hot climate of the area. The Indigenous people, on the other hand, provide cheap and easily manageable labor when needed, and during the off-season, they incur no expenses for housing or food. (Lehmann-Nitsche 1907: 53-54, my translation).

Following the dictates of physical anthropology, the skulls are measured, skin color is observed, the teeth are examined, footprints are taken (Fig. 5), and samples such as hair are collected "to be studied in full comfort" (*ibid*.:60, my translation).

Hombre Chiriguano nº 34, 1/4 t. n. Hombre Chiriguano nº 35, 1/4 t. n.

Contornos del pie

The bodies of men and women are photographed both frontally and in profile in front of a white cloth, to achieve greater 'objectivity' as required by the standards of anthropometric photography, with the wall of the house provided by Walter Leach serving

as the background. Photography is assigned an extraordinary role: based on the scientific criteria of the time, it was considered a tool capable of capturing reality objectively, making the subjects measurable and classifiable according to ethnic and racial criteria that linked similarities and differences.

The study published in 1907 presents fifty plates composed of anthropometric photographs with subjects photographed front and side on, both clothed and nude, along with numerous plates documenting measurements of various body parts taken at the *ingenio*, where Lhemann-Nitsche writes: "The Indigenous people we dealt with were very accommodating and pleasant" (p. 56, my translation). Could they have ever resisted in a context of oppression and labor exploitation? He further writes: "When photographing, one must constantly control the Indigenous people to ensure they don't move, to make sure they sit properly, etc." (ivi p. 54, my translation). Contrary to their initial purposes, these photographs today can reveal some invisible aspects of the postcards related to the context in which people were posed, becoming *tipos indios* (indio types)[27] created with the intention of depicting indigenous people in their 'natural habitat', exoticized and primitivized, eroticized and sexualized, passive and savage.

Picture Postcards: a multi-layered visual source

Illustrated postcards began circulating in the second half of the 19th century in the United States and Europe, reaching their golden age between the end of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. They became, in fact, the most important visual and tactile mass media (Gugganig, Schor 2020), widely distributed on a global scale. For the first time, they enabled the mass distribution of images, thanks to the serial reproduction of photographs.

In addition to representing one of the first forms of visual communication, postcards became important and widespread due to their accessibility and low cost, especially among the working and middle classes. They also became collectibles because of their incredible variety and small format.[28] As Hinnerk Onken writes, referring to the study of a corpus of postcards from Latin America preserved at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin: "The postcard thus had a truly transnational character: it could cross the globe various times before finding its way into the private albums or archival collections […]. A photographer, often a European immigrant, would take a picture in

[27] The most widespread and well-known corpus is perhaps that related to the photographs of the Italian explorer and artist Guido Boggiani, specifically those depicting the Chamacoco of the Paraguayan Chaco, which Lehmann-Nitsche transformed into postcards in 1904, two years after Boggiani was found dead in the Chaco, decapitated next to his camera. "Colección Boggiani de tipos indígenas" holds 100 postcards originating from the artist's photographs, which today are preserved also in various Italian museums.

[28] From the last decade of the 19th century until the First World War, collecting postcards had become fashionable in Europe. As Mariluz Restrepo argued: "Postcards depicting every imaginable topic were available in most countries including the colonies of Western imperial nation. They were not only used as greetings when traveling, but also to send get-well wishes, congratulations, and invitations, and to transmit business requests, invoices, and advertisements. […] Postcards were caringly preserved in albums, shared with families and friends, and exchanged worldwide. Collecting postcards became a gratifying pastime, giving way to collector clubs, magazines, and national and international exhibition. Every month, millions of postcards were published, sold, posted, and kept by numerous people around the world." (Restrepo 2024: XX).

Latin America (making use of a European technique). The photo might then be sent to a manufacturer in Europe that produced postcards" (Onken 2015: 152).

For completeness, it should be added that the postcards were later resold in Latin America, primarily in urban contexts, and sent back to Europe.[29] These incredible circuits and correspondences certainly played a decisive role in creating and spreading a specific imagery of Latin America and, in the particular case I focus on, of the native populations of Argentina in general and the Chaco region in particular. Acting as 'proofs of reality', being based on authentic photographs, the postcards could serve as truthful testimonies of distant travels and unknown lands, contributing significantly to the generation of stereotypes, to consolidating them, to feeding contradictory fantasies about otherness and the 'elsewhere', or to creating new imaginaries.

Images depicting anonymous groups of people working on plantations are a motif that can be found in postcards from various parts of the world: tobacco, cotton, sugar cane, tea, fruit of different kinds in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It seems to me that these images served the purpose of showcasing the economic productivity and abundance of a country. Specifically, those related to sugarcane plantations are a recurring motif in countries that, at the beginning of the 20th century, based their economy on this productive system, such as Brazil, Cuba, Guyana, Guadalupe, the Hawaiian Islands, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad. On the Argentine plantations examined in this contribution, the goal of disseminating images depicting a productive and profitable country was likely combined with the desire to show a 'civilized' Argentina, where *indios pacificados* (pacified Indians) and workers lived.[30] Those images served, on the one hand, to affirm the state's civilizing project, and on the other, to attract investors and new European migrants.

I believe it is appropriate to place these postcards within what Deborah Poole has defined as the 'visual economy', based on her study of the history of image making in the Peruvian Andes (Poole 1997). In addition to considering the analysis of visual representations, Poole emphasizes the exchange value of images and their power as objects. These can be accumulated, exchanged, and thus endowed with a use value, placing their circulation within the cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images are appreciated, interpreted, and through which historical, scientific, and aesthetic value is assigned to them (Poole 1997:10):

Here it becomes important to ask not what specific images mean but, rather, how images accrue value. In the dominant European value system, for example, graphic images are evaluated in terms

[29] In Argentina, the first postcards began to circulate in 1878. Initially intended for national circulation, they were later sent abroad. At first, they were simple cards without images. Illustrate postcards began to appear in the last decade of the 19th century, depicting key location in Buenos Aires, such as Plaza de Mayo, Puerto Madero, and Calle Santa Fe. They were printed by the Compañia Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco. These and many more postcards can be appreciated in the extensive Argentine collection of Hector Pezzimenti, which has been partially digitized and displayed in the online archive of the Centro de Investigación de la Tarjeta Postal en Argentina https://www.geocities.ws/ceitpa/historia2.htm (Last accessed: April 1, 2025).

