Advertising Race/Raceing Advertising:
The Feminine Consumer(-Nation), 1876–1900

Advertising is founded upon the great, fundamental truth that he who desires to sell the most must have the widest acquaintance and be the best known. When society is aggregated in a Robinson Crusoe or in the cabin of the Mayflower it is practicable for any man to know everybody, but when civilization advances into complexity it can no longer be done. In our own country this is especially true. There is no common centre.

— George Rowell, Men Who Advertise: An Account of Successful Advertisers Together with Hints on Their Methods (1870)

The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges.


In a spring 1993 PBS interview, Toni Morrison relates the genesis of her 1970 novel The Bluest Eye: “A major, major question in my mind at that time, . . . How does a child learn self-loathing for racial purposes?” The Bluest Eye specifically records the power of mass visual images, in this novel, of commercial, educational (the Dick and Jane reader illustrations), and filmic representations, to ascribe to the body particular cultural paradigms of aesthetic and moral value. Morrison’s ten-year-old African American narrator, Claudia MacTeer, perceives her inability to achieve “beauty,” “desirability,” and “lovable”-ness since “all the world” had determined the “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” depicted by “shops,

As is the case with any critical-theoretical project, mine is shaped by dialogues with, and the collaborative efforts of, my friends and colleagues. First, AnnLouise Keating’s unflagging support of my project, entailing rereadings as well as intellectual and emotional encouragement, resulted in the current version of this article. Second, I wish to thank Katherine Kinney, Emory Elliott, Jennifer Brody, Janelle Collins, Townsend Carr, and Carol Henderson for their engaged and helpful readings of earlier versions. I am also indebted to the staff, especially Fath Ruffins and Vanessa Broussard Simmons, of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, for their generosity with both artifacts and expertise. Finally, my thanks to the three anonymous Signs readers who skillfully balanced praise and direction in their commentary.

[Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1997, vol. 23, no. 1]
© 1997 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/98/2301-0005$02.00
magazines, newspapers," and "window signs" to be the ideal of these qualities (20). Moreover, the 1930s mass visual culture recorded by The Bluest Eye also excludes African American women from the era's ideal of white feminine consumerism. The adult Pauline Breedlove, like the child Claudia MacTeer, is visually unrepresented and, therefore, invisible within what Guy Debord, referring to commodity culture, calls "the society of the spectacle" (1983). In Pauline Breedlove's invisibility and consequent "self-loathing," she rejects her own daughter Pecola and invests herself instead as the "ideal servant" and surrogate mother to her white employer's daughter; thereby she fulfills the injunction of "every billboard, every movie, every glance" that absents African American women from the parameters of mid-twentieth-century U.S. spectacle (Morrison 1970, 34, 97–100).

Yet, paradoxically, in the imagery of highly popular late nineteenth-century illustrated advertising cards, African American women and girls figure prominently in the construction of an ideal white female consumer. Chromolithographed advertising cards, the earliest and, according to historian Robert Jay (1987), the most "ubiquitous" mass commercial images from the nineteenth century, were disseminated to familiarize potential customers with newly brand-named products. Trade-journal and lithographers' commentary from the 1880s, and contemporaneous collectors' albums of trade cards compiled by the era's families, attest to the magnitude of both the advertising card's circulation and the accompanying public "mania" for collecting cards. One 1885 trade-journal commentator exulted over the "card craze" that "the number of people who save handsome advertising cards . . . . is larger now than ever and will increase with the growth of the population . . . . The ultimate destination of all cards is to swell some collection or to adorn some home, and they may be found in even the remotest parts of the land" ("The Advertising Card Business," 5). In his "Autobiography" (ca. 1890), premier Boston lithographer Louis Prang remarked that "all over the civilized world," practical lithography firms "were built up on" the production of advertising cards: "Millions upon millions of the most varied designs were thrown on the market and the mania among children for collections of these . . . . helped to exhaust the supply. Hardly a business man in the country has not at one time or another made use of such cards to advertize his wares" (153, cited in Marzio 1979, 99). Like modern movies and television, trade cards were more often a part of the nineteenth-century child's visual experience than illustrated books.¹

Despite the cards' popularity, however, histories of U.S. advertising typically have supplied only cursory examinations of the trade card and its

¹ Jay 1987, 2.
aesthetic and thematic influences on twentieth-century illustrated advertising. Furthermore, the overtly racialized depictions of American consumerism inaugurated in illustrated advertising cards have received even less critical attention: in contrast to the absence of African American women and girls in mid-twentieth-century U.S. spectacle, late nineteenth-century advertising cards legitimated the new commodity culture and advertising itself by legitimating post-Reconstruction-era stereotypes of raced gender. Raced female figures dominate the cards’ imagery, most prevalently binarized within contemporaneous stereotypes of black and white women.

Although a number of recent studies, notably Ellen Garvey’s (1996), have charted the nineteenth-century commercial and literary development of an ideal (white) feminine consumer, none to date have accounted for the racialization of this figure. Some modern studies of U.S. advertising comment on the benign racism of early twentieth-century magazine and newspaper illustrations, best exemplified in stereotypic trademark figures such as the Cream of Wheat chef or Aunt Jemima. But the representational links between these early twentieth-century illustrations, the virtual absence of black people from mid-twentieth-century advertising recorded in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and the prominent racial imagery in late nineteenth-century trade cards have yet to be charted.

