

Editorial: Skin Bleaching and Global White Supremacy

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This Special Issue of the *Journal of Pan African Studies* focuses on the practice of skin bleaching -- the intentional alteration of one's natural skin color to one relatively, if not substantially lighter in color, through the use of chemical skin lightening agents -- as it manifests among people of African descent. Within the context of global white supremacy, skin color communicates one's position to and within the dominant power structure. Given this reality, many people, namely those subjected to white domination, colonization, and enslavement, have historically internalized projected notions that the basis of their inferior condition is their skin color. Although the contributors to this issue examine the phenomenon from a variety perspectives, all draw attention to the impact of global White supremacy on valuations of skin color and the extent to which skin bleaching, as a social practice, is functionary of white domination.

The introductory article, "Skin Bleaching and Global White Supremacy: By Way of Introduction" by guest editor, Yaba Amgborale Blay, critically examines the symbolic significance of whiteness, particularly for and among African people, by outlining the history of global White supremacy, both politically and ideologically, discussing its subsequent promulgation, and further investigating its relationship to the historical and contemporary skin bleaching phenomenon. The article provides a broader socio-historical context within which to situate the global practice of skin bleaching and thus provides a necessary framework for further realizing the critical significance of the articles presented in this issue.

Whereas the large majority of the discourse on skin bleaching focuses on the practice as it occurs throughout the world, there exists a paucity of literature

on skin bleaching in the United States. With three articles examining the historical legacy of the practice in early 20th century America, and one focusing on product usage in contemporary Harlem, the current issue attempts to address this significant gap in the literature. In his article, “Skin Bleach And Civilization: The Racial Formation of Blackness in 1920s Harlem,” Jacob Dorman argues that for African Americans at the turn of the 20th century, skin bleaching represented much more than mere cosmetic practice. Examining historical archives, newspaper records, skin bleaching product advertisements, and the infamous and bitter wrangle between W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey, Dorman positions skin bleaching within the larger discourse of civilization and contends that the practice reflected ambiguous notions of racial progress and advancement. Similarly, Amoaba Gooden’s examination the Black vanguard of news reporting in her article “Visual Representations of Feminine Beauty in the Black Press: 1915-1950” highlights the extent to which the Black press, influenced by White supremacy, patriarchy, and classism, assigned higher value to those ideals and physical features associated with Whiteness than those associated with Blackness. Given the frequent appearance of skin bleaching advertisements, and the extent to which reporters attempted to reject degrading popular images of Black women (e.g. the Mammy), Gooden argues that the Black press ultimately endorsed skin bleaching as a means through which Black women in particular could attain not only feminine beauty, but social respectability. Like Gooden, Treva Lindsey also examines a number of skin bleaching advertisements, however, she focuses specifically on late 19th to early 20th century Washington D.C. and skin bleaching among Washingtonian women. Lindsey explores the relationship between White supremacy, skin bleaching, and New Negro womanhood, and in the final analysis of her article, “Black No More: Skin Bleaching and the Emergence of New Negro Womanhood Beauty Culture,” she connects skin bleaching to a politics of appearance that intersected with White supremacist and gendered discourses about urban Black modernity and social mobility; and asserts that African American women of the time embraced a White constructed beauty culture as means to an end – social, political, and economic freedom.

Moving the examination forward nearly 100 years, in his article, “The Derogatory Representations of the Skin-Bleaching Products Sold in Harlem,” co-editor Christopher Charles analyzes the images used to market skin bleaching products sold in contemporary Harlem in order to determine whether or not such imagery is derogatory. Charles discovers that many of the underlying messages inherent to the imagery displayed on skin bleaching labels today are identical to those used decades ago in that they continue to exhibit hegemonic representations of Whiteness versus Blackness. In his estimation, it is this consistency and

continuation that continues to push the sale of skin bleaching products in the United States. Margaret Hunter holds a similar position in her article “Buying Racial Capital: Skin Bleaching and Cosmetic Surgery in a Globalized World.” She argues that the increased incidence of transnational skin bleaching is a result of the merging of old ideologies (colonialism, race, and color) with new technologies of the body (skin bleaching and plastic surgery). In this way, as one attains light skin, s/he attains a form of racial capital – a resource drawn from the body that provides tangible benefits within the context of White supremacy.

The works of Donna Hope and Emphraim Gwaravanda both situate skin bleaching within the specific cultural contexts within which it takes place, Jamaica and Zimbabwe respectively. In her article, “From Browning to Cake Soap: Popular Debates on Skin Bleaching in the Jamaican Dancehall,” Hope examines skin bleaching through the lens of dancehall music culture which, unlike the larger Jamaican society, contends that skin bleaching represents a mode of fashion and style. By examining dancehall artists, their public personas, and their lyricism about skin bleaching, and further situating skin bleaching within Jamaica’s historically three-tiered racialized society, Hope attempts to unpack conflicting cultural debates surrounding skin bleaching in Jamaica. With attention to skin bleaching in Zimbabwe, Gwaravanda relies upon Shona proverbs as an indigenous knowledge system through which to analyze the phenomenon. Through the proverbs, he asserts that for the Shona people, intrinsic beauty is valued above extrinsic beauty, dark skin is to be valued, and that one is to be knowledgeable of his/her culture and identity. It is through these perspectives that Gwaravanda challenges contemporary skin bleaching in Zimbabwe as a departure from traditional Shona culture.

Commentary provided by African-centered psychologist, Daudi ya Azibo concludes this special issue on skin bleaching and global White supremacy. In “Skin Bleaching and Lightening as Psychological Misorientation Mental Disorder,” Azibo argues that skin bleaching is consistent with the psychological misorientation mental disorder articulated in the Azibo Nosology. According to Azibo, living under White domination has severely traumatized people of African descent and has destabilized our ability to orient ourselves towards ourselves. Skin bleaching is thus regarded a reflective side effect of this psychological destabilization. By concluding with Dr. Azibo’s commentary, we hope to open and extend the discourse, spark debate, and inspire continued research into the multiple dimensions for which skin bleaching has implications for people of African descent.