[30] The work was considered by the ruling elites as a means of discipline and thus a tool for the transformation of the indigenous communities of the Chaco region, which at the time were still predominantly organized in semi-nomadic groups living off hunting, fishing, and gathering, into 'citizens' in the service of the state.

of their relationship to the reality they represent. According to this realist discourse, the goal of all visual representation is to narrow the gap between the image and its referent. The image's value or utility is seen to reside in its ability to represent or reproduce an image of an original (or reality). Within the terms of the dominant realist discourse, this representational function of the image might therefore be thought of as its 'use value'. (*Ibid.)*

The image-object, reproduced in a serial manner, therefore acquires value not only for what it shows and represents, 'the postcard Indians', but also for its function as a *souvenir* in Europe, memories of the Argentine Republic. I imagine that these postcards, following in the wake of the images coming from the New World, had the power to contribute to shaping and reinforcing, by contrast, European identity. As Elizabeth Edwards argues: "Fascination (or desire) is itself couched in contradictions: so similar yet so different, so near yet so far" (1996: 215).

Postcards, unlike many contemporary images, are in all respects objects with a specific materiality, thick paper with two sides: one for the actual image and the other for the text. The back is crucial because, in the most fortunate cases, it provides numerous pieces of information, including messages written by the senders and the names, surnames, and the addresses of the recipients when the postcard has traveled. People on opposite sides of the Ocean, connected by heterogeneous ties, come together in a visual communication, which often (apparently) has nothing to do with the lines of text conveying greetings and affection.

As Kurti argues: "We view postcards as multiplications of narratives composed by multitudes of voices that speak both textually and visually. In fact, they are multi-layered and many-faced appropriations of words, symbols and messages masked, as they often are, by primary functions and purposeful contents" (Kurti 2004:45).

In a postcard from the early 20th century (Fig. 6), a man named August writes from Argentina to his friend Pierre, who is in France, sending him "a friendly handshake" while showing an image of "civilized natives eating".

Figure 6 Postcard, front: "Republic of Argentina – Civilized Indigenous People Eating". The handwritten on the back (in French) reads: "Dear Pierre, receive a handshake from your devoted August". Fumagalli Edition, Buenos Aires. Private collection.

We don't know who August was, nor, based on the research conducted so far, who Pierre Sage was, except that he lived at 68 Rue Boileau in Lyon at the beginning of the century. However, what we do know is that August writes the French translation *Indiens civilisés mangeant* in pencil next to the Spanish text, to ensure the caption's meaning is precisely understood. How did August view this scene? What did he see in it, and why did he choose this particular postcard? Was it familiar to him or strange? What are the political implications of this image today? These postcards conveyed 'exportable images', whose

purpose was to generate a specific image of a desirable Argentina, emphasizing its aspects related to modernity and progress, and thus a 'safe' country with 'domesticated' and 'civilized' natives. This is not so much tourism but rather propaganda, since the subject is the 'native other', stripped of any identity, fixed and essentialized within an objectifying paradigm that reproduces the European gaze and the evolutionary forms of classifying cultural diversity, 'capturing' it through the photographic device. These images unintentionally reveal, above all, the tensions that characterized early 20th-century Argentina—a country in the process of consolidation, governed bya Creole elite formed in Europe, carrying out a 'civilizing process' through the rejection and material and symbolic denial of native groups and assimilationist pressures.

At the historical moment when August wrote to Pierre, postcards depicting cities, landscapes, and 'characteristic' inhabitants of Argentina were being sold with the label *Recuerdo de la República Argentina* printed on them. The 'typicality' of Argentina was found naturally in the landscapes and in two communities, among many others present at the time in the territory of the newly formed national state: predominantly 'gauchos', nomadic cattle herders, folk heroes of Argentine patriotism and national identity, and the 'indios', a single category for a multitude of groups, histories, and identities. Based on my observations, and drawing from historical studies related to postcards traveling from Argentina (see Masotta 2003, 2011), the former are depicted in their work, festive activities, or leisure in rural areas while the latter are almost always portrayed as docile bodies[31], outside of history, metonymically representing ethnic groups or, according to the criteria of the time, 'races'. In this sense, I think it is important to consider that many of the photographs portraying indigenous subjects, which became postcards, were taken precisely on the sugar cane plantations and within the context of the *ingenios*. The poses the subjects assume in front of the camera express this condition of control within surveilled spaces: seated, posed, naked, depicted while eating, and in moments of intimacy.

[31] I am referring here to the concept of the "docile body" developed by Michel Foucault (1977), in which the body, as the object and target of power, is subjected, used, corrected, and transformed through discipline. As Foucault writes: "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes the same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (1977:138).

