"The colored lady knows better": Marketing the “New Century Washer” in Canadian Home Journal, 1910-1912

Anne-Marie Kinahan
Wilfrid Laurier University

ABSTRACT This article is a small-scale study of eight advertisements that appeared in Canadian Home Journal between March 1910 and June 1912. Marketing a range of washing machines manufactured by Cummer-Dowswell, Ltd., a Hamilton-based company, the ads are significant for their racialized representations of women’s labour. Featuring a White woman in four ads and “Aunt Salina,” a Black “wash woman,” in four ads, their visual address hinges on racialized dichotomies. I analyze how this advertising campaign employed “race” to “sell” an ideological view of gender, labour, and the myth of technological progress through the linking of Black women to pre-industrial technologies and White women to technological progress.

KEYWORDS Women’s magazines; Canadian communication history; Advertising; Visual analysis; Discursive analysis


MOTS CLÉS Magazines féminins; Histoire de la communication canadienne; Publicité; Analyse visuelle; Analyse de discours

Amid the relatively standard fare of advertisements, fiction, and articles on various domestic concerns in the July 1911 issue of Canadian Home Journal appears an ad extolling the virtues of the “New Century Washer.” “Dey am dun quick,” says Aunt Salina, the Black “washwoman” who is the ad’s spokesperson. The ad offers a visual...
representation of Aunt Salina’s work day: pictured in various stages of doing the laun-
dry and minding a young child, Aunt Salina is shown loading the washer, wringing
the clothes, and, by 10:00 a.m., sitting comfortably, assured “that every particle of dirt
or stain has been removed from the clothes” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: “Dey am dun quick.” New Century Washer advertisement
(Canadian Home Journal, July 1911, p. 38)

This advertisement is one in a series of eight that appeared in Canadian Home Journal
between March 1910 and June 1912. Marketing a range of washing machines manufac-
tured by Cummer-Dowswell Limited, a company based in Hamilton, Ontario, the
advertisements employ two racialized characters throughout the series: the “lady” and
the “mammy.” Featuring a White lady of the house or a domestic servant in four ads
and Aunt Salina in four ads, the advertisements’ visual address hinges on racialized
dichotomies. Indexing a range of issues, from racial difference, gender, class, and labour
to technological progress, these ads provide an opportunity to analyze how an adver-
tising campaign employed “race” to “sell” an ideological view of social and gender hi-
erarchies, the role of labour in the home, and the promise of technological progress.
In this article, I draw on the work of Anne McClinton (1995), Richard Ohmann (1996),
Jo-Ann Morgan (1995), and Marilyn Maness Mehaffy (1997) to provide a critical dis-
cussion on the role of race in conveying social hierarchies, the historical significance
of the figure of the mammy in advertising, and the difficulties advertisers faced in rep-
resenting White women’s domestic labour.
Analyzing “commodity racism” and soap advertising in the Victorian era, McClintock (1995) finds that advertisers used liminal characters, such as monkeys, to represent domestic labour, to disavow White women’s labour, and to racialize individuals who perform manual labour. Within prevalent Victorian customs, “proper” women were those who did not work for profit. The Victorian home was dependent upon the structural contradiction of women’s paid and unpaid domestic work: as women left public employment in mines, shops, and factories for unremunerated domestic work, such domestic work became undervalued. “At the same time,” McClintock notes, “a cordon sanitaire of racial degeneration was thrown around those women who did work publicly and visibly for money” (p. 216). Thus, in these Cummer-Dowswell ads, the character of “Aunt Salina,” the Black “washwoman,” is deployed to represent manual labour and erase the spectre of White women’s labour. Hinging on this racialized duality, the washer ads contribute to a visual discourse that links Black women with pre-industrial technologies and White women with technological progress (Mehaffy, 1997).

In the discussion that follows, I provide a visual analysis of the advertisements; what they convey about early-twentieth-century attitudes about women’s work in the home; what they suggest about social, racial, and gender hierarchies; and how they position technology as a social panacea. By employing two well-established stereotypes, the advertisements flatter White women, reinforce gender and racial hierarchies, and signal the inclusion of White women in commercial culture—an inclusion predicated on the exclusion of Black women. By representing manual labour as the province of a Black female servant and automation as saving White women from back-breaking labour, the ads are a celebration of modernity and technology. Furthermore, the racialized dichotomy of Black and White women serves to position the White female consumer at the vanguard of national progress and accomplishment.

