



# How can postcards be applied to understanding the history

## of ethnic diversity in the American fashion scene?



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### Abstract

This project is a microhistorical visual analysis exploring what postcards from the early 20th to 21st centuries visually communicate about ethnic diversity in the American fashion scene. The project utilizes inductive coding methods to visually analyze the fashion of pictured subjects in the postcards. The research was conducted through Florida State University's Digital Card Archive, an online postcard repository created by Dr. Michael Neal. This project derives its meaning from approaching fashion as a "symbolic system," meaning a social construct that represents how people perceive their social status through visual symbols; ergo, fashion encompasses identifiers such as ethnicity and becomes an easy site for bias (Crane 1). Thorough research has been conducted on this sociological aspect of fashion. However, these studies are mostly confined to using physical dress garments (Aspers and Godart 171). This project supplements the existing body of research by exploring fashion through the lens of a secondary art medium: the postcard. Each postcard reflects the values and social norms of its cultural origin, picturing the "best" that a person, place, or thing was perceived to offer. Each pictured subject is chosen for a postcard because they--and their dress--were believed to be the ideal embodiment of their ethnic community. Understanding this insight, this project visually analyzes relevant postcards to help illuminate the history of ethnic diversity in American fashion. These postcards ultimately indicate a narrative of white cultural dominance with varied oppressions and few social progressions, which can be witnessed through specific fashion examples, like the "afro" hairstyle.