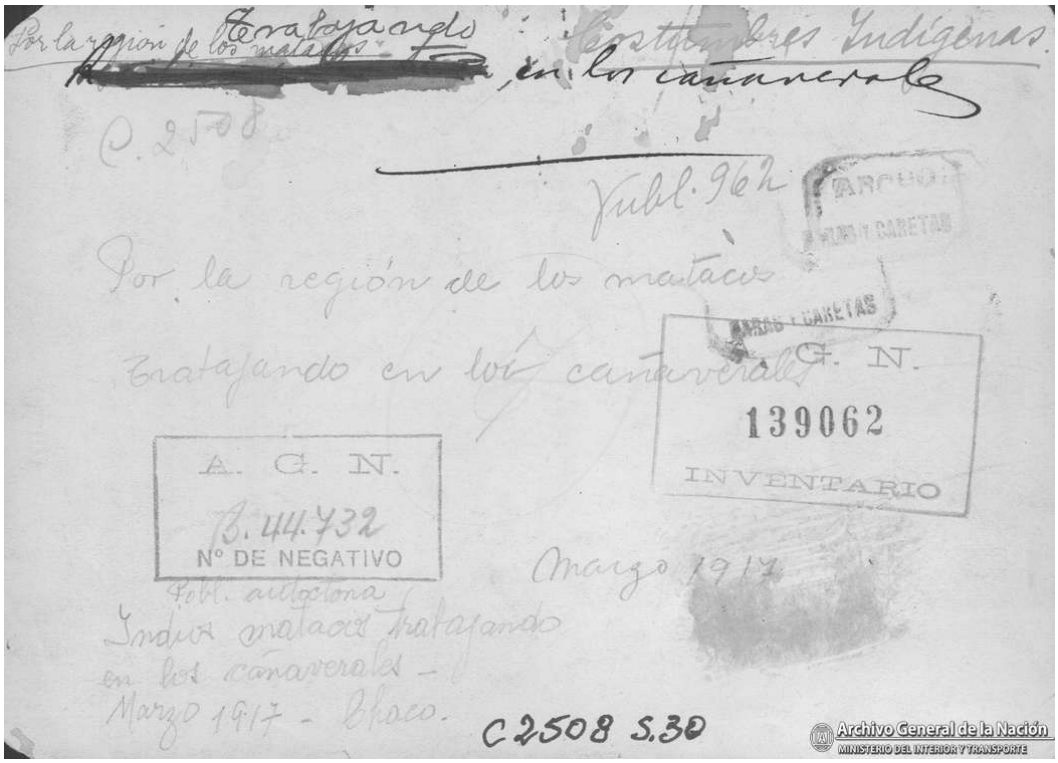

Figure 7 Photo, front and back. Handwritten: "Through the region of the Matacos/ Dinner in the village/Indigenous customs/Native Population/Mataco Indians Eating". Even though there is no precise reference to the author or the context in which this photo was taken, everything suggests it was captured in Jujuy sugar factory. This interpretation is confirmed by the analysis of the Argentine historian Marcelo Constant (2012). Furthermore, we know that they were indeed people from the Chaco region due to the small bag carried by the boy on the right, made from natural fibers of a plant called *chaguar* in Spanish, *kutsaj* in the Wichí language, a traditional element of Wichi material culture, which is still present today. Archivo Genaral de la Nación (Argentina).