This series of ads is additionally worthy of critical analysis because they appeared in one of the largest and longest circulating Canadian women’s magazines in Canada. Founded in 1905 by James Acton, The Home Journal was intended to advertise household products to female consumers in urban and rural areas in Canada. Adding Canadian to the title in 1910, the magazine consistently increased its circulation, so that by 1925 its circulation was more than 68,000 copies per month (Sutherland, 1989). Considering that in 1921 the Canadian population was 8,800,249, with 51% living in rural areas, this was a significant circulation for a homegrown magazine (Statistics Canada, 2009). In 1929, it was purchased by MacLean Publishing Co., which continued to publish it until 1958, when it was absorbed into the MacLean-Hunter-owned Chatelaine (Johnston, 2001; Sutherland, 1989). Appealing directly to women, who were regarded as “the purchasing agent of the greatest buying organization in the World—the home” (The Canadian Newspaper Directory, 1909, p. 113), Canadian Home Journal positioned itself as a magazine that would inform, educate, and flatter the nation’s domestic consumers.

This analysis examines eight advertisements that appeared in the publication between March 1910 and June 1912. It must be stated that it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that the “Aunt Salina” ads appeared in the Canadian Home Journal before and after the dates chosen for this study. This analysis focuses on a small sample be-
cause these were the only advertisements I was able to locate. The earliest issues of Canadian Home Journal (those published from 1905 to 1909), as well as issues published from 1912 to 1918, are unavailable. The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, where this research was undertaken, has the most comprehensive collection of the magazine, but its collection begins in 1909 and is missing several sequential years of the publication. I searched all available issues of the Canadian Home Journal, requesting everything from 1905 to 1923. The first available issues were July–December 1909, January–June 1910, and July 1911–June 1912. The next available issues were July 1918–June 1919, June 1920–April 1921, and January–December 1922. This search yielded the eight advertisements discussed in this article, advertisements that ran in the two years between March 1910 and June 1912. My search of the holdings in the Library and Archives Canada collection only revealed microfilm copies of an earlier (and different) version of Canadian Home Journal, created in 1895 and ceasing publication by 1901.

These incomplete holdings make a systematic and sustained analysis of the publication as a whole exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to complete. Nevertheless, the search produced a chronological and relatively consistent series of advertisements from one company. An examination of these ads allows an analysis of their visual and narrative conventions, modes of address, and changes in representations, and a consideration of the ads in relation to each other. Additionally, given the incomplete state of the library’s holdings, this assembled archive, while small, provides a permanent record of the advertisements and allows for an analysis of how they may have “made sense” to the publication’s readers.

While the appearance of advertisements for washing machines in a national women’s magazine is not an uncommon occurrence, these ads, analyzed collectively, offer an uncommon visual and narrative discourse on race in Canada. Of all the issues examined for this study (some five dozen issues), the Cummer-Dowswell ads featuring “Aunt Salina” are the most consistent and repetitive representation of racial difference in the magazine. In my examination of the magazine, I found only two other advertisements that featured Black characters: an advertisement for Edison phonographs that pictures a Black performer entertaining a White family (Figure 2) and an ad for “Rennie’s Seeds,” which pictures two Black children, sitting on a pumpkin, gleefully sharing a massive cob of corn (Figure 3). These two representations are notable because they conform to the practice of representing Black people as marginal characters, peripheral to White society (Ohmann, 1996). They are additionally significant because they only appear once in my collected sample. The Cummer-Dowswell ads, on the other hand, continue throughout the two years of issues in this study. Considering these ads collectively allows an analysis of how readers may have made sense of them, how they conveyed meaning to a diverse audience, and how they conveyed ideology regarding gender, race, class, and technology.

Notable for the inclusion of a Black domestic worker, the Cummer-Dowswell ads offer a curious and anachronistic representation of domestic service in Canada. According to Marilyn Barber (1991), domestic service during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada “never became closely associated with black women” (p. 3).
Similarly, Sedef Arat-Koc (1997) contends Canada favoured White domestic servants “for their future or potential roles as wives and mothers of the Canadian nation, and thus as nation-builders and civilizers” (p. 54). Writing about African–Nova Scotian women in the late nineteenth century, Suzanne Morton (1993) contends, given the racism of the time, “African–Nova Scotian women had virtually no legal wage-earning opportunities outside domestic service, taking in laundry, or sewing” (p. 67). While Black men and women found work in Canadian homes as domestic and farm workers, and certainly some Black women worked as domestic servants and as washwomen, the overwhelming majority of women
working in domestic-service positions in Canada were White women from the United Kingdom who had immigrated, and the largest numbers of these women came from Ireland (Barber, 1991).

