



## **MAMMIES, AYAHS, BABOES:**

### **POSTCARDS OF RACIALIZED NURSEMAIDS FROM THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

SATYASIKHA CHAKRABORTY

#### **Abstract**

Why did early twentieth-century White Euro/American cultural representations across colonial empires construct “colored” and colonized nursemaids in certain similar ways? In this article, the author examines visual depictions of three particular gendered and racialized domestic servants – the African-American mammy, the South-Asian ayah, and the Indonesian baboe – in the emergent visual medium of the picture-postcard. Despite differences in the historical lives and labors of actual mammies, ayahs, and baboes, all three figures were exoticized, desexualized, and sentimentalized in Euro/American visual imagination. A comparative reading of postcards brings together North American and European imperial histories of interracial caregiving – histories that are typically studied separately in area-studies contexts. By mass-circulating stereotypes of non-White nursemaids, and by naturalizing non-White women’s labors in White homes, ephemeral picture-postcards played a role in globally upholding the domestic and political economies of gender, race, and empire.

*Keywords:* empire, race, gender, nannies, maidservants, racism, colonialism, imperialism, stereotypes, domestic labor, interracial caregiving, Black Americana, racist memorabilia

## **Introduction: Comparative Perspectives**

“I never see my Mammy without a tugging at my heart and a tightness in my throat. Some of the happiest days my life ever had, or will have, were spent in the shelter of her arms” (Langhorne, 1922, p. 8).

“Old Ayah – was her only real intimate; and the affection between these two, one so old and Brown, the other so young and White, was quaint and picturesque” (Hearle, 1912, p. 3).

“The devotion of the babu [baboe] is infinitely greater than that of a Dutch nursemaid. She attaches herself wholeheartedly to your child and keeps this attachment her entire life” (Brondgeest, 1919, p. 39).

African-American and Asian caregivers to Euro/American families were not only gendered, racialized, and otherized, but also overwhelmingly romanticized in early twentieth-century literary-visual cultures (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> What accounts for this shared sentimentalization and exoticization of Black/Indigenous nursemaids in different parts of the world—from North America, to British India, and Dutch Indonesia? In this article, I comparatively examine White Euro/American constructions of non-White domestic caregivers in picture-postcards from the early 1900s. Since the growing popularity of postcards at the turn of the twentieth-century, the first three decades witnessed an unprecedented mass-production, mass-circulation, and mass-collection of the new epistolary and visual medium. Against the backdrop of imperialism, scientific racism, the world wars, racial segregation, and demands for political and social rights by “colored”/colonized people, what did it mean for Euro/Americans to purchase, send, and receive postcards of “Negro” and “Native” nannies?

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<sup>1</sup> I use Euro/American to indicate both (West) European and White (US) American.



Figure 1. Postcards of exoticized and romanticized nursemaids from the early 1900s.<sup>2</sup>

Historians of empire typically study domestic labor relations between Europeans and Asians/Africans in the context of European colonialism (Ghosh, 2006; Stoler, 2002). Historians of the United States, on the other hand, usually situate interracial domestic labor in histories of slavery and abolition (White, 1999) or immigration (Urban, 2017). Looking at interracial domestic labors beyond area-studies contexts, in a broader inter-imperial trans-national framework, not only leads to productive comparative analysis but points to congruencies in imperial projects across nations and empires. Ann Stoler (2001), who spearheaded the “intimate turn” in imperial historiography, emphasized the need to bring together postcolonial studies and North American history, which have remained “two distinctive historiographies” despite their common concern with “how intimate domains – sex, sentiment, domestic arrangement, and child rearing – figure in the making of racial categories and in the management of imperial rule” (p. 829). Unfortunately, little attempt has been made in this regard. Drawing inspiration from Stoler (2001), I bring into conversation early-twentieth-century North American and European imperial constructions of non-White intimate caregivers. The comparative focus using mass-circulating postcards enables us to understand the connected global history of imperial domestic sentiments and racialized gendered stereotypes.

<sup>2</sup> All images are from the author’s personal collection.

