

# Skin Bleaching and Global White Supremacy: By Way of Introduction

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## Abstract

The cosmetic use of chemical agents to lighten the complexion of one's skin, also referred to as skin whitening, skin lightening, and/or skin bleaching, is currently a widespread global phenomenon. While the history of skin bleaching can be traced to the Elizabethan age of powder and paint, in its current manifestations, skin bleaching is practiced disproportionately within communities "of color" and exceedingly among people of African descent. While it is true that skin bleaching represents a multifaceted phenomenon, with a complexity of historical, cultural, sociopolitical, and psychological forces motivating the practice, the large majority of scholars who examine skin bleaching at the very least acknowledge the institutions of colonialism and enslavement historically, and global White supremacy contemporarily, as dominant and culpable instigators of the penchant for skin bleaching. As an introduction to this Special Issue of the *Journal of Pan African Studies* focusing on skin bleaching and global White supremacy, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine 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.

**Keywords:** skin bleaching, White Supremacy, White nationalism, colonialism, commodity racism

*If you do not understand White Supremacy  
-- what it is, and how it works --  
everything else that you understand, will only confuse you.  
(Fuller, 1969)*

## **Introduction**

**T**he cosmetic use of chemical agents to lighten the complexion of one's skin, also referred to as skin whitening, skin lightening, and/or skin bleaching, is currently a widespread global phenomenon. While the history of skin bleaching can be traced to the Elizabethan age of powder and paint (Blay, 2009a; Peiss, 1998; Williams, 1957), in its current manifestations, skin bleaching is practiced disproportionately within communities "of color." Among these populations, colorism<sup>1</sup> constructs a spectrum upon which individuals attempt to circumnavigate the parameters of the white/non-white binary racial hierarchy by instead assigning and assuming color privilege based upon proximity to Whiteness. In this context, the White ideal (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951) – pale skin, long, straight hair, and aquiline features – exerts prevailing and enduring influences on societal assessments of human value. Skin bleaching then represents one attempt to approximate the White ideal and consequently gain access to both the humanity and social status historically reserved for Whites.

Beyond impacting communities "of color," in general, the skin bleaching phenomenon has long affected African communities in particular (Blay, 2009a). Paradoxically situated within the first wave of the African independence movements, skin bleaching surfaced as an increasingly popular cosmetic practice as early as the late 1950s (Blay, 2009b; de Souza, 2008); and is currently widespread. Seventy five percent of traders in Lagos, Nigeria (Adebajo, 2002; Oyo, 2001); 52% of the population in Dakar, Senegal, 35% in Pretoria, South Africa (Gbenga, 2004); and 50% of the female population in Bamako, Mali (Baxter, 2000) all use skin bleaching products. In Cote d'Ivoire, it is estimated that "eight out of every [ten] seemingly fair-complexioned women use skin-lightening products on a regular basis" ("Gender Bulletin," 1998). Among Zambian women ages 30 – 39, as many as 60% reportedly use skin bleaching agents (Pitche, Kombate & Tchangai-Walla, 2005). In Ghana, dermatologists estimate that upwards of 30% of the population, primarily women, use bleaching creams regularly (Delle, 2001; McKinley, 2001). It seems that in many parts of the continent, skin bleaching is nothing less than a way of life.

While it is true that skin bleaching represents a multifaceted phenomenon, with a complexity of historical, cultural, sociopolitical, and psychological forces motivating the practice (Blay, 2007; Charles, 2009), the large majority of scholars who examine skin bleaching at the very least acknowledge the institutions of colonialism and enslavement historically, and global White supremacy contemporarily, as dominant and culpable instigators of the penchant for skin bleaching (Blay 2007; 2009a; 2009b; Charles, 2003; 2009; de Souza, 2008; Glenn, 2008; Lewis et al, 2010; Mire, 2001; Thomas, 2008; Wallace, 2009). How exactly has this come to be? The reality is that for many of us, colonialism and global White supremacy exist as taken for granted realities, and although we understand their basic premises, few of us are familiar with their historical development or understand them as continually generated processes. As such, we have limited insight into the particular ways in which they continue to impact perceptions of and attitudes about skin color and subsequently contribute to the decision to bleach one's skin.

As an introduction to this Special Issue of the *Journal of Pan African Studies* focusing on skin bleaching and global White supremacy, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine 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.

## **White Supremacy Defined**

Here I define global White supremacy as an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples classified as “non-White” by continents, nations, and peoples who, by virtue of their white (light) skin pigmentation and/or ancestral origin from Europe, classify themselves as “White.” Although history illuminates the fabrication, changeability, and contingencies of Whiteness (e.g. the case of Irish and Italians once being denied entry into the White “race”), it is important to note that this global power system is structured and maintained not for the purpose of legitimizing racial categories as much as it is for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it has been Whites who have constructed racial categories based on the economic, political, and social aspirations of Whites, for the benefits of Whites (L. Ross, 1995). In this way, Whites define who is White; a definition that has changed and will likely

continue to change based upon the particular economic, political, and social conditions of the moment (e.g. the case of Egyptians now being classified as White when they were once classified as Arab, and previously as Black). It is clear then that White supremacy is based less on racial Whiteness (as evidenced by skin color) than it is on ideological Whiteness – the exclusive value assigned that involves “a series of immunities, privileges, rights, and assumptions...” This [value is] not inherent, natural, or biologically determined. Rather [it reflects] artificial beliefs created by social, economic, and political conditions” (L. Ross, 1995).

As an historical process and global power structure, White supremacy stands on the shoulders of European nationalism and White nationalism and now operates in tandem with American nationalism. Whereas European and White nationalism reflected imperialist agendas, White supremacy materialized as a system of maintenance. In the US context, the fact that contemporary usage of the term “white Supremacist” often conjures images of the Ku Klux Klan or members of the Aryan nation illustrates the extent to which White Supremacy as a political system has been well maintained insofar as the terminology is largely connected with extremist and not mainstream thought. In this way, White supremacy as the political ideology of practice remains largely invisible to the majority of the American public notwithstanding the reality that White supremacist beliefs lie at the core of the American experience (L. Ross, 1995). Its invisibility further masks its reliance upon violence for its maintenance. From the egomaniacal standpoint of White supremacy, given the self-assigned superiority of Whiteness, White people have the moral right to exact brute force whenever White interests are threatened, while those classified as “non-White” have no equivalent moral right to defend themselves against White aggression, especially when such aggression is enacted in the name of “democracy” (L. Ross, 1995).

Given the historical fact that White supremacy has been constructed by Whites for the benefit of Whites, White supremacy is routinely interpreted as a code word for White people. However, White supremacy is more than a collection of White people. As a system, many people participate in it, and as an ideology, many people think, feel, behave, and operate according to it, and in many ways defend and uphold it -- White and “non-White” alike. The institution of colorism exemplifies how “non-Whites” serve to uphold White supremacy. For example, while most individuals who bleach their skin vehemently reject accusations that they desire to be White, and in fact are aware that no amount of chemical intervention will actually render them White nor will Whites, the gatekeepers to Whiteness, ever grant them access to the racial or social category, as they seek to

gain access to the privilege that has historically been afforded to lighter skin as an approximation of Whiteness, they endorse the constructed superiority of Whiteness and thus White supremacy. As such, any true understanding of White supremacy must transcend focus on White people and physical White power alone. It must address White supremacy as an ideology and confront the psychological power of Whiteness.