This article argues that through the opposition between the genteel White lady and the hard-working Black woman, the advertisements portrayed a world in which White women are associated with newfangled technologies, progress, and modernity, while Black women represent pre-industrial technologies, antiquated political and social systems, and technological obsolescence. These representations take shape against an emergent visual and print culture that was already linking Black faces and Black bodies with such consumer products and brands as Aunt Jemima pancakes, Uncle Ben’s rice, and Cream of Wheat cereal (Kern-Foxworth, 1994; Manring, 1998; Mehaffy, 1997; Morgan, 1995; Ohmann, 1996; Pieterse, 1992).

This racialized dualism has additional significance within a Canadian context. While an editorial discourse on “race” was not evident in the issues of Canadian Home Journal that I examined, the issue of race and, more specifically, the immigration of African-Americans to Canada after the American Civil War was a pressing social and political issue in the larger Canadian society (Mathieu, 2010; Winks, 1971). Indeed, the issue of how to prevent the Northern migration of newly freed American slaves was a central concern for the Laurier and Borden governments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mathieu, 2010). Canada’s reputation as a safe haven for American slaves, its Western homesteading program, and its gradual elimination of slavery in the 1800s made it a desirable destination for many Black farmers and homesteaders in the years following the American Civil War (Mathieu, 2010; Walker, 2011; Winks, 1971). The Western homesteading program saw the migration of 1,000 Blacks from Oklahoma to the Canadian Prairies, especially Alberta, during the years 1909 to 1911 (Walker, 2011).

Despite this seeming racial tolerance, Mathieu maintains that “Canadian governments throughout the first half of the twentieth century averred that the Dominion of Canada should remain for ‘the white race only’” (2010, p. 24). To that end, successive governments drafted more restrictive immigration policies, deemed to contain the potential “threat” posed by African-American migrants. Canadian newspapers carried articles and editorials that warned of the dangers posed by Black men especially, stressing their unsuitability for the harsh Canadian climate (Mathieu, 2010). Drawing on paranoia and fears of the sexual threat to White women, these public discourses stressed the necessity of barring the entry of Blacks to Canada. Immigration officers were encouraged by Frank Oliver, Laurier’s minister of the interior, to be particularly vigilant when assessing the suitability of Black immigrants and were given the authority to levy extra fees at the point of entry into Canada (Mathieu, 2010; Winks, 1971). This larger political issue over Black immigration may help to contextualize the appearance of Aunt Salina, a happy, contented, and marginalized domestic servant, in the advertisements of a national women’s magazine. Covertly acknowledging the existence of fears over the presence of Black men and women, the ads serve to reassure a White audience of the “proper” place of such individuals. While most Canadian men and women did not employ servants, the ads play on the image of “owning” such luxury and convenience in the home.
The new face of domestic products: Aunt Jemima sells the plantation

The appearance of Aunt Salina in the Cummer-Dowswell ads had a significant precedent in the figure of Aunt Jemima. The “story” of Aunt Jemima’s creation is particularly instructive, not only for the history of Black stereotypes, but for the creation of the Aunt Salina character as well. Aunt Jemima was an invention of White men, who drew on racist stereotypes to entertain, and subsequently sell products to, White audiences. Chris Rutt, proprietor of a flour mill that had created the ready-made pancake flour, was searching for the ideal image to market the product. The story goes that on a fateful day in 1889, Rutt strolled into a vaudeville theatre featuring minstrel performers Baker and Farrell. The final act of the show was a cake walk and featured either Baker or Farrell (no one knows for sure) dressed as a plantation mammy, complete with Black face, billowing skirts, and red bandanna, singing the song “Old Aunt Jemima” (Manring, 1998; Morgan, 1995). So began the “strange career” of Aunt Jemima, which eventually saw the development of a comprehensive marketing and promotional strategy: her likeness adorned boxes of pancake flour, trade cards, souvenir buttons, and various toys.

The integration Aunt Jemima into the popular consciousness did not stop with images on consumer products. An entire marketing and promotional strategy revolved around creating a life story for the character. Not satisfied with a two-dimensional likeness, R. T. Davis, proprietor of the milling company that “owned” Aunt Jemima pancake mix, promoted the product by finding someone to play her in person (Manring, 1998; Morgan, 1995). From 1893 until her death in 1923, Nancy Green, a former slave from Kentucky and a cook for a Chicago judge, was the face of Aunt Jemima. Making her public debut at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, “Aunt Jemima” entertained fairgoers with songs, stories of her life on the plantation, and, most importantly, cooking demonstrations on how to make pancakes (Manring, 1998).