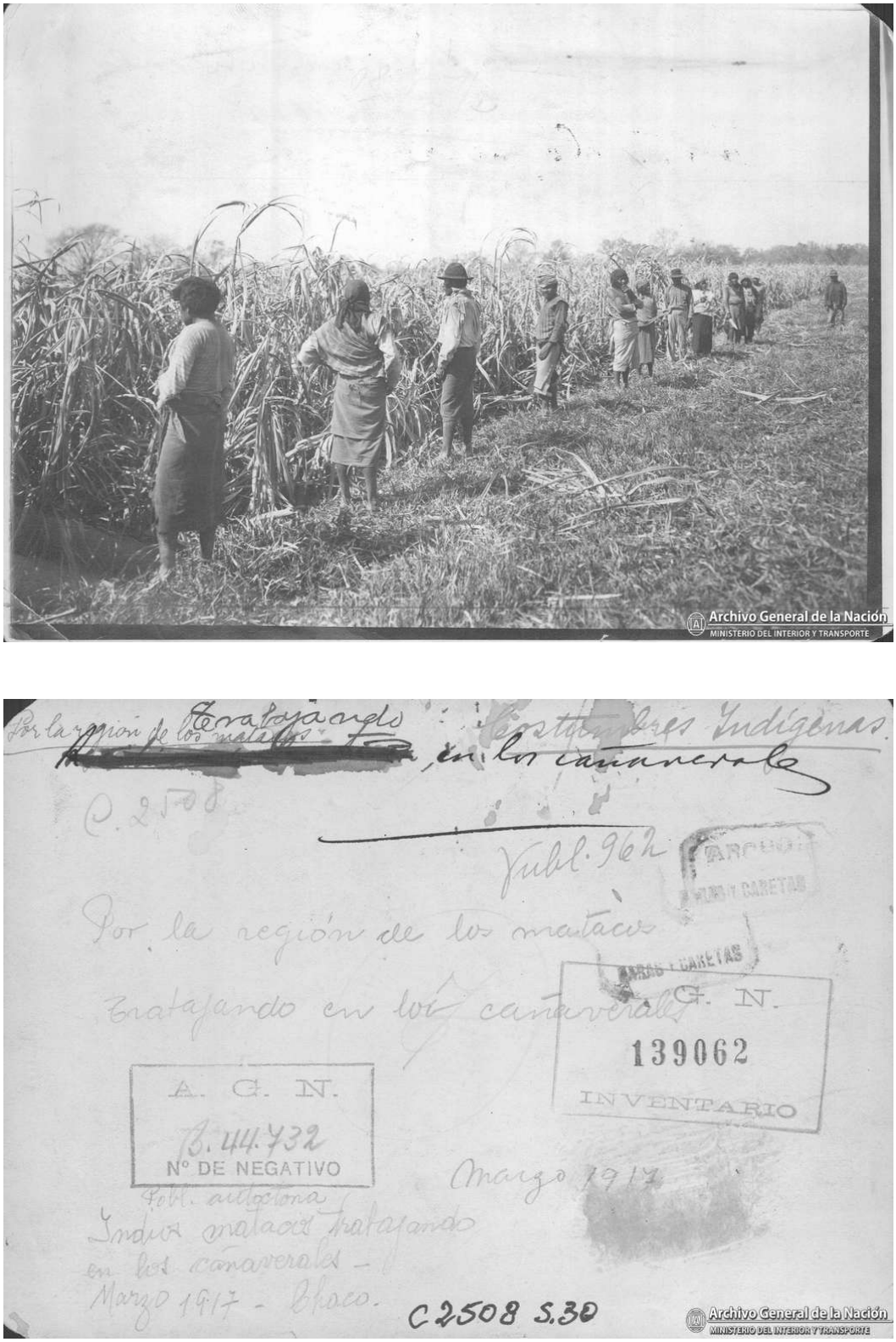

Figure 8 The photo shows Indigenous people working on the plantation. The handwritten caption on the back reads: "Through the region of the Matacos. Working in the sugarcane fields. Native population. Mataco Indians working in the sugarcane fields. March 1917". Source: Archivo General la Nación (Argentina).

Among those analyzed in this paper, only the ones taken among the sugar cane (fig. 12 and 13) show any movement, which in fact coincides with the movement of bodies at work: here, the 'docile bodies' become 'useful bodies', active bodies with effective but controlled movements. The images in question presuppose a series of binary oppositions that, as Edwards illustrates, are central to the metaphorical function of postcards (Edwards 1996:202) – civil/uncivilized, domesticated/wild, unnatural/natural, white/black, moral/immoral, rational/irrational, and we could also add dressed/naked. This difference speaks to the relationship between the photographer and the subjects, but also to the idea behind the representation of the 'postcard natives', who are photographed or, in most cases, posed in ways that reinforce essentializing stereotypes of belligerent, savage, naked but pacified, domesticated, and controlled natives. As Argentine anthropologist Mariana Giordano (2012) points out regarding historical photographs, individual and group portraits (in this case, figs. 9, 10 and 11) are more akin to 'ethnic' staging than to social photography.

The photos taken from structurally violent situations that become postcards seem to double the cynicism precisely because they are inserted into commercial circuits where the exoticized subjects become consumer objects: still bodies inside images that travel.

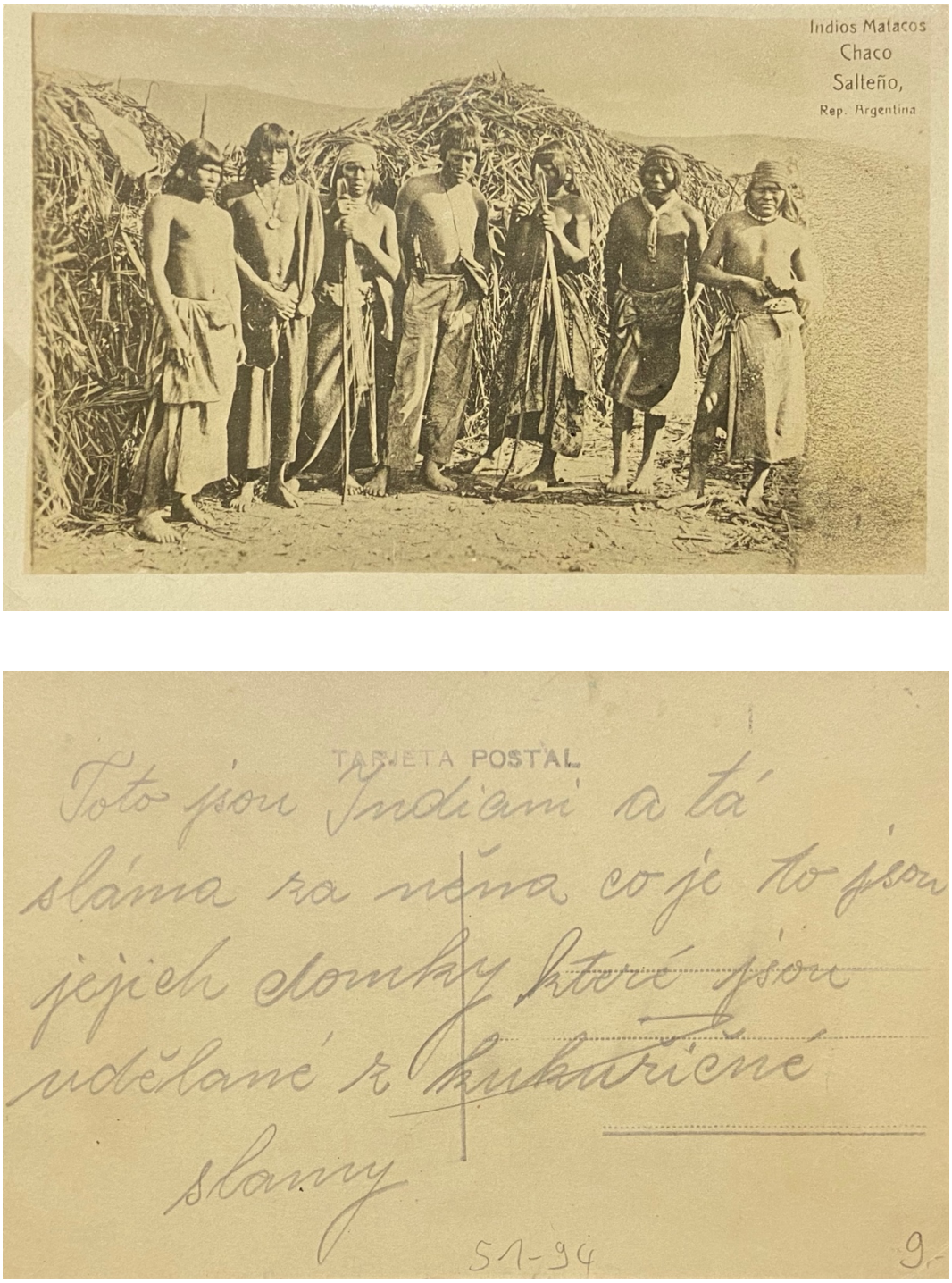

Figure 9 Postcard "Mataco Indians, Chaco Salteño. Argentine Rep.". On the back, the handwritten in Czech says approximately that they are Indians in front of their homes made of straw. Private collection.