As a means through which to understand some of the methods through which White supremacy has come to infiltrate the minds of Africans/Blacks in particular, in the next section, I examine the interdependence of Christianity and European nationalism, because as Michael Gomez (2005) notes, “the Bible has affected the lives of Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora possibly more than any other document in human history” (18).

## **Birth of a Nation: Christianity, the White Ideal, and the Rise of White Nationalism**

Integral to the capitalist mode of production advanced through colonization and enslavement was the rise of European nationalism<sup>3</sup> as a pervasive and deeply ingrained principle in European thought. Christianity, a religion whose spiritual ideals provide the ideological tool(s) through which Europeans have understood and subsequently controlled the material world, is requisite to the historical development of European nationalism. Positioned as the universal doctrine to which all of humanity should subscribe, Christianity not only informs many of the fundamentals of Western (European) culture, but as the handmaiden of colonization and enslavement, it also undergirds the construction of a hegemonic White identity (Dyer, 1997) which then further substantiates a consciousness of nationalism. Although it developed initially as a misappropriation of more ancient African religious traditions, namely Memphite theology and Gnosticism (Ashby, 2002), Christianity has been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history due explicitly to doctrinal persistence of the Manichean dualism of white versus black and the subsequent whitening of religious imagery, particularly that of Christ (Akbar, 1996; Dyer, 1997). In this context, particularly during the period of expansionism and colonialism, whiteness came to be projected and furthermore perceived in a manner consistent with both Manichean and Christian ideologies such that whiteness -- godliness, “the light,” moral, good -- represents everything that blackness -- darkness, damnation, immoral and evil-- is not (Blay, 2009a). Thus, the Manichaeism inherent to Christianity has been instrumental in the defining of what I will now

refer to as White nationalism -- “an expression of European nationalism which identifies caucasian [sic] racial characteristics with superiority and African racial characteristics with inferiority” (Ani, 1994, p. xxvi).

In his discussions of the psychology of the oppressed/colonized, Fanon (1963; 1967) used the term “Manichean” to describe the world of the oppressed/colonized. Of or relating to Manichaeism, “a doctrine based on the ideas of the Persian philosopher Manes, which saw the world as polarized between forces of absolute good and evil, symbolized in the oppositions of light and darkness, black and white” (Dyer, 1997, p. 225), a Manichean view is one that not only divides the world into dualities, but sees those dualities as irreconcilable oppositions:

Its logic is a categorical *either/or*, in which one of the terms is considered superfluous and unacceptable. Yet in reality, this duality of opposites in the Manichean outlook are interdependent. Each is defined in terms of its opposite and each derives its identity in opposition to the other. Yet in such a perspective, it is necessary to keep the line of demarcation quite clear or else the Manichean [world] collapses. (*Emphasis his*, Bulhan, 1985, p. 140)

In this way, the Manicheans conceived of darkness, or black, and things associated with it as evil, while light, or white, symbolized those things that were good.

While the Church formally denounced Manichaeism heresy because of its Babylonian (read: pagan) roots (“Manichaeism,” n.d.), “it has provided a moral framework, and not least a powerfully simple symbolism, that has profoundly marked Christian/ [European] thought” (Dyer, 1997, p. 225). “The conflict between Christ and Satan, the spiritual and the carnal, good and evil came finally to be expressed by the conflict between white and black, which underlines and synthesizes all others” (Bastide, 1968). Thus, within Christianity the Manichean order manifests in identical conceptualizations of good versus evil, pure versus diabolical, light versus dark, as well as the diametrically opposed God/Satan, man/woman, Christian (believer)/heathen (non-believer), Christianity/ paganism, and heaven/hell. Christianity’s analogous conceptual split between mind and body (“flesh”), having the latter as the more inferior and evil compartment, seemingly influenced what would later come to be known as dualism, a time-honored and highly influential philosophical position exemplified by the works of Hume, Kant, Heidegger, and Descartes (“Dualism,” n.d.). Christianity, by way of this

Manichean worldview, also influenced semantics, “the study of the way in which language expresses meaning” (Harrell, 1999, p. 15). While some of the literal definitions of “white” include “the achromatic color of maximum lightness; unsullied; pure; and snowy,” and “black” “without light; soiled, as from soot; dirty; evil; wicked; depressing; gloomy; angry; sullen; morbid; and absence of light” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2001), these definitions are best understood in the context of their moral symbolic meanings -- white dove of peace, White Christmas, white collar, and white lie as opposed to Black Death, blackball, blackmail, Black Market, and black eye.

While the impact of both Manichaeism and Christianity on European thought has been profound, the most powerful implications of this dualistic and hegemonic ordering has been on the construction of identities -- that of a superior White (European) identity as well as that of an inferior Black (African) identity. “The [European] Christian structure of feeling” -- whiteness associated with “the light,” or salvation, godliness and morality/blackness associated with darkness, or damnation, devilish and immorality -- “are realised [sic] in concrete images and stories ...[centered] on embodiment” and further mapped onto skin color difference (Dyer, 1997). Even though Christianity developed out of African religious precursors, once it became a tool of both European and White nationalism, Christ, the iconic measure of perfection, is (re)interpreted, (re)imagined, and (re)presented as not just white skinned, but extremely white; so white as to illuminate. Additionally, Christ is depicted with blonde hair and blue-eyes, eerily reflective of the proclaimed racial superiority of the Nordic race. “It was necessary that this man, the incarnation of God, be as far removed as possible from everything that could suggest darkness or blackness, even indirectly” (Bastide, 1968, 37).

If, Christ, the Son of God, is portrayed as White, the logical assumption is that God too is White. And if, as according to Christian doctrine, God made man in His image and gave him authority over all other creatures<sup>4</sup>, approximations of this whiteness when embodied by “man on earth” communicate not only a greater nearness to God, but humanity itself. In the Manichean sense, then, whiteness, embodied by humanity, communicates moral and physical superiority. Conversely, blackness, the absence of whiteness, communicates inhumanity, immorality, and physical inferiority, *divinely* subjected to the dominance of God and/or His earthly counterpart -- man (read: White man). In fact, the Christianity of the colonial order characterizes black skin not only as punishment from God via the “curse of Ham,”<sup>5</sup> but divine justification for the enslavement of Africans (Akbar, 1996; Bastide, 1968; Gomez, 2005). Here we witness the Manichaeism

inherent to Christianity materialize as one of the ideological antecedents of hierarchical racial demarcations that not only hold whiteness as superior and inherently good, and blackness as inferior and inherently evil, but *necessitate* the domination of those who embody blackness by those who embody whiteness. It is this Manichean/Christian worldview that would not only substantiate and proliferate global White nationalism, but also further validate European colonialism and the enslavement of African people.

As noted by Bulhan (1985), “the Manichean psychology is hard to counteract once it takes root in people, the environment, and the culture. Those who live it rely on it for their individual and collective identity” (p. 142). However, since the Manichean order situates the duality of opposites as interdependent, yet irreconcilable forces, the construction and humanization of individual and collective White (European) identities is dependent upon the destruction and dehumanization of individual and collective Black (African) identities. Thus it is conceivable that the enslavement and colonization of Africa and African people served not only functional, capitalistic needs, but those required for the maintenance of dominant individual and collective European (White) identities, or better stated, European/White nationalism. Just as Europeans would become materially dependent upon Africa for raw materials and Africans for physical labor, so too would they remain ideologically dependent upon Africa and Africans for their superior sense of self.