The success of Aunt Jemima solidified the popular image of the mammy as good-natured, devoted to her White family, and the personification of Southern hospitality (Manring, 1998; Morgan, 1995). Indeed, the mammy’s status as domestic manager and cook extraordinaire authored many treatments of her successful and positive interventions in the lives of young, newly married White women. “Quaker Oats, the company that later owned the product, mounted many advertising campaigns casting Aunt Jemima in the role of advisor to the fretful Euro-American woman who needed help fulfilling her wifely duties” (Morgan, 1995, p. 105). More to the point, however, the ubiquity of Black characters selling consumer products made a profound statement about social relations in an emergent consumer culture. The racialized dualism between Black female workers and true White womanhood authorized a national and cultural discourse that sought to secure proper domains and proper roles for Black and White women (Mehaffy, 1997; Morgan, 1995). Appearing in postbellum United States, popular representations of the mammy symbolized the issues associated with reconstruction and household management. “By remaining in the kitchen or the nursery, [the mammy] offered a ready solution not only to the problem of how to assimilate former slaves into contemporary society, but also to the challenge of how to keep the middle-class Euro-American woman in her ‘ladylike’ role of home administrator” (Morgan, 1995, p. 88).
For Ohmann (1996), the appearance of Black characters in the advertisements in mass-market magazines reinforced an “ideology of trouble-free social space” (p. 264). Assessing such popular publications as Munsey's, Harper's, and Ladies' Home Journal, Ohmann finds that “the Negro Problem” was rarely the subject of feature, fiction, or editorial content of the publications. However, Black characters were regularly used to advertise household items and products. He argues that one of the reasons for the absence of Black people from editorial content and their presence in advertising was related to the editorial preference for “happy talk.” Magazines were oriented to providing a positive space for advertisers, and in doing so they “had drained from the subject of race nearly all upsetting connotations, making it part of a stylized social backdrop, meant to reassure middle class whites about their place in the world” (p. 261). Indeed, in his assessment of several advertisements featuring Black characters, Ohmann contends that advertising images were part and parcel of a policy “of representing the social order as white and right, with black people smilingly present but not really part of it” (p. 265).

For Morgan, Mehaffy, and Ohmann, a key function of the Black stereotype was nostalgia. Appearing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the United States was emerging from Civil War, images of Blacks and Whites sharing social space not only was meant to convey a racialized social hierarchy, with Whites in positions of authority and/or leisure and Blacks in blissful servitude, but also functioned as an extended lament for antebellum social relations, a world in which individuals knew their place. “The advertising world presented a visual microcosm of a world in which black women serve and white women repose. Scenes of happy mammies, converted from former slaves into contented servants continuing to work in kitchens, gave psychological comfort to Euro-American viewers” (Morgan, 1995, p. 100). For these authors, images of Blacks in advertising were a reflection of the specific political, social, and cultural context of post–Civil War America.

While these arguments are persuasive, they do not specifically explain the use of such stereotypes in a Canadian publication. While “Aunt Salina” may convey Southern hospitality and White gentility, there is no reason to believe that these representations would have the same salience for a Canadian audience. While Black characters were circulating in popular culture, publicity, and marketing strategies, and while Canadians would have been familiar with such images, it is unlikely that they functioned within a larger national and cultural discourse about North–South reconciliation. Rather, Aunt Salina's presence in the Cummer-Dowswell ads suggests the ubiquity of this racialized pairing to advertise domestic products to White consumers. Not operating at the level of nostalgia or postwar reconstruction, the ads are seemingly unmoored from the political and cultural context established by Mehaffy, Morgan, and Ohmann. Rather, within this Canadian context, the images of the Black domestic and White consumer are meant to convey expectations of proper gender roles, household management, and scientific efficiency. These gendered discourses also reflect larger national and political concerns over immigration, citizenship, and the attempt to establish Canada as a White settler nation.
“How is your washing done?” Racializing women’s labour in the home

The series of ads appearing in *Canadian Home Journal* draws considerable visual and discursive power from the opposition between Black and White womanhood. Drawing on well-established racialized stereotypes that position White women at the forefront of progress and Black women as emblematic of pre-industrial technologies, the ads construct a narrative of White progress, efficiency, and women’s emancipation from the drudgery of domestic work (Mehaffy, 1997; Morgan, 1995). This narrative is particularly relevant in the ads for the Ideal Power Washer and Velox Motor Washer (Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7), appearing in March and May 1910 and May and June 1912, respectively. Featuring a White woman and the washer, the ads suggest that the machine is intended for the lady of the house. However, there is no representation or depiction of the White woman’s domestic labour. In the 1910 ads for the Ideal Power Washer (see Figures 4 and 5), a White woman demonstrates the washer’s efficiency through the simple act of turning on a tap. The ad copy highlights the facility of the machines and further removes the spectre of White women’s labour. The ideal washer “does all your washing without cost and without any work on your part” (Figure 4). Similarly, the May 1910 ad claims, “It means Washing With All The Hard Work Left Out” (Figure 5).