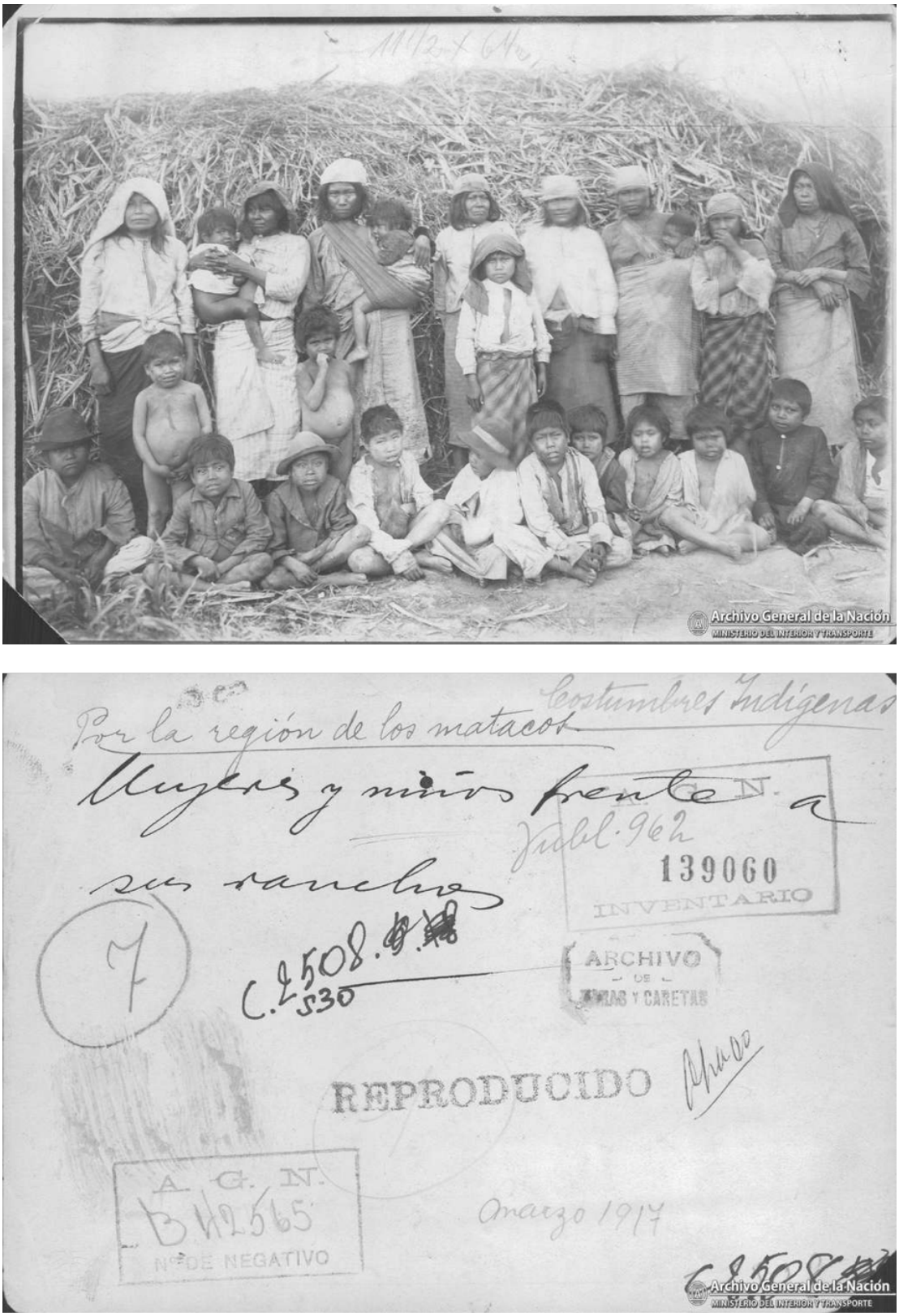

Figure 10 Photo front and back. The handwritten says: "Indigenous customs. Through the region of the Mataco. Woman and children in front of their huts. March 1917". Source: Archivo General la Nación (Argentina).