According to V.Y. Mudimbe (1988), colonization, characterized by “the domination of physical space, the reformation of *natives’* minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective” (*Emphasis his*, p. 2), organized and transformed Africa into a fundamentally European construct. Given the ideological foundations of European/White nationalism, of which colonialism was a necessary outcome, this “transformation” was predicated on Manichean imaginings of the religious, social, economic, and political ordering of the world. Three key figures in this nationalist project were the explorer (soon to be dubbed the anthropologist), the soldier (colonist) <sup>6</sup>, and the missionary (Mudimbe, 1988), all of whose seemingly distinct agendas were in fact perceptibly interdependent, and furthermore instrumental in the justification and espousal of European dominance.

One of the first steps in advancing the notion of European superiority in the minds of both Europeans and Africans was the explorer’s metaphorical construction of Africa as the “Dark Continent.” Described as an impenetrable and hostile environment whose balmy heat and rampant disease “invited mental

prostration and physical debility” (Jarosz, 1992, p. 106), Africa represented everything that the “Enlightened” West (Europe) was not. Thus, “logically,” any people able to survive in what was later termed the “White Man’s Grave” represented everything that Europeans were not -- barbaric, unintelligent, and powerless. With such oppositional characterizations in place, the explorer’s accounts of his travels and the “natives” he encountered provided the soldier with information that assisted in his ability to physically colonize and socially “civilize” the land and its people (Mudimbe, 1998). The missionary, relying on the accounts of both the explorer and the soldier, counterposed the Manichean/Christian metaphor of darkness as sin and ignorance with the “light” of Christian doctrine and epistemology (Jarosz, 1992). Because his whiteness positioned him nearer to God, the missionary considered himself the embodiment of supreme good; and because of his blackness, the missionary portrayed the African as the incarnation of evil (Bulhan, 1985). He thus embarked on the divinely ordained mission to “save the natives’ souls” (Jaroz, 1992; Mudimbe, 1998).

Each of these figures’ accounts of their experiences with Africa and her people constituted a type of knowledge and discourse about Africa and her people (Mudimbe, 1988). Moreover, each of these figures’ knowledge and discourse constituted a type of *power over*<sup>7</sup> the objects of which they were knowledgeable (Mudimbe, 1988). In this way, those who had gained power by way of their embodiment of God and acquisition of knowledge -- Europeans -- had a *divine responsibility* to choose for those who were ungodly and ignorant -- Africans -- thus legitimatizing, precipitating and further maintaining the colonization of Africa by Europe and the enslavement of Africans by Europeans. Colonization and enslavement thus served to actualize European nationalism and came to symbolize and solidify a unity in European consciousness (Mudimbe, 1988) that would influence the contact and interaction of cultures (read: races) for centuries to come.

Most important to note about the history of White nationalism is that insofar as it espoused the “natural” and *divine* superiority of Whites, and ultimately constructed a system of Black exploitation for the purposes of maintaining and defending a system of White wealth, power and privilege, it provided the *ideological* justification for the systematic and systemic racial subjugation that would come to be known as global White supremacy. In this regard then, we should neither take our definitional nor conceptual understanding of the term “ideology” for granted. Beyond “a system of beliefs or theories...held

by an individual or a group” (American Heritage Dictionary New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, 2005),

ideology is how the existing ensemble of social relations represents itself to individuals; *it is the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself*. These representations serve to constrain us (necessarily); they establish fixed places for us to occupy that work to guarantee coherent social actions over time. Ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation *to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us in the place we ought to have* (*Emphasis mine*, Nichols, 1981, 1).

Thus, as an ideology, global White supremacy is exceptionally potent, particularly as it attempts to create an “image of itself in order to perpetuate itself.” Insofar as the superior European/White identity was constructed on Manichean grounds, Europeans/Whites would be continually dependant not only upon the “construction” of Africans/Blacks as inferior (Blay, 2009a), but furthermore in the projection of corroborating imagery. As the next section examines, not only did Europeans create images to substantiate their falsified and inflated sense of self, but in form true to their capitalistically exploitative nature, they “dressed-up” commodities with these images, thus profiting from their marketing and sale.

## **Commodity Racism: Marketing and Selling the White Ideal**

At the same time that European colonialists were creating and instituting color hierarchies vis a vis Manicheanism/Christianity, they were also taking additional measures to assert the power “inherent” to whiteness. Commodities, with their ability to produce forms of knowledge, subjectivity, identity and consciousness (Burke, 1996), represented vehicles through which the colonial order was able to not only gain capital, but also advance both its White nationalist agenda and its “civilizing mission.” Through commodities, namely soap, Europeans positioned and furthermore advertised whiteness as the color of civilization.

In 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe,

baths were only taken as a cure for gout, rheumatism, and ‘to amend ...cold legs against the winter.’...The idea of regularly washing...the body even in a basin or hip-bath in the home was alien to these years. Instead [Europeans] rubbed themselves down with a coarse cloth, with a daubing of rose water” (Williams, 1957, 13).

This aversion to bathing, a characteristically European proclivity, continued through the Elizabethan era. If Queen Elizabeth I was *distinguished* as bathing “regularly every month whether she needed it or not” (McClintock, 1995, 210), the regularity with which the general public bathed was assuredly even less frequent. Thus, soaps were the cheapest of all toiletries sold at the time (Williams, 1957). However, with the rise of colonialism (imperialism) and the spread of European/White nationalism, European culture became obsessed with cleanliness. Given the centrality, if not inescapability, of African (Black) representation to the construction of White identity, particularly in the context of European/White nationalism, the cleanliness associated with Whiteness relied upon the projection of dirtiness as inherent to Blackness. Despite the fact that according to many early accounts of European explorations into Africa<sup>8</sup> its inhabitants were very concerned with cleanliness in everyday personal hygiene, using “native soaps” to clean the body and palm oil, lard, or shea butter “to anoint” it, *at least twice daily* (Daniell, 1856); or that oddly enough, in its whiteness, it is White (not Black) skin that makes the presence of dirt unmistakably apparent, countless European writers have associated Africans (Blacks) with dirt -- namely with the dirt that comes out of the body (the racist perception that they smell) (Dyer, 1997). Lest they themselves be associated with blackness, and all of the connotations it assumed, Europeans became invested in the process of cleansing the skin, thus furthering anchoring the projected superiority of whiteness. In this way, soap became an agent of the colonial agenda itself. It is not surprising then that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, soap, once the cheapest of all European toiletries, had soon become one of the most highly valued commodities of the time.