The three figures of non-White maidservants, which I examine in this study, have their own particular histories. The mammy, in plantation households of the American South, was an enslaved woman of African or African-American descent, who could be inherited, owned, and sold by the White family for whom she was forced to labor. The ayah and the baboe, on the other hand, were non-bonded contractual employees. Ayahs were South-Asian women who worked for British imperial families in India, often accompanying them to Britain. Baboes were Javanese/Balinese women who served Dutch imperial families in Indonesia. Ayahs and baboes were waged, whereas, mammies were unpaid slave laborers. Whites in southern United States often referred to Black maidservants in the post-emancipation period as mammies, although they continued to be subjected to the degrading slave-mammy stereotypes. Despite these important historical differences, the way these figures were mythicized in twentieth-century American memories of the South, and in British and Dutch nostalgia for empire, are strikingly similar.

Rummaging through vintage postcard sales and antique ephemera auctions, I have collected more than one hundred postcards of Black/Brown nursemaids from the early 1900s. While reading the picture-postcards comparatively, I situate American and European imperial postcards in their own distinctive visual and political economies. The majority of European imperial postcards that I examine here are of ayahs; but studying baboes alongside ayahs and mammies helps broaden the scope of analysis beyond Anglophone visual culture. Mundane visual objects such as postcards were important tools of race, gender, and empire. Early-twentieth-century postcards routinely desexualized and sentimentalized non-White caregivers, constructing them as exemplars of fidelity to White families. Postcards also naturalized the role of Black/Brown women as domestic servants in White homes. By mass-circulating the myth of the asexual faithful “colored”/colonized nursemaid, postcards helped sustain Euro/American domestic and political structures of racism and imperialism.

### The Global Life of Postcards

Picture-postcards appeared in various Euro/American countries in the 1880s-90s. New technologies of photographic and lithographic mass-reproduction

facilitated the postcard's mass-popularity (Mathur, 2007). Initially, the undivided back of the postcard was reserved exclusively for the address. In 1902, Britain allowed divided back postcards, followed by the United States in 1907. The divided back, with the image on the front side, and the message and address on the back side, made the postcard simultaneously a visual and an epistolary commodity. Artists and photographers made illustrations and took photographs throughout the world, which they sent to local or foreign publishers who mass-produced the multi-authored postcards. In Britain, for instance, a very popular postcard style was [Raphael Tuck & Sons](#)' oilettes which reproduced oil paintings commissioned locally. Most postcards sold in Asian and African colonies, in Europe as well as in North America, were initially printed in Germany, until war-time restrictions and bombings ended German domination of the postcard printing industry. The demise of Germany's postcard industry boosted the production of hand-tinted postcards in France and Belgium in the 1920s. In the United States, printers met the domestic demand while cutting the cost of ink with new white-border postcards. In the 1930s and 1940s, [Curt Teich & Co.](#) of Chicago began to mass-manufacture a new style of linen-postcards using bright colors on high rag-content paper. Photochrome postcards eventually replaced most other forms of postcards since the end of the Second World War.

Illustrations and photographs of ayahs, mammies, and baboes appeared on all of these various forms of early-twentieth-century picture-postcards. Although, today, most people associate postcards with tourism, in the first decades of the twentieth-century, millions of people used postcards as a fashionable media of correspondence and, also, passionately collected postcards. People of all ages became deltiologists, keeping postcard albums and forming postcard exchange clubs.<sup>3</sup> This so-called "[Golden Age](#) of Postcards" in the early 1900s coincided with the period of European high imperialism, rapid colonial expansion into Asia and Africa, and a scramble for colonies that led to the world wars. During this period, ordinary citizens of Western European nations took immense pride in their colonial empires, in colonial civilizing missions and scientific studies of colonized bodies. Imperial postcards offered the opportunity to collect and possess colonized spaces and [colonized people](#) in an inexpensive and intimate form, which could be viewed,

<sup>3</sup> The term deltiologist (one who collects postcards as a hobby) was, however, coined much later in the 1940s.

admired, shown off, and sent to friends and family. In the United States, the era of postcard frenzy corresponded to the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South, and Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation in public spaces, schools, restaurants, restrooms, and public transportation. In the backdrop of segregation, racial terrorism and lynching, postcards romanticizing plantation slavery and caricaturing stereotypical Black figures like the mammy, the uncle, and the pickaninny, sold billions of copies, feeding White supremacist public appetite for [racist collectibles](#).