I propose that the late nineteenth-century trade card occupies an integral place not only in the history of U.S. advertising but also in the imagistic development of the United States as a specifically white, consumer nation: first, in the cards’ crucial early validation of commodity culture and advertising as a therapeutic, redemptive epistemology and pursuit, and, second, in the cards’ facilitating the mass reception of a new consumerist ideal of Euro-Anglo American domesticity, both feminine and national. Toward the latter ends, trade-card tableaux promoted products by advertising a formulaic, albeit revised, nineteenth-century narrative of raced female bodies. Within this narrative, the middle-class, white domestic ideal continues to conform to the mission of the Cult of True Womanhood, enlightening and civilizing the home and the nation, but her mission is newly enhanced by name-brand, time-saving commodities and appliances.

2 For example, studies by Lori Merish (1993) and Ann Douglas (1988), as well as Garvey’s (1996), document nineteenth-century U.S. literature, especially the domestic novel, as an introduction to consumerism (Douglas 1988) that, like the trade card, equates domesticity with consumerism and the ideal (white) consumer with her possessions.

3 For excellent modern studies and theorizations of advertising and race, although none deal explicitly with trade cards as a genre, see Berlant 1991; Pieterse 1992; and Morgan 1995. For a corollary history of black collectibles in the United States, see Goings 1994.

4 On the language of redemption and therapeutics as related to U.S. advertising, see Lears 1983.
Furthermore, the visual narrative of ideal (white) consuming domesticity takes shape through her juxtaposition with a mirroring black female figure, typically associated, in contrast, with preindustrial technologies and economies of home production.

A chromolithographed trade card for Clark's ONT thread (fig. 1, ca. 1880), illustrates the new, but still ideally demure, white consumer: eyes lowered, she sews by hand even as the mass-produced sewing machine at her side mutely testifies to her active participation in commodity culture. The accompanying black laborer, notable for her bold gaze and muscular hyperembodiment, produces the raw material—cotton—for the work of the bourgeois ideal—domestication and refinement. The ONT advertising
card thereby calls up the raced division of feminine labor mythologized contemporaneously in popular literary and political representations of antebellum slavery.\(^5\)

Temporally located in a precarious balance between a reified past and a technologically progressive present, the ONT thread card's imagery assures that ideal feminine domesticity will remain intact, and even be enhanced, with the advent of commodity culture. Moreover, at the same time the dually raced labors elicit nostalgia for the feminine scenes of antebellum slavery, they also index a bonded Union, the scene of a newly redeemed national identity made available through a name-brand commodity, Clark's ONT thread. The card thus blurs the boundaries between, and asserts a mutually reinforcing bond among, three epistemologies: white women's domesticity and black women's physical labor, a renewed U.S. domestic civility, and a new therapeutic consumer ethic, the three visually joined by a strand of Clark's ONT thread.

George Rowell's 1870 treatise on the "methods" of postbellum advertisers calls for a unifying "common centre" to offset the geographic and ideological "schisms" and "divisions" (79) that would mark the post-Reconstruction-era United States.\(^6\) By 1876, the nascent visual narratives of mainstream advertising had found their medium in novel, colorful advertising cards and their representational "centre" in dually raced female genders. Via colonial-cum-religious motifs of conversion and redemption, the paired figures negotiate both new suspicions about U.S. consumerism and old anxieties about U.S. racial relations. Chromolithographed advertising cards cast the commercially untextualized African American girl and woman of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in two crucial, if sometimes competing, roles: as seen on the Clark's ONT thread card (fig. 1), her labor functions as the spectacular mirror of ideal (consuming) femininity, a mirroring that emphasizes the redemptive potential of the paired figures.

However, evoking the scene of domestic colonialism simultaneously

---

\(^5\) Examples include the plantation school of literature—Joel Chandler Harris, Charles Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon—but also mainstream literatures such as William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), where Colonel Woodburn advocates a "civilization based upon responsible slavery" (128) as a means for recapturing what he perceives as antebellum slavery's utopian, classless, and tranquil labor system. In contrast, Howells depicts the conflict and mob violence characterizing later nineteenth-century insurgent labor movements. See also Boime 1990 and Buck 1937 for the ways in which mythologizing visual and fictional representations of antebellum slavery helped to effect an economic "reunion" between the North and South during the post-Reconstruction period. Carby 1987 delineates the raced division of feminine labor and reproduction undergirding these late nineteenth-century representations (20–39).

\(^6\) For the divided sensibilities of the post-Reconstruction period, see, e.g., Harris 1970; and Conn 1983.
foregrounds the black laborer in a second spectacular function: as the regressive foil for both the (white) consumer and late-century civic ideals of U.S. technological innovation, progress, and enlightened civilization. The more overtly racist depiction of a tattered, barefoot, glowering black child on the contemporaneous Fairy Soap card (fig. 2) exemplifies a convention marking other advertising artifacts of the period as well: the visual linking of dark, usually black, skin color with dirt and "dirtiness." The Fairy Soap

Figure 2  N. K. Fairbank Co., trade card, ca. late 1880s. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.

7 Variations of fig. 2, representing several soap brands, appear in such popular middle-class periodicals as the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Scribner's* well into the 1910s; see, e.g., a full-
card’s African American child functions as an explicit foil for the slightly disheveled, but presumably scrubbed, Euro-Anglo American child: “unclean” and, therefore, unconverted, the former personifies a visual cautionary tale about the adverse effects of, pointedly, women’s failure to participate in commodity culture. More broadly, I argue, this overtly racist image prefigures the encoding, but also, paradoxically, the erasure, of “race,” and of racial imagistics, in the magazine illustrations that, beginning in the 1890s, came to dominate early twentieth-century advertising.