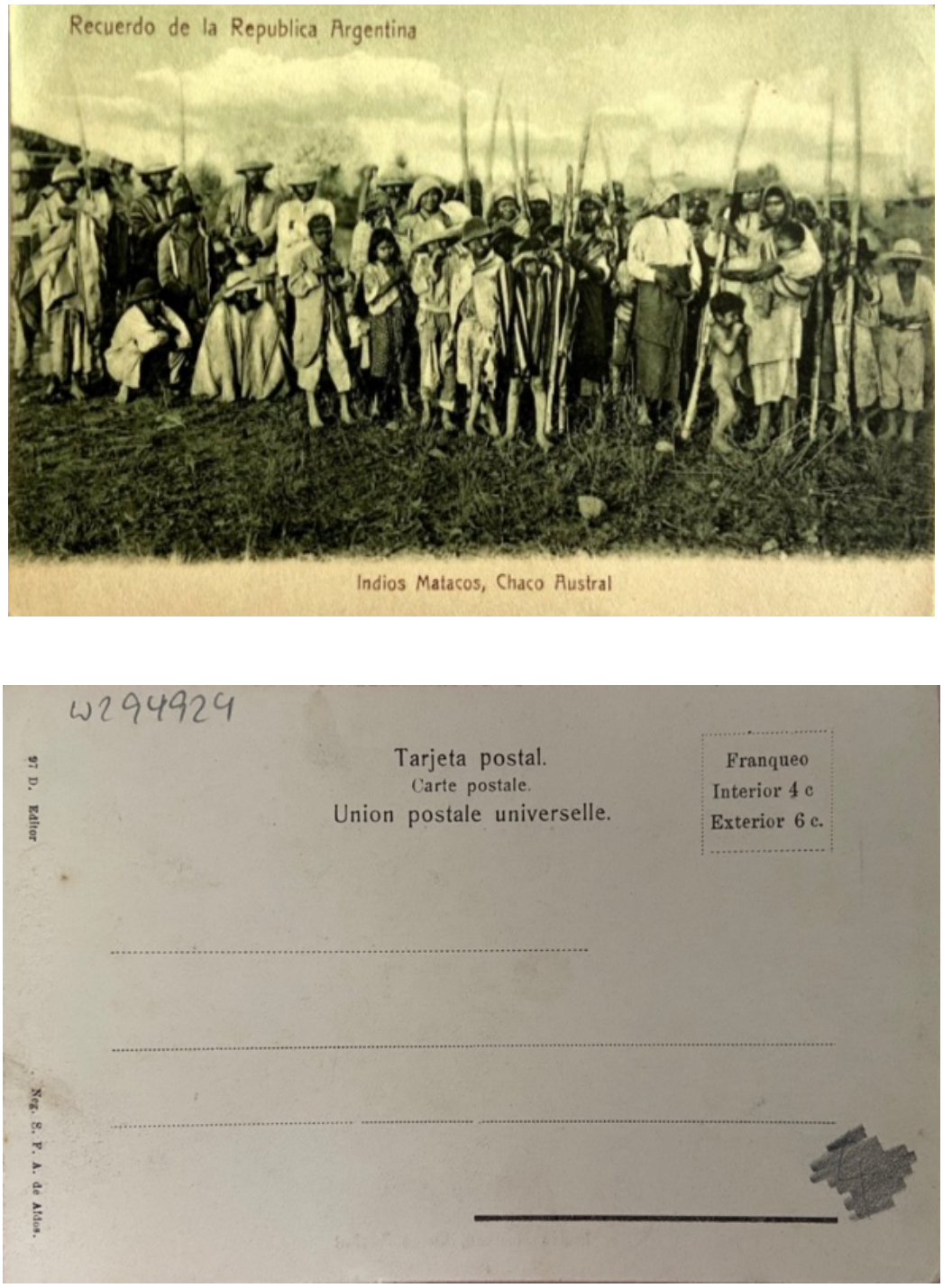

Figure 11 Postcard: "Souvenir from the Republic of Argentina – Mataco Indians, Chaco Austral". The people posed in a group scene are holding sugarcane stalks. Private collection.

In most cases, the textual component adds confusing and often entirely erroneous information, identifying heterogeneous and anonymous groups with "ethnic" names (such as Mataco, Chorote, Toba) or simply 'indios', often geographically located in the Chaco, a vast eco-region that spans several countries and different provinces in

Argentina, often confused with one another.[32] Sometimes, the name of the ethnic group is superimposed onto the name of the *ingenio*, as in the case of Figure 12, which depicts a young man with a bow, labeled 'Indio Mataco, Ledesma (Jujuy) R. Argentina', conveniently omitting that Ledesma was not the subject's place of origin but the town where one of Jujuy's most important *ingenios* was located.

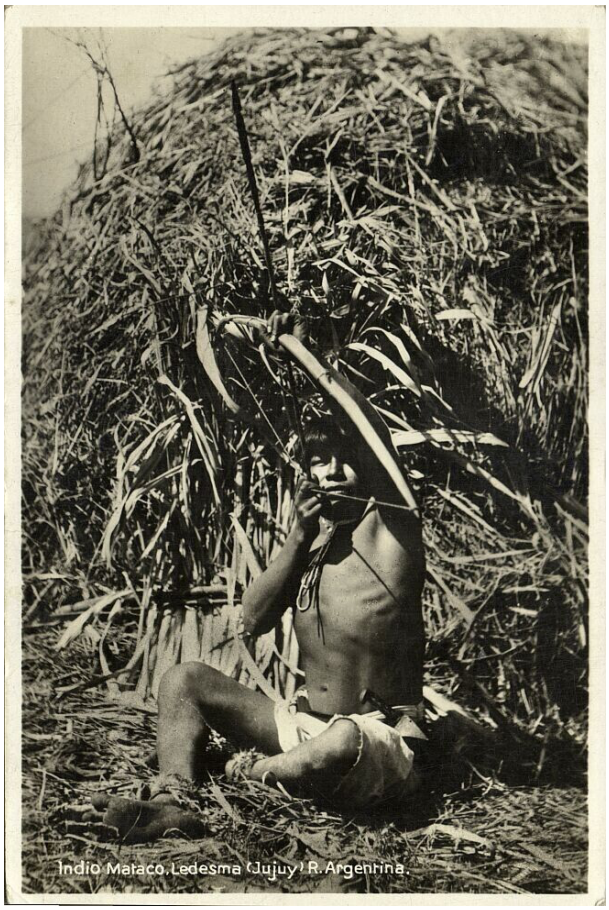

Figure 12 Postcard: "Mataco Indian. Ledesma (Jujuy) Republic of Argentina". Source: Museé du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac (Paris).

In other cases, the categorical act of assigning a name to an image is betrayed by the different editions of the postcards: this could happen when the same photographer sold the same photo to two different publishers, with slight alterations made to create two different versions, as in the case of Figures 13 and 14. These postcards show the same scene, this time not posed: we are on a plantation, and there are people with their backs to the camera, harvesting sugar cane. Figure 13 is slightly enlarged compared to Figure 14, and the head of the horse, likely ridden by the person supervising the work, is not visible.