Despite differences in historical context, European and North American postcards did not circulate in hermetically sealed spheres. Postcards, like most imperial commodities, had a global life. Addresses of senders and recipients, even in the small sample of postmarked postcards surveyed here, demonstrate the high mobility of postcards across nations and empires. While mammy postcards primarily circulated within the U.S., a large number of ayah postcards travelled from Calcutta, Bombay, and Colombo to friends and relatives in England, Scotland, France, Russia, and Belgium. Gendered and racial stereotypes about non-White nursemaids travelled globally with such postcards. Often produced by the same publishers, postcards of colonized and "colored" caregivers targeted different consumer groups in Europe and North America. Tuck, for instance, produced a number of postcards of the South Asian ayah as well as of the African-American mammy, the print-run of which were several thousand. Mass-circulating postcards of ayahs, mammies, and baboes drew upon prevailing ideologies of race, gender and empire, but at the same time played a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing these ideologies.

### Desexualization of "Negro" and "Native" Nursemaids

In Euro/American postcards, particularly those masquerading as scientific and anthropological studies of ethnic "types," the bodies of Asian and African women were frequently eroticized. Malek Alloula (1985), in his pioneering study of French postcards' voyeuristic obsession with Algerian women's bodies, argued that colonial postcards were pornographic objects – "an anthology of breasts," reflecting imperial desires to plunder the colonized land and its women (p. 105). Other scholars have similarly noted the sexual exhibition of Asian and African



nude female bodies in early-twentieth-century Western postcards (Hoskins, 2007). In contrast to the pervasive [hyper-sexualization](#) of Black/Brown women in early postcards, non-White domestic maids serving White families are conspicuously desexualized.

American historians have traced the elderly asexual obese stereotype of the mammy to mid-nineteenth-century Southern responses against Abolitionist characterization of plantation households as sexually degenerate sites of miscegenation (McElya, 2007; White, 1999). Anxieties about Black women as promiscuous Jezebels who lured White men to bed, supplemented by fears about White male lust for Black women continued in the period of Jim Crow laws. The myth of the asexual mammy disseminated widely across the segregated nation through early-twentieth-century postcards, cloaked the long antebellum history of coerced sexual and reproductive labors extracted from slave women's bodies. The mammy's exaggerated features, large feet, amplified Blackness, and shapeless overweight masculine body in the postcards (Figure 2) perpetuated the notion that Black women were undesirable. Thus, White men's pervasive sexual violence against Black women – not legally recognized as a crime in early-twentieth-century America – also appeared improbable.



Figure 2. Undivided-back postcards of mammies with exaggerated features and large feet.

*Oriental* nursemaids were desexualized for somewhat similar reasons – to occlude the presence of inter-racial intimacies between European men and

Asian women.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of British women in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century India, British clerks, soldiers, and sailors cohabited with Indian mistresses called *bibis*, who also functioned as their domestic servants (Ghosh, 2006). The colonial state gradually started professionally penalizing British men who had Indian mistresses and *half-caste* children (Dalrymple, 2003). Therefore, British men guarded their socially shameful secret interracial relations, *bibis*, and Eurasian children. British women were shipped to India in order to form racially pure British families. The asexual image of the Indian ayah as a lady's maid and nursemaid for British families, ensured appropriate racially channelized sexual relationships between the British master and his British wife, at least in the imperial public imagination. Mass-circulating postcards of the desexualized dark-skinned, sari-clad, elderly, obese Indian ayah erased the widespread history of domestic concubinage from British imperial biographies (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Undivided-back postcards of ayahs with big bodies and dark skin.

South East Asia had also witnessed a similar history of interracial intimacies between European men and indigenous women for centuries (Andaya, 1998). In the early 1900s, *metisage* became a source of great anxiety for people in Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China. In order to make the “empire respectable,”

<sup>4</sup> “Oriental” was more of a fantasized rather than geographical category in European cultural representations. For a discussion of the visual and sexual politics of Orientalism, see Joan DelPlato and Julie Codell's edited volume, *Orientalism, Eroticism and Modern Visuality in Global Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017)

colonial governments prohibited mixed marriages and encouraged large-scale immigration of White women into the colonies (Stoler, 1989, p. 634). The *nyai* (Javanese/Balinese mistresses of Dutch men) gradually disappeared from Dutch cultural representations or were depicted as promiscuous, jealous, and vengeful (Gouda, 2008). The figure of the baboe, by contrast, became highly visible in visual culture. Imperial postcards presented the baboe as a non-sexual woman, who was completely devoted to the blond White (read racially pure) Dutch child. The erasure of the sexuality of ayahs and baboes in imperial postcards can be contextualized in early-twentieth-century European eugenicist efforts to protect the imagined purity of the White race.