What the colonialists found in soap was the consummate logo for the colonial agenda -- the projected European (White) values of Christian virtue (“being *washed* in the blood of the lamb”) and *divine responsibility* for the “uncivilized” (“*washing* and clothing the savage”) -- “could [both] be marvelously embodied in a single household commodity” (McClintock, 1995, 208). Arguably, however, Europeans’ use of soap as a mechanism through which

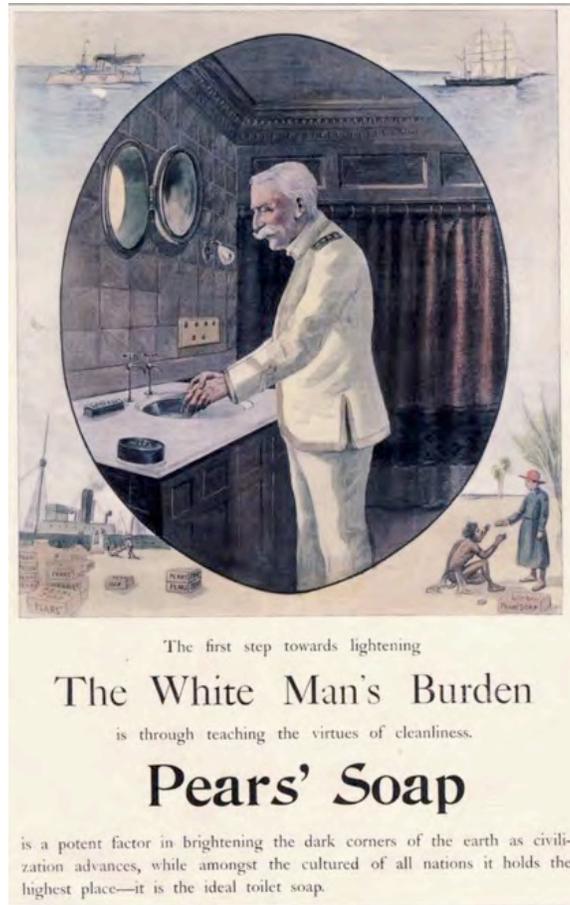
to “civilize the natives” obscured their actual intent, which was to profit from its trade and sale. European colonialists began to import soap into its colonies in record numbers. Despite popular belief, Africans did not readily welcome colonization, “civilization” nor European commodities. In fact, the history of African-European trade includes a long history of African resistance to European attempts to undervalue their economies by transporting useless goods into the colonies in exchange for much more valuable goods like gold, palm oil (necessary for the production of soap) and ivory. Rather than agreeably trade with Europeans, Africans reportedly either discarded their goods, walked away with them, refused trade altogether or demanded that Europeans present cargo that was of equal or higher value (McClintock, 1995). As would be expected, colonialists often took Africans’ refusal “to show due respect” to their goods as contempt and responded with violence, often killing African carriers for their derision (McClintock, 1995). Thus, it was through violence that Europeans impressed the value of their goods upon Africans. Soap, a commodity that was once of little value in Europe, when inscribed as a marker of civilization and a commodity worth killing over, became a highly valued commodity in both Europe and its colonies.

McClintock (1995) notes that this newfound European reliance on commodities to address the “condition” and “needs” of the “natives” represents a shift from scientific racism to what she terms “commodity racism” (33). Whereas in the name of science, Europeans relied on studies of skin color, facial structure and genitalia to construct classifications of human types, provide prescriptions for human behavior and subsequently establish social hierarchies based upon degree of humanity, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this narrative of European superiority was converted into “mass produced *consumer spectacles*” (*Emphasis hers*, McClintock, 1995, 33). The civilization and progress that was once specific to middle class Europeans, would now be available through the purchase and use of commodities.

No place is the shift from scientific racism to commodity racism more apparent than in the advertising of commodities. Advertisers expressed the European/White nationalist ideology of cultural and racial superiority thorough the display of commodities. Commodities were not just things to be bought and sold, but with the persuasive imagery used to market them, they further represented ideas and attitudes to be consumed as well. In its mission to *domesticate* the “uncivilized,” the colonial order began plastering intimate scenes of domesticity (children bathing, men shaving, etc.) in public arenas, thus giving consumers access to the most private of spaces – the Victorian bathroom – the

space within which soap's "magical, fetish powers" would come to life (McClintock, 1995, 207).

Pear's Transparent Soap's 19<sup>th</sup> century advertising campaign best exemplifies the extent to which soap, as an agent of the colonial mission, was literally commissioned to carry out Europe's civilizing duties. In its advertisements, consumers bared witness to soap's "magical, fetish powers" – the power to not only keep the European (colonial) body pure, but to wash black skin white. In 1899, the same year that Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" first appeared in *McClure's Magazine* (Merriam, 1978), so too did a Pear's soap advertisement (Illustration 1) linking "The White Man's Burden" to cleanliness (McClintock, 1995). Through an enlarged window, the viewer is privileged to watch a distinguished-looking British captain, with a head full of white hair and a white moustache, dressed in an impeccably white uniform, wash his hands. Surrounding the window's view, the viewer is introduced to the "bigger picture." At the top of the ad, on both the left and right, we see images of sailing ships, one of which is presumably the captain's ship. At the bottom of the ad to the left is an image of a ship docked at port, surrounded by large containers of Pear's soap. To the right, we see a seemingly grateful dark skinned "native" kneeling down to receive his ration of soap in the same way that an "obedient" worshipper might kneel before a priest, or a domesticated animal might kneel before its master.



(Illustration 1) Advertisement for Pear's Soap, 1899 ([www.advertisingarchives.co.uk](http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk))

The ad's caption reads:

The first step towards lightening The White Man's Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pear's Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place -- it is the ideal toilet soap.

Through its imagery, wording, and connection to Kipling's poem, the advertisement implies that not only does using Pear's Soap purify and protect the White man's body whilst in contact with the Black (read: dirty) natives, but as he shares the soap with the natives, it further "lightens" his burden and thus helps him to "[brighten] the dark corners of the earth" and advance civilization.

In an 1875 ad for Pear's soap (Illustration 2), the juxtaposition of "light" (civilized) and "dark" ("uncivilized") is more blatant, making the presumed "magical powers" of soap more readily comprehensible. Amidst the wording of an endorsement "**I have found PEAR'S SOAP matchless for the Hands and Complexion,**" the viewer is again given access into the private, Victorian bathroom. In the left frame (which represents the "before"), a little Black boy sits in the bath, gazing at the water with a look of sheer amazement on his face, which suggests that bathing is a new experience for him. A little White boy, wearing a white apron, which suggests that he was preparing to engage in "dirty work," extends his magic tool - a bar of Pear's soap. The manner in which the White boy shows the soap to the Black boy again suggests that this is the Black child's introduction to bathing. In the right frame (which represents the "after"), as the Black boy stands up, the White boy shows him his "new" image in the mirror, which, by the smile and look on his face, is very much pleasing to the Black child. Magically, the Black boy's body has become white, but his face remains black. The message? As the part of the body that more often than not carries the immutable signs of phenotypical/racial categorization, one's face (read: race) cannot be changed, not even with the magic of Pear's soap. All in all still, the viewer realizes that it is through the White boy, a smaller and younger version of the White man, that the Black boy becomes "domesticated," thus reinforcing Whites' position as active agents towards civilization while Blacks remain passive recipients of their "kindness" and "goodwill."