[32] After observing hundreds of postcards, I have noticed that, for example, very often, native groups from the Chaco and those from Tierra del Fuego are confused with one another.

The second version was also painted, probably to differentiate it from the first and make it more attractive and closer to reality. From the first, we understand that the photo was taken by Argentine photographer Enrique Carlos Moody[33], probably at the end of the 19th century, during his expedition to explore the Paraguay, Paraná, and Iguazú rivers. This was part of an Argentine scientific mission which traveled through the northern regions to collect local flora and fauna for the 1893 Colombian Exposition in Chicago. The mission, funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, was led by naturalist Gustavo Niederlein, taxidermist Pedro Serié, and painter Augusto Ballerini. Moody was the supplier of numerous photographs for the postcard industry, which was booming at the time. The two images I show were sold to the publishers Rosauer[34] and Fumagalli. As in the case of Figure 2, the relationship between images and text seems surreal. The black-and-white postcard (Fig. 13) has the caption "Bon Noël 03," suggesting that it was sent to France as a Christmas greeting in 1903, while the color version, where the caption explicitly states that it depicts natives harvesting sugar cane, was sent to convey "Lots of kisses to Aunt Jeanne."

[33] A cousin of the brothers Samuel and Arturo Boote, from an English family that emigrated to Argentina in the 1840s, prolific producers of photographic albums depicting Argentine landscapes and subjects in the 19th century. On commission or personal initiative, they photographed all the provinces of Argentina. Samuel Boote was one of the most famous photographers and importers of photographic materials in Argentina.

[34] The publisher Roberto Rosauer, born in Austria and arriving in Argentina at the end of the 19th century, was the first publisher of illustrated postcards in Argentina and the owner of the main philatelic business in Buenos Aires. From the research conducted so far, I have realized that in the case of Rosauer editions, credit to the photographers is always included, with the names of the authors of the photographs being listed. This makes it easier to understand the history behind the postcards. This is not the case when the author is not mentioned or when the acronym "S. F. A. de A." is encountered, which stands for "Sociedad Fotográfica Argentina de Aficionados", a kind of anonymous collective signature. The society had about a hundred members until 1900, including public figures and politicians (Teixidor Cadenas 2023).

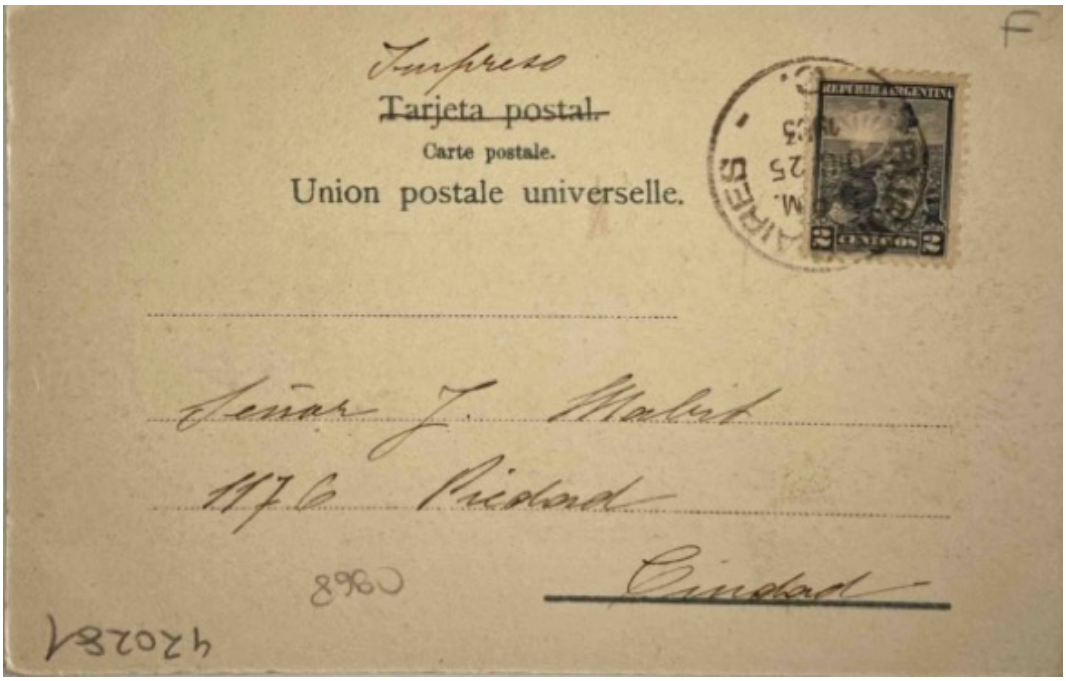

Figure 13 Postcard: "Souvenir of the Argentine Chaco – Sugarcane harvest". Publisher Rosauer, Rivadavia 522 E.C. Moody, Photographer. Private collection.

Figure 14 Posctard: "Republic of Argentina – Indians harvesting sugarcane". Fumagalli Edition, Buenos Aires. Back, handwritten in French: "Bons baisers à Tante Jeanne". Private collection.

Another interesting example is a postcard that traveled from Buenos Aires to Rome in 1915 (Fig. 15): here, the image of the "Indios del Chaco" is used to send "Affectionate greetings from Uncle Tancredi" to Miss Olimpia Botto, who lived in Rome, at Via Salaria 123.

Figure 15 Postcard: "Republic of Argentina – Chaco Indians". Back, handwritten in Italian: "Affettuosi saluti dallo zio Tancredi/ 31.8.15)". Private collection.

In these cases, the messages sent seem completely out of place compared to the image and the description, which is itself ambiguous. Were these images misunderstood? Were they not given the proper significance, or simply accepted within a dominant worldview that placed indigenous people on the lowest rungs of the social, cultural, and economic ladder? And what did the recipients of these postcards see in

them? How did these images affect the lives of those who received them? How did they resonate in the European homes that hosted them until the next stage of their social life?