I. Trade cards: A new discourse of advertising

The trade card rose to advertising prominence at the confluence of several watershed technological, industrial, and demographic events. First, post–Civil War color lithography—called chromolithography, and its products “chromos” and “chromo cards”—replaced the wood and copper engraving illustration processes of the earlier nineteenth century. In the new printing process, an artist, or a copier, drew directly on the surface of specially prepared lithographic stones, a much less complicated process than engraving on, and then inking, a metal or wood surface. Lower in cost, less time-consuming, and, after 1870, aided by new steam presses, color lithography could provide an almost limitless supply of the same prints from one set of prepared stones.8 Second, the expansion of railroad links to the West enabled the transportation of raw materials and agricultural products to eastern ports and, inversely, the transport of manufactured commodities from eastern factories back to the rural and western provinces. Thus, third, despite the U.S. population having almost doubled from 1870 to 1900, “industrial and agricultural production [of the era] still outstripped consumption” (Jay 1987, 91). Cotermoinously, contemporaneous newspaper and magazine advertisements of the period enlisted almost exclusively written appeals, their few, crowded illustrations printed in black and white.

Introduced by the Louis Prang Company and other large urban

8 For specific histories and processes of chromolithography in the United States, see Marzio 1979; and Jay 1987.
lithographers at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, color-illustrated trade cards quickly became late nineteenth-century manufacturers’ preferred advertising medium for bridging the gap between production and consumption figures. Regional lithographers from as far west as San Francisco had begun disseminating cards advertising locally manufactured wares and services. But the vast majority of trade cards were produced by and distributed out of large northeastern lithography firms in New York, Boston, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia. Most cards advertised nationally manufactured and distributed products; however, many regional and local manufacturers also commissioned the large urban lithography firms to produce their advertising cards. To reach potential consumers, manufacturers included chromolithographed trade cards in new name-brand product packages, especially of soap, coffee, and tobaccos; the cards’ size—typically 2 × 4 inches or 3 × 5 inches, although some are as small as 1 × 2 inches or as large as 6 × 8 inches—facilitated their dissemination in product packaging. Another major means of dissemination intersected the national manufacturer and storekeepers in urban and provincial settings who distributed the colorful cards to their customers as a gift as well as an early marketing device.

Production practices common among large urban lithography and advertising firms further helped to locate centrally what Rowell had described, previous to the trade-card era, as primarily regional and local economies. The bulk of trade cards advertising mass commodities were produced by the millions as “stock” cards: with an illustration and the national manufacturer’s name mass-printed on the front of the card, the large urban lithography firm then left a space open in this area for stamping or letterpress-printing the regional or local shopkeeper’s name and, possibly, the firm’s address (see, e.g., fig. 13); most of the product information and written appeal appeared on the back of the card. Moreover, occasionally the same stock card advertised commodities as diverse as soap and hydraulic pumps to potential consumers in locales as far-flung as New York and Nebraska. In this way, common trade-card thematics saturated “even the remotest parts of the land” (“The Advertising Card Business” 1885, 5). Strategically distributing stock advertising cards, numbered sets of cards, and premium albums for collecting them, manufacturers and advertisers thereby acquainted potential consumers with nationally distributed name-brand products; even shoppers accustomed to an economy of purchasing learned to request a name-brand, rather than a generic category of, product. Thus the late nineteenth-century shift from an economy of home production to an economy of purchasing, a shift begun decades pre-
viously, became reframed as a shopping activity involving mass-produced commodities.9

The mass distribution of commodities and of the cards advertising them also functioned to situate U.S. families, urban and provincial, in a new social form: consuming domesticity. Garvey’s study (1996) of the trade-card scrapbooks compiled by late nineteenth-century children and adolescents demonstrates that “play” with trade cards constituted far more than an idle, leisure-time occupation, especially for the era’s girls. The cards’ imagistics brought into focus the traditional adult gender roles expected of them; however, in the imaginatively organized “wish-books” the girls compiled from trade cards, calling cards, and Sunday school verse cards, they also found a new, attractive space of expertise, self-expression, and perhaps freedom from some gender constraints. If nineteenth-century boys’ “parallel pursuit,” stamp collecting, trained boys to play within Gilded Age discourses of commerce and nationalism, to visually and tangibly “put the rest of the world . . . under their thumbs,” the middle-class girl, through her active and assertive interaction with the trade cards, taught herself to speak within, and to be spoken for by, the new discourse of advertising and shopping (Garvey 1996, 26).

Creative play with the mass-produced stock cards situated them as a type of social glue: “The collector has the pleasure of being like every other girl. . . . A girl could compare her scrapbook with another’s, could see what unique pattern a friend has made of the same material” (Garvey 1996, 25–44). Therefore the trade card, both promotional of and itself a valued commodity, helped to situate a middle-class feminine community around the pleasures of playful interaction with the cards and of consuming activities.

II. Black domestics/white domesticity

and the (feminine) consumer-nation

As the Clark’s ONT thread card (fig. 1) shows, advertising’s strategic promise that ideal white feminine domesticity would remain intact, and be enhanced, as a civilizing familial and civic force aided in the early reception of consumerism as a therapeutic, even redemptive, epistemology. But how did ideal consuming femininity come to denote a generic ideal of

consumer citizenship as well? And furthermore, considering the ethnic diversity of the U.S. population in general, and of its immigrant workers in specific, how did the black and white female pairing come to dominate the trade card’s representations of the new consuming domesticity? That is, as seen in figures 3–5, how did the household labor function conventionally...
associated with white middle-class domesticity in the earlier nineteenth century come to be representationally handed off to a, primarily, black domestic? While Garvey's study (1996) brilliantly analyzes the tactics and activities by which consumerism became gendered as a feminine sphere—in part through access to and play with the newly colorful trade card—her analysis takes into account the white consumer as a, mostly, racially isolated figure.