Visual construction of the “colored” caregiver as the non-sexual, non-familial “other,” was, thus, crucial to the construction of the White family’s Whiteness. Postcards of the desexualized mammy, ayah, and baboe, upheld the sexual morality of White men, and the respectability of White women. In rare cases, when postcards focused on the nurse’s buttocks or breasts, the women were not portrayed with the pornographic sensuality of the thousands of erotic postcards of Black/Brown women in “harem” or “ethnic” settings (e.g., Algerian or Rodiya women). The exaggerated buttocks of the mammy compared to a donkey/ass, or the large breasts of the ayah, spilling over her blouse, represent a ridiculous excess, comparable to French colonial postcards of African nursemaids, which even in their nudity were meant to represent sexual repulsiveness (Figure 4). Exaggerated dark skin, thick lips, or monstrous body parts marked Black/Brown nursemaids as the antithesis of desirable White femininity. Animalized and grotesque representations further desexualized non-White nursemaids, implying that sexual relationships were unimaginable with them, which, by extension underlined the racial purity of the White family.



Figure 4. Divided-back postcards depicting non-White nursemaids as sexually repulsive.

### Sentimentalization and Maternalization

Picture-postcards reproduced Euro/American cultural idealization of the bond between the White family and the mammy/ayah/baboe. The stereotypic “Negro” or “Native” nurse was always faithful and selflessly devoted to the White child and mistress in her care. The romanticization of the “colored” nursemaid’s fidelity acquired a particularly intense and emotive dimension in memories of wars and interracial violence, such as the American Civil War, Indian mutiny, and Japanese occupation of Indonesia. Stories of mammies, ayahs, and baboes risking their lives to save White families came to bear proof of the White master’s benevolence. In the early-twentieth-century, African-American civil rights groups like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) campaigned against racial hatred and discrimination. Around the same time, Indian nationalists led violent-extremist and non-violent movements to end British rule. Indonesia witnessed its so-called “National Awakening” and nationalist leaders demanded freedom from Dutch colonialism. In the age of Black activism and anti-colonial nationalist struggles against racist and imperialist oppression, the myth of the ever-faithful dark nurse must have provided moral and emotional comfort to White Euro/Americans.

Historians argue that the trope of the loyal motherly mammy emerged as a pro-slavery technique deployed by antebellum Southern writers against

abolitionist accusations of slavery's violence and inhumanity (Wallace-Sanders, 2008). The enslaved mammy's fidelity meant that her relationship with the White family depended on genuine familial affection, rather than crass market contracts of free labor (McElya, 2007). Even anti-slavery fictions like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852) had romanticized the Mammy and perpetuated her image as an icon of Black slave motherhood. Postcards idealizing the mammy drew from these older traditions of loyal slave-women as well as from early-twentieth-century fictions and films glorifying the old American South. In D.W. Griffith's 1915 epic movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, set in the 1860s, the mammy defends her master's estate against Black and Union soldiers, who are fighting to emancipate slaves like herself. In the 1939 classic film, *Gone with the Wind*, based on the eponymous novel (Mitchell, 1936), also set during the civil war, the iconic mammy completely identifies with her White mistress. Postcards reproduced this imagined idyllic love between the mammy and the Southern belle, which became the symbol of the "The South – that is no more" as stated on the postcard in Figure 5. Catering to early-twentieth-century US nostalgia for old paternalist racial domestic hierarchies, postcards contributed to the maternalization and mythification of the mammy.



Figure 5. Postcards romanticizing the mammy.

After the 1857 Indian Mutiny, British visual and literary representations celebrated Indian ayahs, who supposedly risked their lives to save British children from Indian rebels. Decades after the Mutiny, British women still wrote in their

diaries how "many an ayah in the Mutiny proved her devotion at the cost of her life, and many would do so again" (King, 1884, p. 130). An early 1900s postcard created a mass-circulating mutiny memorabilia by juxtaposing an old Mutiny ballad, on the legend of a brave Scottish lassie in Lucknow, with Joseph Paton's mutiny painting *In Memoriam* (1858), which depicted a red-bordered sari-clad ayah (the second woman on the right in Figure 6) holding a British girl on her lap and hiding fearfully with British women to escape the mutineers. Inserting the loyal Indian ayah in imperial visual memory of the anti-British Indian Mutiny, reaffirmed the affective domestic ties between British families and their colonial maidservants, even at the time of colonial resistance. Tuck's "Native Life in India" postcard series (1908-1914) described on the back of the postcard of an ayah: "They frequently become greatly attached to the European children in their charge, the inevitable parting eventually causing them great distress" (Figure 7). This heartfelt maternal love, and "great distress" at separation was a testament to British employers' kind treatment of Indian ayahs, at least in the postcard consumer's mind. In the backdrop of early-twentieth-century Indian nationalist critiques of British despotism and Gandhian mass-movements against British rule, imperial postcards of ayahs disseminated an emotionally and politically powerful message of Native devotion.