Final reflections: images between movements and relationality

Between the final decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the native societies of the Chaco region faced numerous transformations in their ways of life: the definition of national borders between Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay, military campaigns aimed at controlling territories and indigenous populations, evangelization by Christian missionaries, forced labor in sugar factories in northern Argentina, and the Chaco War (1932–1935). This led the indigenous societies of the Chaco region to progressive sedentarization, social and political upheaval, and the denial of their languages and cultures by means of internal colonialism.

In this historical moment of profound transformation and social reorganization, photography froze these societies in time, turning them into postcards that became consumer objects in European material culture, enclosed within rectangles of paper, as if they were confined within the boundaries of a plantation. What do the subjects posed before the photographic apparatus—arranged and photographed—tell us, and what do they conceal?

Kurti suggests that postcards: "are fascinating miniatures of historical frames that hide more than they reveal" (Kurti 2004:60). In this paper, I have attempted to reflect on the hidden aspects of illustrated postcards as visual objects traveling between worlds, depicting the native peoples of the Argentine Chaco as still and docile bodies at a time of great and irreversible transformation in their heterogeneous ways of life, linked to territories and resources stripped away by early forms of extractivism, territorial control, and social discipline. These are not ordinary images because the postcards were produced for commercial purposes: within that frame, the stereotypical image of the indigenous person is sold and sent beyond national borders. Native otherness is relegated to the backdrop of history, paradoxically fossilized as an icon of national heritage to be exported. It is paradoxical that these images, now deeply dehumanizing to us, were used as a vehicle to convey the image of the Argentine Republic, transforming indigenous subjects into docile bodies subordinate to the civilizing mission of the national state, turning them into "remembrances of the Argentine Republic". They remain disturbing images, further aggravated by the banality of the printed and written words and the cruelty of common sense. They speak of a visual culture and a way of seeing the world that one felt “natural”, almost innocent, to those who consumed them or perhaps - naively - “collected” them as mere objects among others.

As Malek Alloula wrote in his beautiful essay on postcards sent by French nationals in Algeria, “the colonial postcard will set up a rhetoric of camouflage in which only the agency of avowal will appear in the forefront, no matter what theme the photographer may select” (Alloula 1986: 28). We can only grasp the false innocence of the image by shifting our focus from the photographed event to the photographic event itself, and by relating the images to one another. As if it were a genealogy, we can carry out an

ethnography of image families, understanding their kinship, alliances, and conflicts. As David Levi Strauss reminds us: "Photographs exist and operate on an axis of selection meaningful in relation to other photographs in proximity" (Levi Strauss 2003:23).

These postcards can only be understood if placed in relation to each other, with their similarities and differences, if compared to the corpora from which they emerge, to history, and to their mobility, which situates them within a global visual economy and establishes their use value. It is their circulation that brings them to life, and their potential kinship that allows us to understand them.

The apparent humility of these objects, their ability to camouflage and their mobility, have also allowed postcards to go unnoticed, bypassing the logic of archiving and slipping between public and private spaces, thus giving us the opportunity to view them thanks to their audacious capacity to appear in the most uncommon places: from museums to flea markets, from public or private archives to online auctions.

What we are allowed to do, through the qualitative analysis of postcards, is to dive into their 'radical openness' (Restrepo 2024) to organize the fragments of the socio-cultural biographies of these objects and observe both what is portrayed, and the relationship with the text. We can also offer an interpretation based on a perspective informed by fieldwork and dialogue with people potentially involved in the analysis, such as representatives of the source communities. This is about connecting the images, making them speak, and weaving together the fragments that, like isolated puzzle pieces, are small clues we can only understand when brought together.

What function can these postcards have today? Their inherent ambiguity raises a fundamental question: what history do they tell? The history of the indigenous people on plantations? The tale of a country seeking to assert itself economically and politically on a global scale? The story of the sender or the recipient? The density of these postcards holds together all these levels, narrating global connections and the disparities between different types of travel and migration: that of Europeans going to Latin America for various purposes, and that of indigenous people in the *ingenios*. They also tell the stories of those who sent images from an unknown continent to known people on the other side of the Ocean. What truth do they tell? What do they save from oblivion?

One could argue that postcards, as material goods, had the capacity to fulfill the genuine desire to see, to give shape and substance to landscapes and people who were only known by name or reputation. However, in this case, it is impossible to forget the coloniality of a gaze and a thought that sees the indigenous subjects in the postcards as objects to be possessed (Edwards 1996:205), much like the postcard itself. These indigenous people, like the postcards, become commodities to be consumed within the bourgeois European taste for the exotic at the turn of the century, the same Europe that invented human zoos and displayed natives from various parts of the world, including Argentina, for observation.

My current research intends to 'reanimate' the movements of these images and share them with the descendants or people and communities who may be interested in this intrinsically diasporic visual heritage, which, like any heritage, is political and thus a site of conflict. The study of past images can be important for present-day awareness

regarding the production, use, and circulation of images, which are inherently mobile and mutable. The postcards of yesterday, and their stories, can help us question the very present act of image-making, their diffusion, how they were seen and received, as well as the ethical and aesthetic relationships with the photographed subjects. They can also help us question the types of images we can or should produce today, when we are saturated with images in which we ourselves are images moving within a screen in an immaterial space. Then there is the question of what images are missing, and what images have we not yet seen or understood? I believe visual anthropology can help us reflect deeply on these issues, for example by valorizing different perspectives that offer new interpretations of images. As noted by some Argentine authors (Masotta 2003; Giordano 2012), it is possible to identify elements that point to the agency of the subjects portrayed, in their sideways or furrowed gazes, which may convey a sense of resistance. The 'indigenous people to be looked at' are, in fact, looking at us, forcing us to look at ourselves, to question, to doubt, to trace the genealogy of this reciprocal and uneasy gaze.

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