(Illustration 2) Advertisement for Pear's Soap, 1875 ([www.advertisingarchives.co.uk](http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk))

Identical to the dependence of inflated White identities on maligned Black identities, the projection of White skin as immaculately clean depended upon imaginings of Black skin as filthily dirty. Moreover, in the case of soap, the product's supreme cleansing abilities would only be realized in its capacity to wash the dirtiest of dirt -- black skin -- clean. In the simplicity of the messages, commodity racism, unlike its ideological predecessor scientific racism, extended its reach beyond the privileged and educated. Whereas one needed to either be literate, if not highly educated in order to "benefit" from and further advance scientific racism, one need only have sight to understand and further endorse the messages being marketed by commodity racism. In linking racist imagery with everyday domestic commodities, products that most everyone wanted, needed, or used, White nationalist motifs made their way into homes all over the world. Seemingly unassuming and passive when compared to the scientific racism of the Enlightenment, commodity racism was in many ways more accessible and thus more persuasive than scientific racism. Through the historically repetitive

portrayal of social power relations via “popular” imagery, ideas about the superiority of Whites and the inferiority of Blacks eventually become seen as simple, taken-for-granted truths, among Europeans and Africans alike.

## **Skin Bleaching and Commodified Whiteness: The Legacy Continues**

As we begin to connect the dots, so to speak, and link the legacy of global White supremacy vis a vis European/White nationalism and commodity racism to the contemporary skin bleaching phenomenon, it is important to note that the history of skin bleaching via the use of whitening commodities began with Europeans themselves. Christianity, as it helped to construct the ideological blueprint through which inflated European (White) identities were constructed and furthermore enacted, likewise informed the notion of *true* whiteness (Godliness) as unattainable. Christ is “what one should aspire to be like and yet also what one can never be. This sets up a dynamic of aspiration, of striving to be” (Dyer, 1997, 17). Undoubtedly, the intended implications of “striving to be” are Christian morals and values and Christ-like behavior, however, the manifested ideological implications are efforts to make white skin appear whiter than it is naturally. Consequently, much of the history of European aesthetic practices is a history of whitening the skin.

Whiteness, when considered in the context of European/White nationalism, contributed to a conceptualization of power as the ability to act or do from a position of advantage and thus designated those who embodied whiteness as those who had access to power (Blay, 2009a). When this particular reality was gendered, European women, in their physical capacity to produce future generations, represented the “bearers of whiteness” (Dyer, 1997, 74); and historically, their whiteness communicated their ability to continue and maintain the purity of the race. European women who exhibited the whitest of skins thus represented the most desirable mates and as such, they stood to benefit from the display of an exceedingly white appearance more so than European men. It is not surprising then that those aesthetic practices related to the whiteness of skin were employed primarily by European women. As not only the explicit ideal, but the feminine aesthetic ideal, whiteness impacted nineteenth century women in ways similar to how it continues to impact women of all races and culture; and so began cosmetic efforts to whiten the skin.

Though there are reports of English women using wheat powder, also referred to as blanchet, to blanch their faces and Italian women using “a great variety of beautifying waters, paints, and plasters for their faces” (Williams, 1957, 2), it was not until Queen Elizabeth I’s reign that cosmetics and whitening commodities gained popularity among European women (Gunn, 1973). As the personification of the ideal of beauty characteristic of the time period, “no single individual has ever exerted such an influence on the fashions and beauty of a period” (Gunn, 1973, 73). Elizabeth’s “toilet”<sup>9</sup> included an entire series of preparations, the base of which was white powder. As a contrast to her remarkably pale skin and to further simulate a youthfully translucent complexion, Elizabeth reportedly painted artificial veins on her forehead (Brownmiller, 1984; Gunn, 1973). Her pale complexion was the inspiration for what would come to be known as the Elizabethan ideal of beauty. It is not surprising then that during the Elizabethan era, a large majority of European women coated their skins with whitening products (powders, paints, whitening lotions/creams) containing such toxic compounds as ceruse, lye, and ammonia (Peiss, 1998; Williams, 1957). American women later “inherited” this European tradition of whitening. Brought to the colonies by English immigrants, many of the formulas and recipes employed by European women found immense popularity among American women (Peiss, 1998). In fact, skin whiteners remained the most popular cosmetic throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries (Peiss, 1998; Thomas, 2008). American women, irrespective of class or age, used a variety of products known generically as “lily white, white wash and white cosmetic” in efforts to achieve the “ideal face,” which in the American context not only “asserted bourgeois refinement” but also racial privilege (Peiss, 1998, 40). And similar to the commoditization of soap in Europe and its colonies, with the increased popularity of skin whitening commodities came increased profitability.

But with presumed benefits came substantial risks. In Europe, the most “successful” whitening formulas contained ceruse, or white lead, which not only allowed for the appearance of matte white skin but further had a toxic effect on its wearers, including shortness of breath, dizziness, blindness and even paralysis (Dyer, 1997; Gunn, 1973; Peiss, 1998; Williams, 1957). In America, by the end of the Civil war, medical case records of women applying dangerous lead-based whitening lotions surfaced (Peiss, 1998). Lead (ceruse) was not the only dangerous cosmetic to be employed by European and American women. Eating arsenic wafers, which by virtue of their toxicity produced the pale appearance so desired, was also popular (Brownmiller, 1984). Most of the cosmetics sold on the American market contained not only lead and arsenic, but also mercury (Peiss, 1998).

Although the whitened face was inline with the projected ideal of the times, women's use of "artifices" was met with much public disdain. Invoking the biblical motifs of Eve and Jezebel<sup>10</sup>, early Christian moralists, European and American alike, likened painting to idolatry and thus urged women to avoid all forms of artifice in service of virtue, purity, sexual chastity and natural beauty (Peiss, 1998). Popular perceptions of the time assumed that the "painted woman," as she was called, was a harlot or prostitute "who brazenly advertised her immoral profession" as a way to attract customers (Peiss, 1998, 27). Furthermore, public criticism of men who whitened their skin was particularly scathing, regarding them effeminate and accusing them of falling to the vanity endemic to women (Gunn, 1973; Tseelon, 1995). Consequently, as much as they were able to, those who whitened concealed their practice for fear of public ridicule. The great lengths to which many Europeans went to conceal their use of whitening cosmetics often thwarted attempts at medical treatment.

This discussion of the White ideal bears interesting parallel to the contemporary skin bleaching phenomenon. From research conducted in Africa in particular, we learn that skin bleaching is practiced disproportionately among female populations (Baxter, 2000; Blay, 2007; 2009a; 2009b; Delle, 2001; Lewis, Robkin, Gaska & Njoki, 2010; Pitche, Kombate & Tchangai-Walla, 2005; Thomas, 2008). In their exploration of skin bleaching among Tanzanian women, Lewis et al (2010) discovered six primary reasons motivating the practice: (1) to remove pimples, rashes, and skin disease, (2) to have soft skin, (3) to be white, 'beautiful' and more European looking, (4) to remove the adverse affects of extending skin bleaching use on the body, (5) to satisfy ones partner and/or attract mates of the opposite sex, (6) to satisfy/impress peers, and (7) feel clean and fresh. According to the investigators, these skin bleaching motivation themes speak directly to participants' desire to obtain the approval of others and to be seen as beautiful, with their conceptualizations and standards for beauty reflecting "Eurocentric beauty ideals" (Lewis et al, 2010). In an extensive study of skin bleaching in Ghana, Blay (2007) found that Ghanaian women engage in the practice for a variety of reasons, the most prominent of which were: (1) to counteract the effects of the sun; (2) to appear clean; (3) to be and appear beautiful; (4) to attract attention and/or potential mates; (5) to appear sophisticated and/or modern; and (6) to gain and/or maintain capital, both economic and social. Furthermore, in a similar study investigating the relationship between gender, skin bleaching, light skin, and beauty among Ghanaian women who bleach, Blay (2009b) found that light (relatively white) skin as gained through skin bleaching serves many functions: it (1) allows access to particular social networks; (2) facilitates the performance of particular social identities; (3)

enables the performance of “modernity;” (4) attracts attention; (5) ignites heterosexual (male) desire; and (6) boosts marriageability/ “husband maintenance.” In this context, the act of skin bleaching allows participants access to social capital (Blay, 2009b). In both studies, Blay argues that it is the symbolism and consequent functionality of light skin that motivates the practice insofar as it approximates, emulates, and/or reflects white-/Whiteness and its assigned/presumed value. When examined in comparison with the historical practice of skin whitening among European and early American women, we see that in choosing to bleach the skin, both African and European/American seem to have responded not only to the projected White ideals of beauty and femininity, but in as much as the use of whitening products conferred upon them desirability among men, and thus potentially increased their marriageability, they seem to have responded to societal gender roles and expectations – that women *should* become wives and mothers.