Figure 6. Postcard commemorating the Indian mutiny.



Figure 7. Tuck's oilette postcard of an ayah.



During the early decades of Indonesian nationalism and demands for self-rule, the figure of the baboe was similarly romanticized in Dutch colonial memory. From Dutch imperial family photographs to children's ABC books like the *Nieuw Indisch* (Heyden, 1925), the Indonesian baboe in her colorful sarong taking the Dutch baby for a perambulator ride, or lovingly wrapping the baby in her *slendang* (shawl) came to represent the perfect picture of interracial harmony. The inter-imperial idealization of racialized nurses is noticeable from a Singapore-based English-language newspaper's praise of the Indonesian baboe: "How faithful and lovable these 'Babu Anak' can be is well known to all who have lived in the Dutch islands" (The Straits Times, 1939). Dutch memoirs of the Japanese occupation in the 1940s recall loyal baboes who looked after their imprisoned Dutch masters' children without expecting payment (Stoler, 2002). The sentimentalized postcards of the baboe with the Dutch child ("baboe met kind" as noted on the postcard in Figure 8) are similar to the mammy and the ayah postcards in representing imperialism and racial hierarchies as affectionate relationships.



Figure 8. Romanticized postcard of a baboe.

The "colored" nursemaid's fabled love for White children over her own "colored" children was crucial to her sentimentalized and racialized maternalization. As a British woman wrote about Indian nursemaids: "Whenever they nurse a White baby they cease to care for their own; they say, 'White child

is good; black child his slave'" (Darton, 1910, p. 402). White American cultural representations similarly typecast mammies as slavishly devoted to their master's White children, but rude and dismissive towards their own Black children. Postcards amplified the stereotype. For example, an American linen postcard, shows a Black woman with three Black children, asked by the White saleslady at a gloves counter, "could I interest you in a pair of white kids?" Kid gloves—made of white leather from young goats—were mostly used by butlers and maids in this period. This suggests a double pun - the Black woman's natural role as servant, and her secret wish to take care of White children despite having three children of her own. In another linen postcard, a mammy desperately washes her wailing Black child trying to turn him White: "mammy will have you white as snow in a minute!" (see Figure 9). Cultural constructions of the non-White nursemaid's desire for White children rationalized the political and socio-economic systems that severed so many Black and Brown nursemaids from their own families, rendered them kinless, and denied them the right to marry or have children, in order to serve White families.



Figure 9. Linen postcards mocking the mammy's supposed preference for White children.

### Naturalization of Racialized Gendered Domestic Labors

By repeated depictions of Black and Brown women in subservient and menial roles, postcards contributed to the racialized division of gendered domestic labor. Household work in early-twentieth-century Western Europe and the United States was understood as a feminine domain. But the more labor intensive and menial chores in White American homes became naturalized as the domain

of Black women. Postcards drew on the antebellum history of slave-women's domestic labor and post-emancipation reality of lower-class Black women's predominant occupation as servants for middle-class White families. Thousands of copies of postcards like "Negro Mammy" in an "old-fashioned Southern Kitchen," "Mammy going to Market," or "Mammy Chloe" taking a break from work, reinforced notions of the natural position of Black women as maidservants (see Figure 10). While economic segregation pushed Black women into menial domestic roles, postcards depicted the Black mammy providing household service in the White home with a constant smile on her face. The [black-faced](#) mammy in the Thanksgiving postcard, for instance, beams with contentment as she brings in the turkey she has cooked for the White master's children. (See Figure 10.) Reproducing the caricature of the happy slave, the intensely racist linen postcard of the mammy washing clothes shows her and her animalized children smiling widely. The mammy's subhuman appearance, ignorance and broken English – "I'se quitting" (Figure 10) – implied that she was inferior to White women, and only suited for menial chores, which she herself happily accepted. The idea of her "quitting" this role was marketed as humorous to the postcard's consumer.