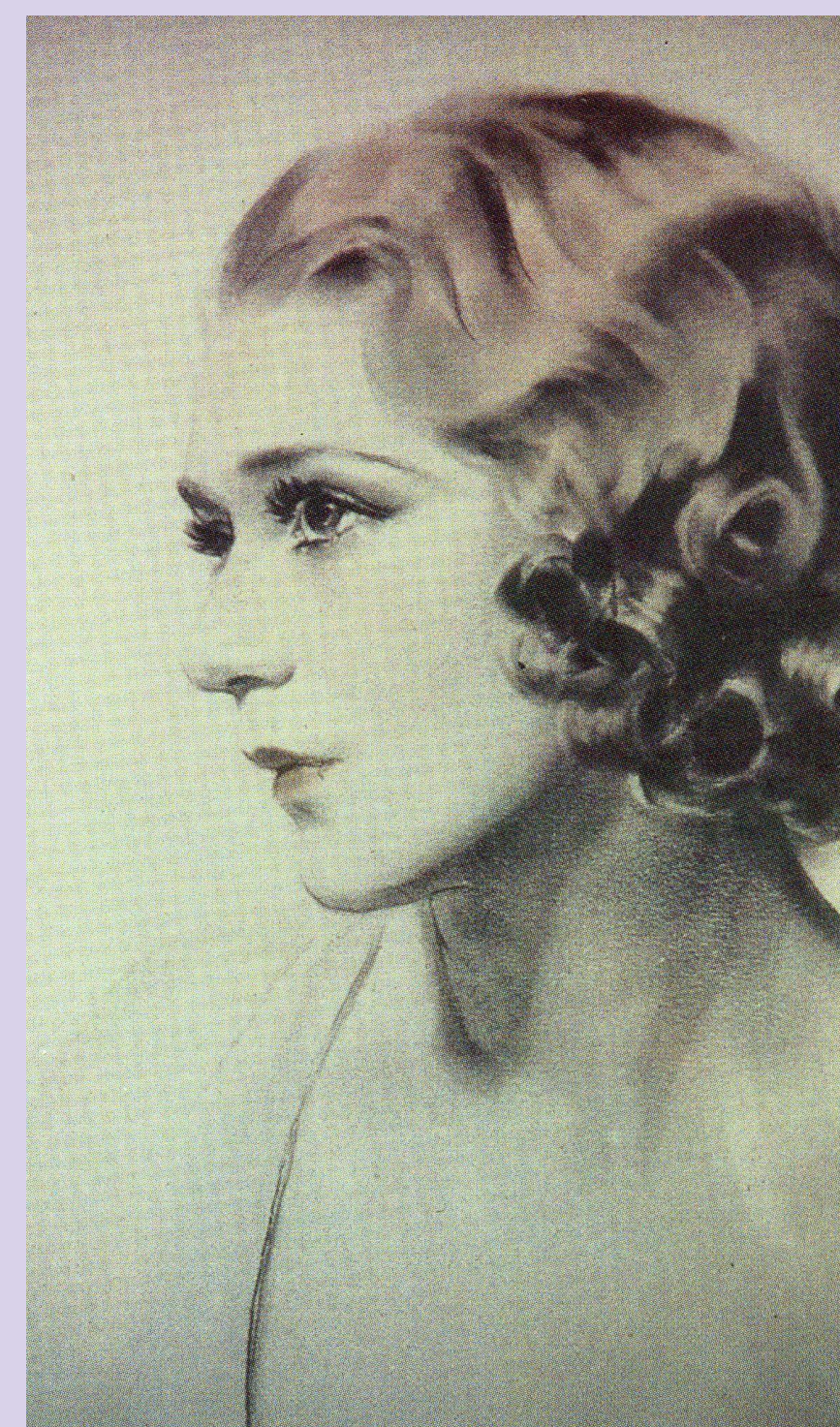
### Background Information

Postcards are uniquely profound sources for humanities research built on microhistorical visual analysis because they are "manifestations of popular culture," known for their idealized pictured versions of reality (Östman 423). This idealization indicates an implied agreement with or endorsement of the postcard's constructed image with each publication and purchase, on the behalf of the pictured subject, manufacturer, and consumer. These sociological connotations foster a specific necessity for analyzing visual cultures like fashion through postcards, despite their widely ignored potential in humanities research (Prochaska 383). In addition to understanding the legitimacy and special qualifications of postcards as means for visual analysis in humanities research, it is also helpful to understand the below terms in the context of this project.

- ❖ Fashion: Physical dress garments, such as jewelry and clothes, as well as hairstyle.
- ❖ Pictured subject: The person(s) being featured in the image on a given postcard.



"Aloha." Circa 2000s.



"Mary Pickford." Circa 1920s.



"Lana Turner." Circa 1980s.



"Diahann Carroll." Circa 1970s.



"Lionel Richie." Circa 1980s.

### Results

- ❖ The foremost trend in fashion representation was the dominance of white pictured subjects. Fifty-five percent of pictured subjects were white, with only twenty-one percent being African American, fifteen percent Native American, and nine percent Native Hawaiian. Archival searches drew no results with Asian, Hispanic, or Arabic pictured subjects that contained visual fashion components for analysis, which illustrates the stark marginalization within this study's convenience sample.
- ❖ Native Americans and Hawaiians were almost exclusively pictured in stereotypical, historical dress, or were portrayed with barely any clothing. Native Hawaiian women specifically were disproportionately sexually exploited. In the few instances where Native Americans were not pictured in stereotypical dress, they seemed to be dressed in mainstream Western clothing, with only slight differences from their white counterparts of the same time period.
- ❖ White men and women often favored sleek hairstyles, especially in the early 1900s, while people of colors' hairstyles featured a lot more variety. The portrayals of ethnic hairstyles that did not conform to the straight ideal of Western hair increased in representation over the years.
  - In the 1970s specifically, African American men and women began to grow their hair out longer in its natural, curly texture, in what became known as an "afro."
    - In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an overall increase in the ethnic diversity of the pictured subjects as well as the variation in hairstyles. Many of the postcards with minority subjects came from this period.
- ❖ Beginning with the 1970s, fashion elements conceived in specific ethnic communities began to more noticeably enter the mainstream, such as hoop earrings, which were originally popularized by African American women.
- ❖ Ultimately, the most tangible, overarching trend found was the dominance of white cultural dress amongst this study's convenience sample; the majority of pictured subjects wore fashion elements adhering to mainstream Western culture. As time went on, though, ethnic diversity in fashion witnessed advancements at the cost of some setbacks, which invites further discussion on complex issues such as cultural appropriation.