Similar to the European outcry against the use of “artifice,” skin bleaching in Africa engenders public disdain. As was the case in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, in Africa, skin bleaching is popularly regarded the practice of prostitutes (Dorkenoo, 1990; Odoi, 1991). In and by the media, women who bleach are often portrayed as naïve, irrational and gullible, and have been chastised and ridiculed. They have been “diagnosed” with low self-esteem, self-hate, and colonial mentalities (Bancroft-Hinchey, 2001; Fuller-Dappah, 2004; Chisholm, 2001; Lewis, 2002; Odoi, 1991; Tuma, 2010; White, 2004). Their engagement in skin bleaching has been said to be reflective of their moral character and inner strength (Dzide, 1997). One Ghanaian journalist decried skin bleaching “an insult to the dignity of the Black race in general and the African in particular,” and thus accused women who bleach of betraying their culture (“Skin Bleaching,” 1999). As was the case among Elizabethan European women, although they are willing to suffer pain, risk physical damage to their skin and further compromise their general health, rather than endure public ridicule and/or have their characters questioned, many African women attempt to conceal their practices. And in the same ways that European and American men who bleached were regarded effeminate, African men who bleach are also seen as effeminate and often assumed homosexual (Blay, 2007). It seems then that in addition to notions of whiteness as ideal and whiteness as feminine ideal, European aesthetic/cosmetic practices and popular perceptions about those practices were among the ideas and values that were introduced to Africa via colonialism.

Having discussed the similarities between the skin bleaching phenomena in Europe, America, and Africa, one critical dissimilarity deserves mention and

that is the manner in which the sale of whitening chemicals has been regulated in Europe, America, and Africa. During the Elizabethan era, once it became clear that many of the active agents used to whiten the skin were indeed toxic and life threatening, measures were employed to attempt prohibition. As early as 1724, an English Act provided for the inspection of all drugs, medicines, and preparations sold within a seven-mile radius of London (Williams, 1957). The act authorized officials to “enter any shop, inspect goods and order those which did not come up to their standards to be destroyed. Although cosmetics were not specifically mentioned in the Act, many of the ingredients used in their preparation most certainly came within its terms” (Williams, 1957, 68). Fast forward 277 years to January 2001 and hydroquinone, one of the primary active agents found in contemporary skin bleaching products, is banned from over-the-counter cosmetics in the European Union (Kooyers & Westerhof, 2006). Currently in the United States, hydroquinone cannot be obtained in percentages above 2% without a prescription; and by prescription, the highest percentage legally available is 4% (Engasser and Maibach, 1981). It should be noted that in 2006, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began debating a ban similar to that enacted in Europe (Stoppler, 2006). To date, however, no such ban is in effect. Conversely, although several African countries have legislated bans against the manufacture, import, and sale of certain bleaching agents/products, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, the Gambia, and Ghana to name a few, the issue is one of enforcement as skin bleaching products are readily available throughout the continent. Worse still is that the manufactured skin bleaches found in Africa contain potentially lethal doses of substances like hydroquinone (between 4% and 25%), corticosteroids<sup>11</sup>, mercury iodide<sup>12</sup>, and various additional caustic agents (Mahe, Ly, Aymard & Dangou, 2003). Manufactured primarily in European and Asian countries, places where many of the active bleaching agents are banned from sale, Africa has thus become a proverbial dumping ground yet a thriving market for products deemed dangerous if not lethal. Many companies manufacture bleaching products almost exclusively for African populations.

Mire (2001) notes that the perception of skin bleaching as an exclusively Black problem had informed the intervention, or lack thereof, of the global medical community, which in her eyes constitutes “racialized medicine.” According to Mire, while previous research found that even in percentages of 2%, prolonged absorption of hydroquinone caused extreme skin damage among dark-skinned Africans, because no complications from hydroquinone use had been reported among White populations, who, according to two of the world’s leading dermatologists, Findlay and DeBeer, were the biggest users of skin bleaching agents at the time (1980s), the medical, pharmaceutical, and cosmetic industries

saw no justifiable need to ban the product (Mire, 2001). For Mire, the global medical community thus asserted the corporeal superiority of Whites. It should be noted that the impetus to finally legislate the ban on hydroquinone in the European Union was precipitated by results of animal studies linking hydroquinone to cancer (Kooyers & Westerhof, 2006). Despite the fact that the life-threatening effects of even small amounts of hydroquinone have been reported among African populations, since as early as 1980, it took animal testing to convince Europeans that hydroquinone is in fact a dangerous substance. Indeed, the global medical community operates in tandem with global White supremacy – White bodies have value and require protection, Black bodies are of no value and are not deserving of defense. Reminiscent of colonization and enslavement, so long as the potential to amass White wealth exists, Black bodies are worthy of exploit, even if ultimately, it leads to death.

### *Commodity Racism in Africa: The Case of Ghana*

Another manner in which the European/White nationalist legacy continues to impact African realities is in the transmission of commodity racism. Although the colonial regime may have physically left African soil, their legacy of colonial hegemonic ideologies remained. Through commodity racism, Europeans continued to assert the power “inherent” to whiteness. First attempting to instill within the psyche of its colonized subjects notions about their inherent inferiority as evidenced by their blackness (read: dirtiness), the colonial order then attempted to exploit the very psyche it created, as well as the markets it sought to dominate, by importing and further promoting commodities (soap, laundry detergent, powder, cosmetics and skin bleaching agents) that promised miraculous transformations -- from dirty to clean, from dark to light. Commodities “were by their very nature about the transformation of the ‘traditional’ African self into something the advertisers argued would be more commensurate with ‘modern’ society” (Burke, 1996, 159). Here I will use examples of advertisements featured in *The Sunday Mirror*, Ghana’s most popular women’s weekly, to illustrate the continuation of commodity racism.