Figure 10. Postcards naturalizing Black women's role as maidservants.

The mammy postcards were part of a larger White-American culture of collecting racist memorabilia. In early-twentieth-century segregated America, when Black-Americans were asserting a new racial consciousness through the NAACP and the Harlem Renaissance, there was a proliferation of racist collectibles in the form of everyday household objects, from Mammy cookie jars, salt-pepper shakers, toothpick holders, to packaged food like Aunt Jemima's pancake-mix (Goings, 1994). During Jim Crow segregation, often the only interaction of White Americans with Black Americans was through domestic service and through racist caricatures depicting Black people as servile, ugly, stupid, lazy, buffoonish, or obsessed with watermelon and chicken. Mammy postcards, functioned similarly as other [coon cards](#) and racist collectibles, in reminding White middle-class consumers of their own racial superiority, and Black women's proper place as servants.

Postcards of ayahs and baboes, on the other hand, were rarely so overtly degradingly racist. Imperial postcards operated in the colonial culture of scientifically studying and collecting exotic and ethnic specimens. The purpose of imperial postcards was usually the production of ethnographic knowledge about Natives (Patterson, 2006). Ethnographic postcards promised "stern fidelity," akin to colonial anthropological sketches and photographs (Pinney, 1997, p. 17). From early-nineteenth-century [Company paintings](#) of "Indian castes" on mica, to late nineteenth century photographic studies of Indian "castes and occupation groups," the ayah was visually produced and collected as an ethnographic "type" of Indian domestic servant.

In British imperial households, domestic work was largely performed by a retinue of men-servants like the *bawarchi* (cook), *khidmatgar* (table-servant), *dhobi* (washerman), *mehtar* (sweeper), *malee* (gardener), among others. The ayah, as a nursemaid and lady's maid, was usually the only maidservant. Imperial postcard sets of "Native servants" (Figure 11) promoted the notion that domestic work in the British Empire was the domain of Native women and effeminate Native men, thereby, boosting imperial masculinity and its association with political-economic power. Ayahs, in these ethnographic postcards, rarely have the happy-slave smiles of mammies. Their contentment in imperial domestic service,



however, is expressed through the numerous ornaments on their bodies. In the frontal and profile “type” postcards of the Tamil ayah (Figure 12), for instance, the numerous necklaces, nose-rings, earrings, toe-rings, bangles, anklets, and hair ornaments not only demonstrated her exoticness, but also indicated to European consumers how well she was provided for by her benevolent imperial masters. In reality, ayahs were unlikely to have possessed expensive ornaments. Placing the ayah in front of a *dhooli* (Indian cradle), or on a *ricksshaw*, further demonstrated British indulgence of her “Oriental” lifestyle (Figure 13).



Figure 11. Postcard set of Indian servants by Moorli Dhur & Sons, printed in Germany.



Figure 12. Ethnographic postcards of a Tamil ayah.



Figure 13. Postcards of ayahs in exoticized settings.

Picture-postcards advertising household goods, blatantly reinforced the role of African-American and Asian women as domestic servants. Turn-of-the-century manufacturing companies, in their mass-marketing of quotidian commodities, utilized what Ann McClintock (1995) describes in the context of Victorian Britain as “commodity racism” (p. 209). Victorian trade-cards, which were the predecessors of advertising postcards, popularized a racist and gendered domestic labor order while advertising ordinary household commodities like Clothes-wringers, Crown-dressing, or Stove-polish (Figure 14). Black maidservants were used as the foil to promote the cleanliness of White women’s

bodies and homes. Freely-distributed advertising postcards in the early-twentieth-century continued using the bodies and labors of “colored”/colonized women to sell domestic commodities (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Victorian trade-cards.



Figure 15. Advertising postcards.

In the “Walk-Over” shoes postcard (Figure 15), for instance, the image of the mammy subserviently kneeling on the floor and putting boots on her young mistress’s feet, was no doubt intended to pamper the racial privilege of potential White customers. The Virol postcard, advertising the “wonderful Food for Children and Invalids,” used an image of three Indian ayahs from the 1912 Ideal Home Exhibition in London, to expand Virol’s market to Britain’s empire with the caption: “Virol Children of All Nations” (Figure 15). Drawing upon the turn-of-the-century obsession with scientific childcare, the Soesoe Tjap Nonna postcard advertised Condensed Milk using the figure of a baboe carrying in her slendang a healthy Dutch child (Figure 15). In the guise of explaining to the child (“Anak”), the baboe advertises to Dutch imperial families the health benefits of this particular baby product. Advertising postcards naturalized the roles of White women and children as domestic consumers, and “colored” women as domestic laborers and caregivers.