However, my study of the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana trade card holdings (National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution) indicates that trade-card imagery, as a genre, constructs an ideal white consumer largely through her juxtaposition with an ethnic "other," an at once mirroring and foiling figure for the native-born white consumer. According to historian Fath Ruffins, archivist of the Warshaw Collection, 30 to 40 percent of the collection's nineteenth-century illustrated artifacts invoke familiar ethnic stereotypes—Asian, Middle Eastern, Irish, British, Dutch, and French, as well as the most common, African and Native American—as a means for establishing a link between the potential consumer and the product.10 Further, while not all trade cards feature women and girls, or dually raced women and girls, but also men and children, landscapes, ships, animals, birds, and flowers, female figures

dominate trade-card imagery, even in those cards advertising commodities unrelated to traditionally feminine activities.

For example, the Native American woman, the "Indian Princess" who had dominated the British colonial imagination of the New World (Fleming [1967] 1986), appears frequently on trade cards advertising tobacco and other organic commodities. In this way, she, like the black laborer, is visually associated with the earth and with preindustrial technologies. In explicitly domestic tableaux, trade cards sometimes picture, in addition to the more common African American maid, one other ethnically marked female servant: Brigitte, the Irish maid. But, as with the grotesque caricature of the black servant in the Redwood Range card (fig. 5), the caricature of Brigitte's frowsy hair and simian facial features forecloses her representational status as a consumer: despite Brigitte's whiteness and, as with the black servant (in fig. 5), her apparent expertise in recommending name-brand commodities, her bodily characteristics mark her as the laborer, never the consumer.

Although these ethnically marked female figures, like the black servant, also function to mirror and foil the white female consumer, the trade card's pairings of black domestic labor and white (consuming) domesticity consistently constitute its primary iconography. This prevalent pairing can be attributed, in part, to the trade card's representational participation in a larger national discourse — of plantation literature, the visual arts, and politics — mythologizing antebellum slavery as a more coherent, tranquil era "lost" to the uncertainties and upheavals of postwar urbanism, industrialism, and commercialization. Moreover, as Hazel Carby (1987) points out, within this larger discourse, dual definitions of U.S. womanhood, rooted in antebellum slavery, persisted as an icon for late nineteenth-century femininity, perpetuating the related stereotypes of black women's primitivism and white women's "piety, purity, . . . and domesticity." Thus, paradoxically, a representational context of the past — the scenes of antebellum slavery — facilitates the construction of a new white consumer ideal: the figuative transferal of manual labor over to a black domestic at once nostalgically evokes a contented black slave and "frees" the consumer for shopping activities and her new, less labor intensive, role in household management.

The trade card's prevalent black and white feminine iconography also echoes contemporaneous political and commercial visualizations of the nation and of an increasingly imperialistic U.S. self-identity. The Euro-Anglo American Miss Columbia figure that had dominated U.S. coinage,

popular art, and statuary since the late eighteenth century continues to be an emblem for the United States after the mid-1800s; indeed, she is the predominant figure by which both U.S. citizens and European visitors come to "know America" (Banta 1987, 96). Merging nineteenth-century gender ideologies of white, middle-class women's civilizing capacities with an increasingly militant bearing, the later nineteenth-century Miss Columbia/Freedom/Liberty thereby embodies and legitimates U.S. colonialism, both domestic and international. The journalistic rhetoric surrounding the establishment of the Statue of Freedom atop the U.S. Capitol building in 1863 (fig. 6), for example, applauds her "virtuous," "civilizing," and "unifying" power to enforce domestic civility. But it also echoes the "great republic as empire in the Western hemisphere," legitimating westward expansion and the creation in 1842 of the territory of Texas after the Mexican War (Fryd 1992, 200). Likewise, John Gast's 1873 "American Progress; or Manifest Destiny" (fig. 7), commissioned and chromolithographically reproduced as a popular poster advertising an information journal for western settlers, and the Leslie's Illustrated centennial register cover (fig. 8) project a classically beneficent nation at the same time they spectacularly foreground her dominance, her power to incorporate and civilize subjected Native American and African American peoples. Accordingly, a later (1899) Ladies' Home Journal advertising page (fig. 9) links the nation's, white women's, and Sapolio soap's capacity to cleanse and Americanize the "world": in the ad, a sword-holding, but still benign version of, Miss Columbia/Liberty/Freedom "drives" "darkness, dirt, and disease" from the Philippines. As does the Fairy Soap card (fig. 2), the Sapolio ad reinforces the racial stereotypes of white (feminine and national) "purity" and cleanliness and, taken contextually with prevalent trade-card iconography, also of the generic "dirtiness" of her racial others.

Banta cites several nineteenth-century European travelers to the United States—among them John Muirhead and Alexis de Tocqueville—who exclaim over the American penchant for granting authority to "the transparent figure of the [white, middle-class] Girl" as the ideal "type" of American values and citizenship, as opposed to European countries where "books [have been written] on [the countries'] social and economic traits . . . without a parade of petticoats in the headlines" (Muirhead, cited in Banta 1987, 96).

See Fryd 1992, 177-208, on the use of female figures to rationalize U.S. expansionism in Capitol art, 1815–60; e.g., Fryd charts the evolution of the Statue of Freedom from its first 1855 drawing as a reasonably pacifist "Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace" to the statue's final, militant form in 1858, as "Armed Liberty."