In pre-independence Ghana (1955-1957), *The Sunday Mirror* featured countless advertisements for various cleansing agents, namely bathing soaps, laundry detergents, and toothpaste. Nearly all of the advertisements referred to whiteness in their claims about the product’s ability to make things (clothes and teeth) and people clean. With the tagline reading, “**Buy Lux Toilet Soap today – the white soap with the lovely perfume,**” one advertisement for Lux Toilet Soap

not only highlights that the soap itself is white, but further plays into European perceptions of African bodily odor by purporting that the soap will garner a more attractive smell. Another ad for Surf laundry detergent actually provides its viewers pictorial instructions on how to use the product to wash clothes (Illustration 3). And given that the viewers are assumed to not have any experience in clothes washing, evidence of their inherent “uncivilization,” the advertisers maximize on this presumed ignorance by announcing that their product is “magical” as the headline reads “**It’s New! It’s Magic! Surf washes clothes with Magic Power!**” The ad further instructs that Surf can be used safely on both whites and coloreds. It is no wonder then that in the 1950s, many Ghanaians reportedly used laundry detergent as bathing soap as it was an often cheaper alternative to many of the available imported soaps<sup>13</sup>.



(Illustration 3) Advertisement for Surf  
(*The Sunday Mirror*, 1955, no. 113)

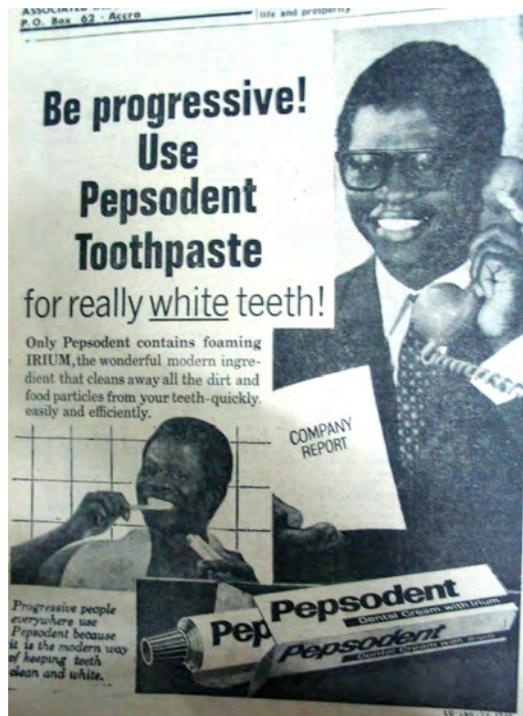
In newly independent Ghana (1957-1970), “modernity” became the new code for “civilization” and advertisements begin to feature key figures as seemingly engaged in modern activities. Now ads for Lux soap feature African subjects, both male and female, with straightened hair bathing in bathtubs (Illustrations 4 and 5). One ad for Pepsodent toothpaste depicts a dark-skinned African as a Western-dressed businessman talking on a telephone, a device that was not yet readily accessible in newly independent Ghana (Illustration 6). The tagline “**Progressive people everywhere use Pepsodent because it is the modern way of keeping teeth clean and white**” makes the underlying message even clearer. These ads communicated that Africans could, or rather should, change their less civilized ways. Modernity, and perhaps even whiteness, could be accessed through the purchase and use of commodities.



(Illustration 4)  
Advertisement for Lux Toilet Soap  
(*The Sunday Mirror*, 1958, no. 236)



(Illustration 5)  
Advertisement for Lux Toilet Soap  
(*The Sunday Mirror*, 1958, no. 237)



(Illustration 6) Advertisement for Pepsodent Toothpaste  
(*The Sunday Mirror*, 1968, no. 801)

Years later, we begin to see advertisements for cosmetics, namely white face powder and skin bleaching creams. In an ad for Snowfire Cosmetics (Illustration 7), we see the key figure, a relatively light-skinned African woman, through a Victorian-style mirror. With a large headline, “**Be modern with Snowfire Luxury Cosmetics,**” the ad informs its viewer “**The modern girl uses Snowfire.**” Snowfire promotes itself as an affordable “luxury” that provides “magic beauty,” somehow implying that in the absence of the powder, the viewer is neither “modern” nor “beautiful.” Although it claims to be “specially blended to fit every complexion,” Snowfire, like many other cosmetics of the time, came only in shades suitable for European and/or very “fair” complexions. Thus, African women using Snowfire would have to wear relatively white faces in order to fit into this conceptualization of “beauty.” The first skin bleaching ad to appear in the *The Sunday Mirror* on September 3, 1967 was for a product called Colibri Snow Cream. Between the years 1967 and 1971, ads for nine different types of

bleaching creams were displayed on the newspaper's pages. Early ads described the products as cleansers that had the ability to unclog pores, reduce and prevent bumps while also removing "discolorations." As time went on, and bleaching creams gained popularity, we see no association with cleansing or acne prevention/treatment as the ads blatantly boast "smoother," "lighter," "softer," "lovelier" skin. An ad for Venus (Illustration 8), "**The ideal Skin Lightening Cream for Extra Beauty**," depicts a white statue of the Greek goddess juxtaposed to the key figure, an African woman who has relatively light skin, presumably due to her use of the cream. Through a 1971 advertisement for Satina (Illustration 9), we see the re-emergence of the "before and after" motif. Here we witness the transformation of an African woman, from dark-skinned to relatively light-skinned, right before our eyes through a progression of images, the lightest of which appears at the forefront. The caption encourages the potential customer to "**Buy Satina today. Then watch the miracle of light skin beauty unfold.**" Though these ads may appear unashamedly blatant by today's standards, combined with the long history of associating commodified whiteness with civilization, modernity, femininity, and beauty, at the time they were not perceived as any more direct than the any of the other ads for soaps, laundry detergents, and cosmetics.<sup>14</sup>



(Illustration 7) Advertisement for Snowfire Luxury Cosmetics  
(*The Sunday Mirror*, 1963, no. 491)



(Illustration 8) Advertisement for Venus”  
(*The Mirror*, 1971, no. 917)



(Illustration 9) Advertisement for Satina Skin  
Tone Cream (*The Sunday Mirror*, 1968, no.  
754)

Unfortunately, little has changed in the projected connection between whiteness and female beauty in Ghana, or Africa for that matter, nor has the manner of advertising skin bleaching products. One magazine, *Amina*, written in French, published in Paris, and marketed throughout West Africa, promotes itself as “Le Magazine de la Femme Africaine” (The African Woman’s Magazine). At first glance, given the aesthetic qualities of the cover models, namely their relatively dark skin, one might assume that *Amina* supports a different ideal of female beauty than do other popular “women’s magazines.” Surprisingly, however, content analysis of the December 2006 edition reveals that out of a total of 77 advertisements featured in the magazine, 41% (n=18) are for skin bleaching products. As was the case with ads of the colonial past, one need not be literate, or in this case fluent in French, to understand the messages being sent to the readers of *Amina*. If light skin signifies beauty, and products symbolize the means through which to attain beauty, ads coupling relatively lighter skinned, if not

seemingly bi-racial and/or non-African descended women with products, send the message that it is through the featured products that the key figures attained their beauty; and if the viewer desires the kind of beauty the key figures represent, then they too should use the featured products.