Postcard manufacturers sometimes depicted the racialized mistress-maid relationship through children, capitalizing on their exaggerated cuteness (Figure 16). A 1907 American postcard depicted a Black slave girl looking after her master’s blue-eyed White baby to express nostalgia for the Confederate South: “I Wish I was in Dixie,” referencing a popular minstrelsy song. Another early 1900s postcard, exchanged between two young English girls in London and Hull, depicted an exoticized young slave/servant helping her little aristocratic blonde mistress get dressed up, and adding a puff of powder as “The finishing touch” (Figure 16). Her stock Oriental sartorial style: turban, jewelry, and harem pants, and her bare brown skin meant that she could be from anywhere in South Asia or in the Middle East; her exact provenance was inconsequential. The cutification of the compliance and docility of young Asian, African, and African American girls naturalized their servility. Postcards, such as those discussed in this article, came in the mail to Euro/American recipients, yet, Black and Brown maidservants working in White homes often received these postcards at the door. Postcards naturalizing non-White labor no doubt reminded these women of their “proper” place. Normalizing the labors of non-White women, objects like racialized postcards, perhaps, acted as tools of domestic and social control, legitimizing the non-extension of political rights and social equality to “colored” and colonized people, particularly women.





Figure 16. Cutification of racialized domestic labors.

### Conclusion: The Politics of Reading and Collecting Postcards

While images on postcards provide valuable insights into popular perceptions of race, gender, and empire, postcards are “two-sided artifacts” frequently revealing unique information about consumers “on the verso” (Baldwin, 1988, p. 15). The majority of messages scribbled by early postcard senders were usually completely unrelated to the postcard’s image, particularly in the U.S. racist postcards. The rare examples of messages alluding to the images provide personalized perspectives on the generic mass-reproduced postcard visuals of racialized nursemaids. Such messages often reveal the (White) senders’ pleasure of symbolically owning and gifting Black/Brown women to (White) people unfamiliar with “colored” people. In a postcard from 1920 (Figure 17), for instance, a Frenchman sends to his mother, “deux exemplaires des beauties du pays” (two examples of the land’s beauties). Exoticizing the ayahs photographed in a Bombay park, and playing on the Orientalist stereotype of “oppressed” Hindu/Muslim women’s compulsory veiling, he writes: “les ayahs sont toutes converties au catholicisme c’est pourquoi elles peuvent se promener le visage decouvert” (these ayahs have converted to Catholicism, this is why they can walk with their faces uncovered). Informative messages on postcards reinforced stereotypes about non-White maidservants in particular, and “colored” and colonized women in

general. A postcard of “Hindoo Ayahs,” sent from Bombay to a friend or sister in London, infantilizes the adult ayahs as “girls” and explains that “some of the ayahs a(re) very good looking & others are mighty ugly, this is not a good sample at all for they are neither one or the other” (Figure 18).

Unlike the messages in European ethnographic postcards, messages in US racist postcards were rarely descriptive of the visual subjects, although some messages they appreciated the racist humor in postcard images. For example, a postcard, sent by a father to his son at a children’s hospital in Boston, while not directly engaging with the animalized mammy reference, asks, “aren’t these bears funny Kenneth?” (Figure 19). Messages in postcards—exchanged between family members and friends, and particularly when sent by parents to children—played a pedagogical role in perpetuating exotic, racist, and sexist stereotypes about “colored” maidservants.



Figure 17. Divided-back postcard of two ayahs in Bombay.

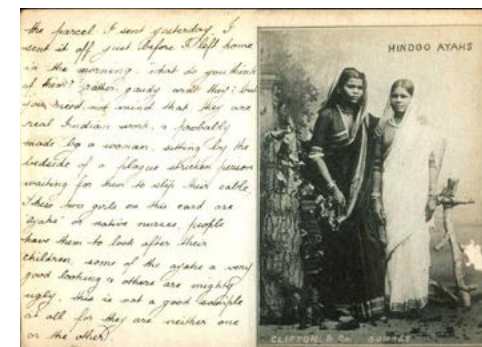


Figure 18. Undivided-back postcard with both the image and the message on the front side





Figure 19. Undivided-back postcard of a mammified bear.