### Methodology

- ❖ To begin research, the Digital Card Archive was examined for postcards with vivid portrayals of fashion using key terms like "fashion," "man," or "woman," as well as ethnic identifiers like "white" or "African American." After receiving some promising but sporadic results, searches were refined to specific decades, using key terms like "1930s." Additionally, postcards were secured for this project through the purchase of a collection from the 1970s and 1980s specifically, since little results were initially yielded in those decades.
  - These new postcards were uploaded to the Archive's software system, which meant scanning them with a flatbed scanner to form digital picture files that could be uploaded to the website. Next, their Dublin Core metadata was entered into the Archive's software system, which covers basic characteristics as well as a more detailed description of the postcard's visual art components. Additionally, the Postcard Item Type metadata was entered, which outlines details more specific to postcard manufacturing and distribution.
- ❖ Furthermore, a digital spreadsheet was created to encompass each of the thirty-three postcards in the convenience sample collected for research. This sheet included a column for the postcard title, the specific year or approximate decade they were from, the ethnicity of the pictured subject(s), their gender(s), their clothing, their hairstyle, and their jewelry. These categories recorded the specificity of the pictured subject's ethnicity, dress, and historical context. While recording this visual data, an inductive coding approach was used, meaning no theoretical framework was applied to the data. Since no special disciplinary knowledge on fashion or visual analysis preceded this project, the data served as an exploratory starting point rather than support for a pre-existing theory.
- ❖ After the data collection process, visual patterns had to be determined. This project focused on disparities in ethnic representation, as well as possible commonalities in dress characteristics across ethnicities. Dates of origin for the postcards were also considered, as this could be another factor in establishing possible trends. Whenever an absence, commonality, or other compelling characteristic was noticed, it was recorded in an extensive list that acted as the base for the actual analysis of such visual trends.
- ❖ To conduct a thorough analysis of the fashion elements and trends from the postcards, key terms from the aforementioned list of visual findings were used to search for relevant secondary sources. For instance, after noticing the disparately high sexual exploitation of Native Hawaiian women in the postcards, databases like the FSU Library were used to search for articles and studies that included the key words "Native Hawaiian," "women," "fashion," and/or "exploitation." After repeating this process several times, there were a plethora of academic sources to help place this project's findings in a broader research context.



"A-Ho-Kola." 1970.



"Long Alec." Circa 1910s.

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### Discussion

- ❖ Portrayals of Native American pictured subjects are largely limited to stereotypical, historical fashion, such as the postcard "A-Ho-Kola." This creates an absence of contemporary representation, leaving Native Americans to function as historical tokens (Leavitt et al. 39). Beyond such tokenism, their pictured representations reflect assimilation into "Anglo domesticity," such as in the postcard "Long Alec" (Simonsen 76).
- ❖ Native Hawaiians were also confined to stereotypes in their postcard representation--specifically the women. Native Hawaiian women were portrayed as "picturesque and primitive" (Brislin qtd. in Hall 24). This sexual exploitation couples with stereotyped, historical dress to birth an abundance of "hula" fashion, such as in the postcard "Aloha."
- ❖ As far as African American pictured subjects, the progression of hairstyles was specifically compelling. In postcards prior to 1970, African American women were pictured with their hair either covered or cropped. This lack of variation despite mainstream hairstyle trends like the "flapper"--as seen in the postcard "Mary Pickford"--was startling. While African Americans were enthusiastic and equal participants in liberating American fashion movements like the "flapper," they have been "overlooked in media and literature" because their participation was under a higher level of scrutiny for fear that it would harm "racial uplift" (Sparks 2).
  - In the 1970s and 1980s, postcards embracing the natural texture of African American hair began to appear, like in the postcards "Diahann Carroll" and "Lionel Richie." These feature the hairstyle commonly referred to as the "afro," which became a symbol of African American pride (Walker 536).
    - ◆ In this same time period, some African American pictured subjects chose to relax their hair, an emulation of "white" physical characteristics that researchers believe stems from internalized racial hierarchical mindsets (Barnett 70).
- ❖ Many ethnically diverse fashion trends in the postcards suggest cultural appropriation. For instance, the hoop earrings and acrylic nails in postcards like "Lana Turner"; these trends began in the African American community, where they were often labeled as "improper," yet when adopted by a white pictured subject, were considered "a fashion statement" (Richardson 55). These instances of borrowed cultural fashion without acknowledgement of their origin are grounds for "appropriation of indigenous and other non-white cultures ... in an attempt to manifest revolutionary identities" (Michael, et al. 127).
- ❖ In understanding the history of ethnic diversity in the American fashion scene, postcards are vital research means. Their unique "manifestations of popular culture" and predominant visual components provide insight into the perceived and actual realities of ethnic representation in fashion (Östman 423). Although this research is far from a finite endpoint, as there are many postcards featuring pictured subjects from marginalized ethnic communities that could supplement the current sample, this project proves the potential of postcards in related sociological research that stem from visual analysis.