These two ads for the “Ideal” washer invoke the theme of domestic management and efficiency. Picturing a White woman reaching over the machine and turning on the tap, the ads essentially demonstrate how the machine works. The copy further explains how the washer functions: “Just attach it to the tap—turn on the water—and

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**Figure 4:** “Ideal” Power Washer advertisement (*Home Journal*, March 1910, p. 28)

**Figure 5:** “Ideal” Power Washer advertisement (*Home Journal*, May 1910, p. 25)
it washes the clothes” (Figure 4). The main character in the ad reinforces the theme of domestic management and efficiency. Dressed formally in long skirt, apron, puffy blouse, and black bow tie, she may be the lady of the house, or a domestic servant, but she could also be a domestic expert or a product demonstrator. Her clear mastery of the machine, one hand turning on the tap as the other arm extends toward the machine in a gesture of demonstration, suggests both expertise and instruction. The copy in both ads further reinforces this instructive element: it addresses the reader, includes instructions on how to operate the machine, and advises the reader to contact the company if “your dealer does not handle” the washers (Figures 4 and 5).

In the 1912 ads, the White woman, more clearly established as the lady of the house, is pictured at some distance from the washer (see Figures 6 and 7). In the “Ideal” ad, she is gesturing to the machine, while in the “Velox” ad, she is in the background, attending to setting the table and far removed from the workings of the machine and presumably from the labour-intensive drudgery of laundry day. The ad copy focuses on the ability of the washers to save the housewife from the toil of laundry day: “How Is Your Washing Done? Do you do your washing with the old style hand machine or worse still the back-breaking wash board?” (Figure 6). The ad for the Velox Motor Washer asks: “If you have running water in your house, why make a drudge of yourself 52 wash days every year[?]” (Figure 7). While the ads make allusions to White women's
domestic labour, it is never explicitly represented. Presumably, someone has to load the clothes into the machine, hook the machine to the sink, wring the clothes, and hang them to dry. However, within the domestic scenes offered by these ads, this work is magically accomplished without the labour of White women.

The saving of White women’s labour is equated with preserving her happiness: “Is not the saving of your strength, your time, your temper and your clothes worth the difference?” (Figure 6). The Velox Motor Washer promises that the machine “runs itself,” “needs no attention,” and “washes your clothes as fast as two women” (Figure 7). It is significant that White women appear in the ads for technologically advanced washers, while Aunt Salina advertises hand-wring washers only. Indeed, the copy in the Ideal ad makes the distinction between the machines clear: “If you have no running water in the house, get the NEW CENTURY WASHING MACHINE” (Figure 4). Within the world portrayed here, the manual labour demanded by wash day is the proper province of the hard-working Black washwoman. The hand-wring machines still require significant labour, which can only be represented through the presence of Aunt Salina. The labour of White women, on the other hand, is augmented, supported, or replaced by the new technologies of water-powered and motorized washers.
Visions of the well-run household: Labour, domestic efficiency, and washing machines

A key element in the advertising of these washers is the advertisements’ reference to the smooth and efficient running of the household. For Cummer-Dowswell, the washers are central to women’s ability to free up more time for themselves, their children, or other domestic responsibilities. Figure 1, “Dey am dun quick,” specifically indexes the White woman’s absence from the home and her replacement by Aunt Salina on the one hand and the “New Century Washer” on the other. Portraying a domestic scene in which Aunt Salina is busy not only with the laundry, but also with minding a young child, the ad offers a vision of domestic labour completely devoid of the White woman’s presence. Left in the capable hands of Aunt Salina and the New Century Washer, “wash day is looked upon as one of ordinary pleasant occupation” (Figure 1). Indeed, the ad promises, “start your washing at 8 o’clock in the morning and you are through before 10, with the clothes on the line, the kitchen cleaned up and the assurance that every particle of dirt or stain has been removed from the clothes.” Showing Aunt Salina at each hour—starting the wash, wringing the clothes through the washer, and finally sitting down with the child as the clothes hang on the line—the ad evokes images of a well-run and efficient household. While the White woman is not specifically pictured in the ad, her presence as domestic manager is taken for granted. She is the “you” addressed by the ad, but she is clearly not the “you” depicted in the ad, the “you” who is actually doing the labour associated with wash day.