An interesting characteristic of this genre of bleaching ads is the variety of techniques employed to promote the products. One ad (Illustration 10), using both English and French, promotes its product as an “**Exclusive Whitenizer.**” Another product superimposes an image of what appears to be milk and depicts the key figure as if she is bathing/basking in it (Illustration 11). In another ad (Illustration 12), we see a resurrection of the classic “before and after” imagery, however, this “new” adaptation is less “convincing” as the ad portrays images that are clearly not “true” before and after pictures -- the “before” picture is the same as the “after,” only the brightness of the lighting has been adjusted. However, in *Black Beauty*, a magazine published in the UK and sold in West Africa, more convincing “before and after” imagery is presented (Illustration 13). This ad for a “**revolutionary scientific advanced and natural home care programme [sic]**” features the most convincing “before and after” pictures that I have seen to date – in the before image, a very dark skinned woman; in the after, the same woman is shown with a significantly lighter complexion. Through its presumed effectiveness, the manufacturer claims that its product is capable of “**Healing the wounds of time.**”



(Illustration 10)  
 Ad for Fair & White Exclusive Whitenizer  
 (Amina: *Le Magazine de la Femme Africaine*,  
 2006, no. 440)



(Illustration 11) Ad for Bel Dam  
 (Amina: *Le Magazine de la Femme Africaine*,  
 2003, no. 399)



(Illustration 12) Ad for 21 days  
 (Amina: *Le Magazine de la Femme Africaine*,  
 2003, no. 399)



(Illustration 13)  
 "Healing the wounds of time"  
 (*Black Beauty*, 2005, August/September)

In addition to magazine advertisements, in contemporary Africa, advertisements are aired on local television and radio stations and are also strategically positioned throughout urban areas and along major thoroughfares in the form of 60ft billboards. In Ghana, most of the bill boarding advertisements (Illustrations 14-23) depict a woman baring most of her skin, positioned next to a series of products with captioning that generally indicates that her “nice” skin was gained through the use of the products. Two particular advertisements, one for Plubel (“... **and he only has eyes for her**”), and the other for G& G (“**Let your Skin do the Talking**”), connect the sexual desirability associated with light skin to the effectiveness of the products (Illustrations 17 and 19). Incidentally, Illustrations 22 and 23 depict advertising displayed on the wall surrounding the National Cultural Center in Kumasi. One must indeed question the predominant message being sent to both Ghanaians as well as outside visitors when the entrance to the National Cultural Center displays images of a plethora of skin lightening agents with the wording “**Our Cultural Heritage**” as the heading.



(Illustration 14) Billboard for Body White, Achimota Circle, Accra



(Illustration 15) Billboard for Sivoderm, Osu, Accra



**(Illustration 16) Billboard for Skin Light,  
Liberation Road, Accra**



**(Illustration 17) Billboard for Plubel,  
Makola Market, Accra**



**(Illustration 18) Billboard for  
Pharmaderm,  
Jamestown, Accra**



**(Illustration 19) Billboard for Plubel,  
Tettehquarshie Circle, Accra**



(Illustration 20)  
Billboard for Clear Essence,  
Tettehquarshie Circle, Accra



(Illustration 21) Billboard for G&G,  
Kejetia Market, Kumasi



(Illustration 22) Advertising for Various  
Products,  
National Cultural Center, Kumasi



(Illustration 23) Advertisement for Skin Light,  
National Cultural Center, Kumasi

As its functionary, commodity racism promoted the ideology of White nationalism – the “natural,” if not *divine* superiority of the White race. In their equation of whiteness with all things “civilized,” “clean,” “modern,” “luxurious,” “beautiful,” “feminine” and “desirable,” advertisements reinforced well-established notions of whiteness as a symbol of respectability and social power, only now, through consumerism, Africans would be able to change their circumstances and seemingly gain access to varying degrees of that respect and power. We see here that much of European manufacturer’s success in marketing

and consequently selling their products to Africans was predicated upon European (colonial) promotion of idealized whiteness.

## Conclusion

Skin bleaching is a widespread global phenomenon. 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 historically subjected to white domination, colonization, and enslavement, have internalized projected notions that the basis of their inferior condition is their skin color. In this context, skin bleaching would manifest as the seemingly most "logical" method through which to approximate the White ideal and thus empower oneself. As the political offshoot of European/White nationalism, global White supremacy continually creates an image of itself in order to perpetuate itself, and thus continues to employ and rely upon the fabrication and projection of imagery to forcibly convince the masses, particularly those oppressed under its systemic exploitation, that the White ideal is in fact the human ideal.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I define colorism as a system of hierarchical perceptions of value and discriminatory treatment based upon skin tone. Alice Walker first coined the term "colorism" in her essay, "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" in *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). In her discussion of the relationships between what she refers to as "black black women" and "light-skinned black women," she states that "unless the question of Colorism – in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color – is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black 'sisterhoods' we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us" (290-291).

<sup>2</sup> Two definitions of White supremacy have been useful in my development of this particular definition. The Challenging White Supremacy Workshop (CWS) organizers (<http://www.cwsworkshop.org>) define White supremacy as “an historically-based, institutionally-perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.” African American behavioral scientist and psychiatrist, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing (1991) defines racism/white supremacy as “the local and global power system and dynamic, structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined, which consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought, speech, action and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war), for the ultimate purpose of white genetic survival and to prevent white genetic annihilation on planet Earth - a planet upon which the vast majority of people are classified as nonwhite (black, brown, red and yellow) by white skinned people, and all of the nonwhite people are genetically dominant (in terms of skin coloration) compared to the genetic recessive white skin people” (2).

<sup>3</sup> I take this definition of European nationalism from African-centered cultural scientist Marimba Ani. In her groundbreaking text, *Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (1994), she defines nationalism as an “ideological commitment to the perpetual advancement, and defense of a cultural, political, racial entity and a way of life” (xxvi). She further defines European nationalism as “all forms of thought and behavior which promote European Hegemony/global white supremacy” (xxvi).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:26-27 “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image...” (The Holy Bible, King James Version)

<sup>5</sup> The “curse of Ham” refers to the curse that Noah placed upon his youngest son, Ham after he saw Noah naked because of drunkenness in his tent. “And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (*The Holy Bible*, King James Version, Genesis 9: 24-25). Although Caanan is the son of Ham, this “curse” has come to be known as the “curse of Ham,” and while the Bible makes no reference to skin color, given this Manichean context, blackness as a curse is “logical.”

<sup>6</sup> Though both agents of the colonial agenda, Mudimbe (1988) makes a distinction between the colonist (those settling a region) and the colonialists (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority), a contrast important to note in this context.

<sup>7</sup> Weber’s definition of power is instructive to understanding the European/White nationalist agenda. Weber defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Einsensstadt, 1968, 15)

<sup>8</sup> See Marees's *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, Romer's *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)*, and Daniell's (1856) *On the Ethnography of Akkrah and Adampe, Gold Coast, Western Africa*.

<sup>9</sup> Defined during the period as "the act or process of dressing or grooming oneself" (*The Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Eve -- who when presented to Adam by God was "adorned with jewellery [sic] and plaited hair" (Tseelon, 1995), and Jezebel -- who was notorious for painting her face and dressing her hair with ornaments (Williams, 1957), both represented the dangerous power of women to engage in trickery, seduction and the arousal of sexual desire.

<sup>11</sup> Hormones used dermatologically to thin the skin (machtet, Machtet, Vaillant, and Lorette, 1996), for example in the treatment of keloids.

<sup>12</sup> A highly toxic substance that functions to inactivate and further inhibit the proper function of tyrosine, the protein responsible for the synthesis of melanin (Engasser and Maibach, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication with Mr. Reginald Sam, historian and Assistant Librarian at the University of Ghana, Legon's Africana Holdings, July 25, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication with Mr. Reginald Sam, July 25, 2005.

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