Postcards of non-White nursemaids, although marketed for White Euro/Americans, were frequently produced through non-White labor. Many popular imperial postcards, including that of an ayah pushing a British baby in a pram, were based on paintings by the Indian artist M.V. Dhurandhar (Figure 3). Ethnographic sets of Indian domestic servants, printed in Germany and collected widely by Europeans, were published by the Indian firm Moorli Dhur & Sons in Amballa (Figure 13). Not only were the illustrators and photographers often Black or Brown men, even the women who posed for postcard images as ayahs, baboes, and mammies were Asian and African-American women. Despite the pretense of ethnographic postcards to objectively capture “types,” such postcards of ayahs, mammies, and baboes, unfortunately, do not tell us much about the lived realities of their lives and labors. Postcard manufacturers staged and performed these “type” photographs, anticipating Euro/American consumption demands. Postcards, thus, reveal Euro/American fantasies and anxieties about racialized nursemaids. Sentimentalized, ethnographic, and racist postcards of non-White caregivers, however, obscure the actual experiences and social histories of these women.

The mass-popularity of postcards gradually declined after the Second World War. European ethnographic postcards, including exoticized postcards of ayahs and baboes, started disappearing with decolonization in the mid-twentieth-century. American postcards of the mammy caricature, along with other racist black collectibles, became socially unacceptable with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The NAACP criticized such degrading artifacts and some Black rights activists are known to have purchased entire stacks of racist postcards in order to destroy them (The JBHE Foundation, 1999). The decline of such postcards was, also, because the purpose of postcards changed in the late-twentieth-century; the role of postcards became largely reduced to vacation souvenirs. Old stereotypes romanticizing and naturalizing the servile role of “colored” women, nevertheless, persisted. In Natchez, Mississippi, there still stands a restaurant called *Mammy’s Cupboard*, in the shape of a gigantic mammy holding a serving tray. Built in 1940, cashing in on the mammy archetype popularized by *Gone With the Wind*, the dark skin of this concrete mammy was progressively lightened, and her pendulous breasts were reduced during the 1960s. Visitors can literally go under the Mammy’s red hooped skirt to get a taste of “typical Mississippi fried and barbecued chicken” and proverbial Southern hospitality. In the gift-shop, tourists can buy a postcard (Figure 20) of *Mammy’s Cupboard* as a memento and as a tribute to the Southern mammy.



Figure 20. Modern postcard of Mammy’s Cupboard Restaurant

As Euro/American imperial and racist postcards declined from production, there grew an interest in collecting these vintage postcards. The majority of the collectors of old racist and imperialist postcards today are African Americans and the descendants of formerly colonized Asians and Africans. Ironically, the more racist and sexist postcards have acquired even higher value among today's collectors. The early picture-postcards of exoticized and racialized nursemaids, particularly the more offensive ones, serve as a visual reminder of the dehumanization of these women in White Euro-American imagination, even as their domestic and caregiving labors in White homes were normalized and romanticized. Even today, domestic labor in upper-class White homes in Western countries is largely performed by women of color and immigrant women from the Global South. In contemporary Western popular visual culture and media representations, the available roles for Black, [Hispanic](#), and Filipino women are often limited to nannies and housekeepers. It is not surprising, therefore, that women of color are routinely assumed by people to be [nannies](#) of their own light-skinned mixed-race [children](#). The postcards of mammies, ayahs, and baboes from the age of Jim Crow racism and high imperialism enable us to confront the long history and lasting legacy of racialized gendered domestic labors.

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### About the Author

Satyasikha Chakraborty is a Ph.D. candidate in the History Department at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Before joining Rutgers, she completed an MA in History with certification in Women's Studies from Jadavpur University, India. Satyasikha is interested in histories of the household, gender and sexuality, colonial medicine, visual culture, and postcolonial studies. She is finishing her dissertation on the intersection of race, caste, gender, and domestic labor through a social and cultural history of the South Asian ayah. Her work has been supported by a Louis Bevier Fellowship and fellowships from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Satyasikha has taught global and world history courses and has published in the *Journal of Women's History* (forthcoming) and the *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*. She is also working on an art project to visually express her archival research on colonial South Asian intimacies by using marginalized vernacular folk art forms as her medium of expression.

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For correspondence: [satyasikha@gmail.com](mailto:satyasikha@gmail.com)

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