Within an era when the advisability and morality of U.S. industrialism and expansionism was the subject of popular debate, then, the nation, as well as the feminine consumer, most often takes visual shape by means of a foiling, regressive (not-)nation, most often embodied in a "primitive" black female figure. The 1884 Currier and Ives political satire of the Statue of Liberty (fig. 10), for example, protesting restrictive import tariffs, geographically locates the imposter-nation "opposit de United States":

Figure 6  The Statue of Freedom, set in place December 2, 1863. By the Architect of the Capitol.
it "frightens" the world rather than welcomes or enlightens it. Thus, as I have shown in the preceding paragraphs and images, the gender discourses employed in prevalent expansionist discourses and popular nostalgic representations of antebellum slavery, both undertaken to sanction late-century capitalist economic interests, not only make sense of the categorial pleasures of consumerism and commodity culture for bourgeois white women, but also shape a national subject whose civic imperative to purchase constitutes one of the civilizing responsibilities of U.S. citizenship.

The colonial discourses of trade card imagery, which interpenetrate political iconographies of raced citizenship, reiterate, and assist in introducing into common practice, the new consuming domesticity—feminine and national—as a specifically ethnic epistemology and pursuit. According to trade card iconography, the technologically advanced consumer, emblem of the consumer-nation (fig. 8), is white, female, native born, at once beneficent and colonial, the traditional mother of the “universal family” in the Soapine and Merrick Thread cards (figs. 11 and 12), but also the
Figure 8  Cover of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition 1876. Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress.
Figure 9  *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Sapolio advertisement, July 1899. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.
embodiment of a “new,” less labor intensive consuming domesticity in the Hunter’s Sifters card (fig. 13). As her foiling “opposit[e],” the African American female figure invokes and codes provincial agricultural technologies and an association with the earth and the out-of-doors (figs. 14–16). Furthermore, the fertilizer cards (figs. 15 and 16) implicate the African American laborer not only as the producer of raw materials but also as herself the raw material to be domesticated and refined: the Clark’s ONT thread card (fig. 1) features a black laborer picking cotton for both the manufacturer’s and the consumer’s conversion and domestication; however, on the fertilizer cards she is the cotton, happily awaiting conversion and refinement. In a similar contradiction, the black maid who cleans, cooks, and cares for white children (figs. 17 and 18), instrumental in the bourgeois woman’s mastery of consumer culture, also appears, in represen-
tations such as the Fairy Soap card (fig. 2), to be unclean, the black mother whose failure to participate in commodity culture results in her child's dirtiness.

These competing representations—the black laborer as both producer and raw material of industrial commodities, as both authority on cleaning and cleanliness and, in other depictions, "dirty"—parallel the larger contradictions destabilizing the trade card's prevalent binary of black labor and white domesticity. The foiling functions of the Fairy Soap card (fig. 2) and the Currier and Ives political satire (fig. 10) coexist with images that function to mirror the two, more typically, binary figures. The racial mirroring function of cards such as the Clark's ONT thread card (fig. 1), for example, emphasizes the material, not to mention the representational, centrality of smiling, laboring bodies in securing U.S. technological power and superiority. Cards such as those for Sapolio scouring powder and the J. S. McMurtrie wringer washer (figs. 3 and 4) suggest the instability of the racial categories imposed in many other cards' foiling imagery: the wringer washer card distinguishes the two women only by skin color, and the Sapolio card leaves ambiguous whose face appears in the scoured pan, the white woman's or the black's. Although the width of the female face mirrored in the Sapolio-scoured pan matches the width of the African American maid's face, the angle of the reflection is in line with the Euro-Anglo American consumer's face; further, the width of the reflected face, a face as "white" as the consumer's, could be read as the pan's distortion.
Additionally, the mirrored face, horizontally in line with the angle of the consumer’s face, pointedly transforms and diminishes the shape and size of the (putatively) black servant’s lips.

Such ambiguities and contradictions reflect the racial instabilities within U.S. culture itself, but more important for my argument, they reflect the social tensions within early commodity culture that make manufacturers and advertisers unsure which is the better “card” to play: does the black domestic represent the redemptive labor and raw material for the new consumer (figs. 1, 15, and 16) or the regressive old way to be rejected in favor of new technologies (figs. 13, 19)? Is she inherently uncivilized (figs. 2, 19) or is she already a more savvy consumer than the white woman (fig. 5)?

Figure 12  Merrick Thread Co., trade card, ca. late 1890s. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.
Whereas some cards draw on racist conceptions to insist on the grotesque impossibility of black consumerism (fig. 19), others suggest that familiarity with name-brand commodities can civilize even the most “primitive” figure. The folding Eclipse Clothes Wringer card (fig. 20) demonstrates the conversion and improvement of the muscular, bare-armed and -chested, and mechanically inept Dinah into a more domesticated, slender-faced, thin-lipped, and appropriately attired approximation of her “Mistis” (who is notably unchanged, with the exception of her faint smile of approval). Like the feminine face reflected in the Sapolio-scoured pan (fig. 3), Dinah is here “whitened,” if not in skin color, certainly in terms of dress, gesture, and facial features.

Such representational contradictions plague the development of the white consumer as well: is she innocent or knowledgeable as a consumer? That is, is she traditional, the ideal of the Cult of True Womanhood (fig. 1), or herself “new” (figs. 13, 21)? The Cottolene cards (fig. 21), distributed as a set, picture a variation on the Clark’s ONT thread card imagery, allaying the contradictions by splitting both the women and the past and present onto separate cards: the two cards double the racialized figures as redemptive mirrors of each other. In this way, the Euro-Anglo American “New Woman”—educated, urban, progressive—and the African American woman—emblematic of bodily well-being, “better times” to be had or to be returned to— together represent the multiple therapeutic benefits of participating in consumer culture. The (white) consumer may be “new,” but the Cottolene cards’ actual and visual doubling allows her to remain
mirrored within the reassuringly traditional scenes of slavery and colonialism.