The ad appearing in October 1911 portrays Aunt Salina directly addressing White women and harshly, yet respectfully, reminding them to be prudent and efficient home managers (see Figure 8). “Women folks who do their own washing are foolish” begins the ad copy, and we are to assume from the scene depicted that Aunt Salina is demonstrating the usefulness of the machine to the oddly disembodied women positioned in the upper right corner of the ad (Figure 8). Clearly invoking the history of Aunt Jemima as public spokeswoman and household expert, Aunt Salina provides some “down home” advice for the assembled women: “Wuk less and enjoy life moah by lettin the ‘New Century’ wash for you” (Figure 8). Aunt Salina’s domestic expertise is on display in yet another ad in the December 1911 issue (see Figure 9). “De right ting for de Missus’ Christmas Gift” finds Aunt Salina instructing a young White couple on a “sensible gift” for a wife or mother. “Something that will relieve her of the back-breaking and nerve-racking worries of ordinary household duties—something that shows her you really care.” Positioned in the bottom left corner of the ad, Aunt Salina gazes up at the young couple, who are preoccupied by the “New Century Washer.”

The racialized contrasts between White women’s and Black women’s labour becomes more apparent when we consider the collective visual representation of Aunt Salina in the four Cummer-Dowswell ads that feature her. (Figures 1, 8, 9, 10). While the White woman’s labour is suggested through her operation of technology, Aunt Salina’s labour is demonstrated through her body, her clothing, and her physical appearance. Aunt Salina is marked by her labour: her strong, powerful body, her confident stance, her muscular arms, and her working clothes all symbolize her status as domestic worker, but they additionally place her at a distance from the ideal “true
Figure 8: “Wuk less and enjoy life moah by lettin the ‘New Century’ wash for you.” New Century Washer advertisement (Canadian Home Journal, October 1911, p. 22)

Figure 9: “De right ting for de Missus’ Christmas Gift” (Canadian Home Journal, December 1911, p. 55)
woman” portrayed in the other ads. In contrast with the ads featuring White women, Aunt Salina is portrayed actually using the machines (Figure 1), demonstrating their efficiency (Figures 8 and 10), and testifying to their quality and reliability (Figures 1 and 8-10). Presumably drawing from her considerable domestic experience, Aunt Salina can speak with authority about these household appliances, while the White women—proper ladies indeed—remain curiously silent.

At the same time that Aunt Salina has some degree of authority, she is also clearly situated as inferior to the White folks who populate the ads. She is the “washwoman” hired by the middle-class White family to complete domestic chores and childcare tasks. As a spokesperson, Aunt Salina’s authority is challenged by her diminished position in the ads. In Figure 8, the audience of disembodied White women looks down on her, and in Figure 9, the White couple actually pay her no mind at all. In these representations, Aunt Salina’s presence is deeply ironic. As a modern spokeswoman associated with a brand, and an authority on the product, her presence acknowledges the innovations in marketing and publicity campaigns detailed by Morgan (1995) and Ohmann (1996). Even though she is a visual representation of the ad and the company’s publicity—each ad encourages readers to request a copy of “Aunt Salina’s Wash Day Philosophy,” an instructive booklet on Cummer-Dowswell washers—she is continuously presented as marginal to the product she endorses. Indeed, as a “washwoman” whose labour is about to be replaced by a machine, she is a “vanishing figure,” an individual whose outdated, obsolete, and antiquated labour will be replaced by the “New Century” (Woodson, 1930).

“The colored lady knows better”: Racialized representations of class

In a fascinating analysis of the “strange career” of Aunt Jemima, M. M. Manring (1998) notes the difficulties that attend to writing a history of an image so indelibly associated with commercial culture. Part and parcel of the attempt to determine the history of the image is an attendant focus on the history of slavery and of Black women’s lives. Indeed, the “story” of Aunt Jemima was a blend of the actual experiences of former slaves with tales of life on the plantation written by advertisers (Kern-Foxworth, 1994; Manring, 1998; Morgan, 1995). Manring (1988) notes that Nancy Green, who “played” Aunt Jemima in public for several years, became so associated with her that a newspaper obituary for Green mourned the passing of “Aunt Jemima” and blended facts of Green’s life with fictional tales of Aunt Jemima’s experiences. In this sense, the mammy generally and Aunt Jemima specifically were purely fictional creations, intended to inform and entertain consumers, and ultimately to sell consumer products.