Despite the representational ambiguities and contradictions in the imagery of many trade cards, and the frequent oscillations between black and white authority in the sphere of consumerism—or perhaps because of these tensions—trade-card iconographies, whether a redemptive mirroring or an explicit foiling, persist in excluding black women from the parameters of both consuming domesticity and civilized nationhood. The corporeal ambiguities accruing in the Sapolio scouring powder card or in the J. S. McMurtrie wringer washer card (figs. 3 and 4) are consistently allayed and contained in such representations as the Fairy Soap card or an early Centennial Exposition card advertising irons (figs. 2, 19). Figure 19 pictures a regressive black maid, technologically outdone by a monkey wielding a superior product; moreover, the maid’s facial features mirror those of the monkey, visually establishing not only an implicit racial difference between her and the consumer ideal but a clear difference in species as well.

Furthermore, the frequent colonial-cum-religious motif of cards advertising soap and other cleaning products, read contextually with cards advertising other, apparently unrelated, products (the fertilizer cards [figs. 15 and 16], e.g., or the Cottolene set [fig. 21]), reciprocally defines Euro-Anglo American and African American female bodies through, and fuses
them inextricably with, nationalist, spiritual, and imperialist missions and pleasures as well as those of consumer capitalism. Equating "civilization" with cleanliness and cleanliness with whiteness, soap-card imagery, like that of the later Sapolio ad (fig. 9), often blurs the boundaries between soap's traditional function of cleaning human bodies and a commercial-colonial mission of "enlightening" the world (figs. 22 and 23). Moreover, the imagery of soap cards, the most numerous advertising cards of a single product category disseminated in the late nineteenth century, is often explicitly located at the visual intersection between religion and commerce.

Figure 15  Williams, Clark & Co., trade card, 1883. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.
The added spiritual conversion motif of Protestant Christianity, overlapping with these colonial discourses, would have aided in mediating commodity capitalism and advertising’s status as “low,” even immoral, culture within the nineteenth-century middle-class ethics of thrift, frugality, and self-restraint.\textsuperscript{15} For example, one oversized Pears’ Soap card strategi-

\textsuperscript{15} Jackson Lears has articulated the commercialization of Protestant Christianity during this period, resulting in a religious discourse newly emphasizing God’s love and abundance
cally blurs the distinction between two conventionally separate epistemo-
logical spheres, religion and sales, in its depiction of the pious and highly 
recognizable minister Henry Ward Beecher (fig. 24). An ad circulating 
concurrently in popular periodicals from 1893 to 1899 (fig. 25) explicitly 
articulates the interpenetration of Protestant Christianity and commodity 
culture implicit in the spectacularly huge advertising card; in the ad, 

rather than His severity. But commerce and advertising were likewise infused with religious 
motifs; the relation was, in fact, a mutually reinvigorating one.
Beecher unapologetically endorses the use of the Pears’ product as “a Means of Grace”: “If cleanliness is next to Godliness, Soap must be considered as a Means of Grace and a Clergyman who recommends moral things should be willing to recommend Soap. I am told that my commendation of Pears’ Soap has opened for it a large sale in the United States. I am willing to stand by every word in favor of it that I ever uttered.” In the epistemology of spectacle, where soap can constitute a “moral thing” (Beecher) and the means for a “strong nation” (the Sapolio ad), the African American female figure thus functions in a primary metaphoric and metonymic relation with dirt, labor, the earth, and (technological and discur-
sive) primitivism. The primitive child (fig. 2) and the black domestic who are instrumental in the trade card’s imaging and privileging of white women’s consuming domesticity translate as well into the symbolic raw material for imagining an exclusive consumer-nation.

The black servant’s explicit corporeal “improvement” in the Eclipse Clothes Wringer card (fig. 20) and, implicitly, in the ambiguously mirrored face on the Sapolio-scoured pan (fig. 3) imply that the conversion potential of consumerism might extend as well to African American women, that body shape and bourgeois style can accrue, as legible signs of authentic, consuming domesticity, to black women as well as white. But, foreclosing such spectacular flexibilities, the duplicitous black women in contemporaneous trade-card imagery such as the James Brown Hat Manufacturer set (fig. 26) and in the turn-of-the-century “Sensation-Temptation-Appropriation-Damnation” set of postcards (fig. 27) promise that skin color and facial features will always tell. Authentic consumer status accrues solely to white middle-class Americans; never authentic consumers, African American women may participate in commodity culture only in grotesque imitation.

III. Reading advertising, reading raced gender: A romance
Roland Marchand’s seminal book on the cultural work performed by magazine advertising, Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940 (1985), calls attention to the predominance of the “maid”
in the advertising tableaux of middle-class magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Good Housekeeping* during the 1920s and 1930s: here the “maid” functions as a device by which advertisers produce and satisfy consumers’ desire to secure purchase on “modern style,” their “ascension into a[n] . . . exclusive level of society.” But the 1920s maid, unlike the late nineteenth-century one, is “French,” and “possess[es] finely chiseled facial features and a smartly modern hairdo”; “[e]xcept for her dress, she was indistinguishable from the leading lady [the bourgeois consumer].” Despite the vast demographic preponderance of black and recent eastern and southern European immigrant maids and cleaning women, consumers preferred to see “maids” who would visually constitute their employers as “tasteful and modern by instinct and birthright” (Marchand 1985, 202, 205).

But Marchand’s reading does not take into account the cultural work already effected by the ubiquitous black-servant/white-consumer pairings disseminated on the trade card and, subsequently, on early twentieth-

---

**Figure 20** Eclipse Clothes Wringer, folding trade card (with foldout on facing page), ca. 1880. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.
century postcards: cultural work that clearly sets out and delineates the boundaries of class, gender, and nationality within a racial frame of reference, a semiotics that later (invisibly) enables and sustains the white pairings, marked only by class difference. Once the narrative of class difference is imposed on and through the racialized African American female body, she (and her overt entanglement with the Euro-Anglo American female body) is no longer necessary for the compositional blueprinting of “taste,” “modernity,” or autonomous bourgeois subjectivity. As a visual prop (even when mirroring rather than foiling), she is expendable once the iconic racial semiotics of appropriate consumerism are established. Thus, although
the black figure has largely disappeared, in her “absence” she nonetheless functions as what Morrison (1992), writing on the canonical tradition in American literatures, has called the “Africanist presence,” a marker without which the idealized white consumer, the French maid, and the consumer-nation cannot take on coherent, autonomous, and spectacular significance.

In this way, an unacknowledged, densely multidimensional racially gendered “past” undergirds both the official history of modern U.S. illustrated advertising and the formal structures of narrative and receptivity that mark...
its iconography. Reading advertising and reading raced gender constitute parallel and inextricable processes. The French maid and the white female consumer(-nation) are only intelligible as they function as palimpsests for Dinah, whose smiling instrumentality at once recollects and sublates her laboring, economic, and sexual exploitation in national history and collective self-identification.

For, framed in the idiom of antebellum slavery, trade-card imagery would have forced into motion another recollection, one less commercially appealing to potential late nineteenth-century consumers: antebellum master and female-slave relations, miscegenation, and the threat it posed
Figure 22  B. T. Babbitt Co., trade card, ca. 1880. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 23  B. T. Babbitt Co., trade card, ca. 1876. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.
to the racial and moral purity by which the new consumer-nation defined itself. Jo-Ann Morgan’s study (1995) of the mammy figure in U.S. advertising, literature, and film demonstrates that black women often function in these media as “mannish,” bossy servants. In the trade card’s frequent romanticization and eroticization of the black female laborer, however, these images would also have (re)constructed her as a forbidden figure of desire.

The James Brown Hat Manufacturer card (fig. 26) and the “Sensation-Temptation- Appropriation-Damnation” postcard series (fig. 27) negotiate, and attempt to quell, new concerns about U.S. consumerism and old anxieties about race by allegorizing a surrogate relation between reading
advertising and reading raced gender. Within this allegory, just as misreading race—defined by that determining but often imperceptible “one drop”—may “tempt” and trick a potential masculine suitor, inexperience in seeing or reading a commodity may, in the same way, “damn” a potential consumer. Correlatively, women’s perceived “perversity,” especially “dark” women’s—theyir duplicity and ability to obscure dramatized in nineteenth-century literary and psychoanalytic rhetorics from Hawthorne’s tales to Freud’s *Three Essays*—seduces, and renders vulnerable, the bourgeois white man.\(^{16}\) Enlightened “seeing,” or reading, suggest these sets of cards (figs.

---

\(^{16}\) Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* ([1905] 1962), e.g., persistently links the “perverse” multiplicity of unreconstructed (i.e., preoedipal) female genitalia with the “prime-
26 and 27) — a commodity literacy practiced through interaction with the ameliorative discourse of advertising — supplies the solution: this spectacle of the romance between reading advertising and reading raced gender, with its potentiality for miscegenation and "damnation," may also function as salvation and redemption if the consumer — male or female — takes his or her cues for appropriate commodity enlightenment from the new texts of advertising.

At this representational moment when the preoccupation of early illustrated advertising is self-promotion and -legitimation as much as product sales, and when the flexible imagery of many trade cards threatens to rupture the new consumer-nation’s self-defined purity and whiteness, these two sets of cards reorder acceptable gendered structures of race and desire. But the enactments of these cards also give the lie to the “autonomy, . . . [the] phantasmatic freedom from its own history” of the modern commodity (Berlant 1991, 133) and of the splendidly serene bourgeois white woman(-nation). Rather, as overtly narrated on these cards, the cautionary romantic tale for the bourgeois white man and the cautionary tale for the consumer are the same tale. The skills for reading commodities and advertising and the erotics of reading raced and gendered bodies converge and collapse in the spectacle.

IV. Coda

By the late 1890s, trade-card tableaux, and the trade cards’ place as a valuable commodity in Victorian homes, had installed advertising as a common referential discourse, predisposing potential consumers to see later illustrated magazine advertising and consumer culture itself as a therapeutic, even redemptive, pursuit. What a popular weekly journal, the Nation, in 1874 deemed the “chromo civilization” had opened in Boston with the dissemination of the first chromolithographed poster, the new technologies exultantly promoted in the chromo’s legend: “Drawn from Nature and on Stone, and Printed in Colours.”17 The most “ubiquitous” (Jay 1987) artifacts of the “chromo civilization,” illustrated advertising cards, declined