For Morgan (1995), the “growing field of commercial printing” was central in the creation of the mammy stereotype. She argues, “Mammies became fixtures on trade cards, product labels, and song sheet covers—almost anywhere advertisers could exploit the former slaves’ well-honed domestic skills to attract buyers” (p. 87). This connection to commercial culture goes some way to explaining the appearance of “Aunt Salina” in Cummer-Dowswell washer ads in the early twentieth century in Canada. Not limited to historical accounts, literature, or diaries, the mammy’s image was developed specifically for commercial and cultural use. Indeed, that she was unmoored from her Southern plantation roots and put to service in the new world to advertise
“better” technologies for White Canadian housewives suggests the extent to which the mammy was a very profitable image for manufactures and advertisers. But this inclusion in commercial culture is deeply ironic and contradictory. Aunt Jemima’s public presence at world’s fairs and expositions, the public visibility of the mammy as commercial character, and her deep association with mass consumer culture again reinforce her distance from the ideal expression of true womanhood. As noted above, Victorian culture was deeply suspicious of women who worked outside the home for money, and Victorian advertisers played on racial difference to further suggest gender difference (McClintock, 1995). The working woman, because she worked in various trades outside the home, was devoid of the refinement and grace that characterized the housebound Victorian lady.

Aunt Salina also inhabits this controversial public/private space. In order to denote her distance and difference from ideal White womanhood, the advertisements play up her huckster persona, her working-class status, and her lack of education. Each of the four ads that feature Aunt Salina includes her testimony about the washing machines. Clearly meant to convey her lack of formal education, her speech is rendered in a Southern dialect: “Dey am dun quick” (Figure 1), “Wuk less and enjoy life moah by lettin the ‘New Century’ wash for you” (Figure 8), “De right ting for de Missus’ Christmas gift” (Figure 9), “De washing machine dat can wash moah clo’s cleaner in half an hour dan three washerwomen” (Figure 10). Aunt Salina’s “voice” is used to extol the virtues of the washers, to testify to their economical sense, and to cajole White

Figure 10: “De washing machine dat can wash moah clo’s cleaner in half an hour dan three washerwomen.” (Canadian Home Journal, November 1911, p. 45)
folks into buying them (“Women folks who do their own washing are foolish,” Figure 8). However, her voice also betrays her exclusion from the developing professional, consumer class. While she is “employed” to sell consumer products, her visual and vocal representation underscore her distance from the qualities and characteristics necessary to be an active agent and participant in this emergent consumer culture.

While the White domestic servant (or product expert) is often shown demonstrating the machine’s utility and simplicity, it is significant that these ads make no claims about the machine saving women from housework. Indeed, it is only Aunt Salina that can make such claims, which are authenticated by her own experience with back-breaking labour, visibly shown through the scenes of wash-day labour in Figure 1. In each of the ads that feature White women, the women are denied voice and agency since they merely function to suggest what cannot be represented explicitly: White women’s domestic labour. While advertisers felt that representing White women’s labour was taboo, they used the presumption of White women’s “idleness” to allude to the preferred class status of their customers. Not working outside (or even inside) the home, married, and certainly with children, the female domestic consumer is able to afford the modern conveniences that allow her reprieve from drudgery. Certainly the manufacturer of the washers intended to target consumers of a specific social class: those able to afford its appliances. But at the same time, the ads function as wish fulfillment for the reader—to imagine a life in which the back-breaking labour of laundry day is effortlessly completed by a machine. Indeed, the copy accompanying the ads stresses the futility of such labour and provides a stark choice between domestic drudgery and liberation from domestic toil: “To keep on washing clothes the old way is simply to destroy youthfulness and shorten life itself. Why should women do it—since an up-to-date washing machine can change the drudgery of washday into a pleasant pastime? The colored lady knows better” (Figure 10, November 1911, p. 45). Collectively, these ads offer an invitation to female consumers to dispense with old-fashioned habits, adopt new technologies, and in the process save their health and beauty.

“A Vanishing Figure”: The dawn of technology and the erasure of race

Representing modernity as the province of White middle-class women and men, the ads in Canadian Home Journal comprise an ambiguous and contradictory discourse on the role of Blacks in an emergent Canadian society. The ads create a world in which Black women and men (the latter not even represented) are excluded, marginalized, and left behind by the acquisition of “better” domestic help and newfangled technologies. At the same time that the ads enact this erasure, their commercial address is utterly dependent on the words and the expertise of Aunt Salina. This presents a deeply ironic form of visual address: Aunt Salina is a visible representation of slavery, plantation life, and manual labour. She represents an outdated and antiquated economic and social system. At the same time, however, she is the well-informed and savvy spokesperson who can attest to the economic value and labour-saving attributes of the washers. As Mehaffy (1997) contends in her analysis of trade card imagery, “some cards draw on racist conceptions to insist on the grotesque impossibility of Black consumerism, others suggest that familiarity with name-brand commodities can civilize even the most ‘primitive’ figure” (p. 151). But clearly, Aunt Salina’s “expertise” does not inculcate her in an
emergent commercial and consumer culture. Rather, her expertise is a sign of her irrelevance, her obsolescence, and the impossibility of her continued participation in a culture and economy dependent upon her eventual exclusion. With the emergence of new technologies, new scientific methods within the home, and a new social and political order, the “washwoman” is indeed a “vanishing figure,” and with her removal from advertising’s visual discourse, and from the domestic economy, we also witness the attempted purification of social and domestic space.