17 Quote from the Nation, cited in Marzio 1979, 17. Although the widespread production of color advertising cards did not take place until after the Civil War, U.S. chromolithography had commenced with the production of this first artifact — a portrait of the Reverend F. W. P. Greenwood — in 1840. Even after the virtual demise of the trade card in the 1890s, chromolithographed advertising pages were bound into magazines until, in the late 1890s, larger advertising pages were made available by the commercial application of halftone printing (Jay 1987, 99).
as manufacturers’ preferred medium for promoting products when vastly cheaper second-class mailing costs, reduced by postal regulation in 1885, established monthly magazine advertising, postcards, and catalog sales (Montgomery Ward, Sears) as the predominant media for promoting name-brand wares and services to customers. However, trade-card imagery aided in the mass reception of U.S. industrialism and commercialism, boundary expansion and consumerism, as activities and emblems of progress and enlightened civilization. Via late-century chromolithographed advertising cards’ imagery and their function as popular art, regional
and local economies became increasingly situated in mass consumption, formulating a community of white consumers that representationally, and often materially, excluded African American people.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) painstakingly records the ways in which the exclusionary power of mass images can influence subjectivity; the novel charts an intimate correlation between seeing and being seen in the culture of spectacle, specifically, the correlation between the embodied (seeing) historical subject and the 1930s "billboards," "movies," and "glances" that do not "see" Claudia MacTeer or Pecola and Pauline Breedlove. Pecola, for example, "invisible" or "ugly" within the visual images of commodity culture, methodically "dis-appears" her own body:
"She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. . . . Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappearing all the way to the elbow. Her feet, now, yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs." Only her eyes, which contain "everything"—"all of those pictures, all of those faces"—never disappear; she can always see "the eyes of other people." Claudia MacTeer eventually learns to "worship" the blue-eyed Shirley Temple doll she has once "despised," evidence of her cultural assimilation and her ability to relinquish the materiality of her own body; Pauline Breedlove internalizes the aesthetic sensibility and ideals of

Figure 27  Postcard set, ca. 1900. Hoffman and Boaz African-American Postcard Collection, Archives Center, NMAH, Smithsonian Institution.
consumerism, but can only animate and perform them in a displaced position as the "ideal servant" in the spaces of the Fishers' (her employers') house (Morrison 1970, 39–40, 100).

*The Bluest Eye* self-consciously engages the dialectic between gendered subjectivity and the historical specificity of 1930s mass visual culture. To contrast, an examination of contemporary visual discourses of the racially gendered feminine body must take into account not the African American girl or woman's *absence* but, since the 1970s, her increasingly evident re-entrance and *presence*. Ruffins, speaking on the Warshaw Collection, the largest and most comprehensive archive of U.S. commercial ephemera
(1700s–1980s), has noted that once a particular ethnic motif enters the mainstream advertising idiom, it stays, but is continually retooled to consolidate and express shifting attitudes and the place of an ethnic group in the economic structure in a given historical period; the ethnic iconography of advertising migrates as well, according to Ruffins, refracted in popular film and television. bell hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) critiques the prevalence of such reciprocal dynamics in contemporary mass culture: specifically, hooks concludes that even as black people

---

18 Ruffins and her staff are preparing an exhibit on ethnic imagery in U.S. advertising, scheduled to open at the National Museum of American History in 1998.
"return" to advertising in the 1970s and 1980s, many of the historical motifs in nineteenth-century advertising—most predominantly, black women’s "primitivism"—persist, albeit in a more covert form, in the spheres of film, popular music, literature, advertising, and television produced by both African Americans and Euro-Anglo Americans. Although black women now appear more often as consumers, Susan Bordo’s study of 1980s and 1990s mainstream illustrated advertising shows that black women continue to bear the burden of the U.S. "body," appearing frequently as exotics and "in jungle scenes in contemporary advertisements" (1993, 9–11). Thus the critical work of these scholars, and others, demonstrates what hooks calls the "commodification of otherness" (1992, 21) in
contemporary spectacle, a commodification that consolidates and perpetuates the dynamic of raced gender visually inaugurated by late nineteenth-century trade cards.

Some may say, however, that the era of the trade card, and its overtly racist construction of the domestic ideal—both feminine and national—and of U.S. colonialism has ended. Perhaps the trade card, the lowest of “low” culture and art, rightfully now takes its place stacked among the dusty relics and embarrassing black collectibles in thrift shops and at flea markets. Some may say that this relic of low culture represents neither an appropriate topic of academic inquiry nor a legitimate participant in the multidimensional discourses—commercial, political, religious, artistic—that speak, and are spoken by, contemporary America and its citizens.

But, I would answer, most likely the manufacturers, lithographers, card collectors, and scrapbook designers who distributed these cards and who adorned their homes with them and made of the cards reading material and art did not themselves recognize the import of this first “ubiquitous” instrument of mass visual culture. Small enough to fit into a child’s hand or a box of newly brand-named soap, the trade card’s size, novelty, and humor would trivialize and normalize the impact of its framing visual epistemologies of race, gender, and national self-identity. If, as Louis Althusser (1971) has argued, there is no “outside” ideology, no space from which critics may deconstruct their culture except as they are part and parcel of it, one may, however, turn to material history and, specifically relevant to my topic, to the material history of U.S. mainstream illustrated advertising as a pivotal touchstone for reading the links between past and present, between social policy and the images of visual media, between personal and collective self-identity.

As is evident in the preceding pages, allocations of raced gender typically have constituted not only a topic or thematics within any era’s political and economic imperatives; even when women, or topics pertaining to women, are not the apparent preoccupation, allocations of raced female gender nevertheless formally frame and normalize mass culture’s very structures of “knowing” and “seeing.” In today’s putatively race- and gender-blind era, the raced-gender allocations of late nineteenth-century advertising cards haunt the rhetorics of contemporary media, and, in the perennial, dually raced invocations of “welfare queens” and sanctified white motherhood, they haunt contemporary politics and government as well.19 Given

19 Jewell 1992, 142–61, cites the racial demographics on women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and other welfare funds, which contradict this dually raced invocation, and charts the integral relation between contemporary political-cultural stereotypes of black women and the shaping of U.S. social policies and legislation.
these spectacular formal similarities between the past and the present, mass visual culture and social policy, much remains to critique, to historicize, to resist.

Department of Languages and Literatures  
Eastern New Mexico University

References