Aunt Salina’s erasure from the home is complete through the visual representations in the ads for the “Ideal” Power Washer and the “Velox” Motor-Washer (Figures 6 and 7). Despite mention in the ads of the “Aunt Salina’s Wash Day Philosophy” booklet, Aunt Salina herself is nowhere to be found. Her presence in the home is no longer required, since the automated washers have replaced her. I can only speculate on the reasons why she disappeared from Cummer-Dowswell advertisements. One reason could be that the ownership of the magazine changed hands in 1912, when it was sold to Harold Gagnier’s Consolidated Press (Sutherland, 1989). This change of ownership could have meant changes in advertising strategies for its clients. Another explanation could be that Cummer-Dowswell decided to target directly the White female consumer in its advertisements and to shift its focus to the water- and motor-powered machines. However, I would like to suggest a plausible, but more speculative answer: Aunt Salina was no longer the spokesperson for the ads because her presence was incongruous for advertising automated washers. The visual and discursive appeals made in the Aunt Salina ads are premised on an understanding of domestic labour that was time-consuming, intensive, and menial. The figure of Aunt Salina was an ideal way to stress these demanding aspects of domestic labour and the labour-saving qualities of the washers, while carefully avoiding the unseemly portrayal of White women’s manual labour.

This contradictory inclusion in consumer culture applies to the ads’ representations of White women as well. The domestic servant and the domestic consumer are both central to the discourse envisioned by the ads: their placement in the home, and their unacknowledged and unpaid labour, were central to the smooth functioning of the middle-class home at the turn of the twentieth century. As Morgan (1995) notes, “if the wheels of commerce turned by the labor of a loyal mammy, they were no less dependent on the purchasing power of the lady of the house” (p. 105). Indeed, while the Black female labourer and White female consumer are shown in opposition, they are each shaped by and constrained within the social, cultural, and economic world envisioned in the ads. Their agency, authority, and power are all delimited: Aunt Salina’s marginal position, her clear appearance as former slave and manual labourer, and her Southern dialect all serve to remove her from the consumer and commercial culture that is dependent on her image. The White domestic consumer and servant have no active agency within the ads: they do not speak, they are rarely shown working, and their movements are limited and constrained. While Figures 6 and 7 (May and June 1912) represent the White woman as domestic manager, in Figure 9 she is merely an extension of her husband. Despite the publication’s acknowledgment of women’s central role in domestic consumption (she is the “purchasing agent” for the family),
she clearly is not the person buying the machine. While she may influence the decision of her husband to purchase “[d]e right ting for de missus’ Christmas gift,” she has no authority and no means to make the purchase herself (Figure 9). These portrayals of White women’s domestic responsibilities accord with the general consensus that women’s primary responsibilities revolved around the home.

Aunt Salina was a marketing creation meant to invoke Old South mythologies to sell technological progress within the home. However, that she was only represented to advertise washers that still depended on considerable physical labour suggests the extent to which her commercial reach had definite limits. Presumably, Cummer-Dowswell hoped that Aunt Salina would bring the same success for their washers as did Aunt Jemima for pancakes. But this study suggests that while Aunt Salina can be extracted from plantation narratives and mythologies and put to work to advertise domestic technologies, she can never explicitly be associated with technological progress. Indeed, technological progress is, and remains, the preserve of the White, middle-class family.

The present small-scale study demonstrates the extent to which these racialized discourses served to underwrite an understanding of social relations in an emergent Canadian society. It is impossible to speculate on the possible “effects” of this campaign. So much of the historical record is buried, lost, or destroyed. However, focusing on this short-lived campaign enables an analysis of how “race,” a rarely acknowledged issue within the publication, became a central means by which to represent membership in commercial culture, delineate the boundaries between social inclusion and exclusion, and signify the ideal attributes of the Canadian consumer. Through the creation of a narrative and visual discourse that linked Black women’s labour to pre-industrial technologies and linked the White woman’s home to technological progress and modernity, the Cummer-Dowswell ads offer a glimpse into the fantasy ideal of the emergent Canadian nation. That such anachronistic representations appeared in a national women’s magazine suggests the extent to which they tapped into prevailing social, cultural, and political racism. While Canadian Home Journal often offered the sanitized “happy talk” that advertisers desired, these ads suggest that racism was a central component in defining the ideal characteristics of the Canadian nation.

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