

PIGMENTATION AND EMPIRE

By Amina Mire, PhD.

Saturday, August 14, 2010.

Skin-whitening or skin-bleaching is a practice whereby women - and some men - use various forms of skin-whitening products in order to make their skin appear as white as possible.

As an anti-aging therapy, skin-whitening promises to "restore" as well as to "transform" the aging skins of women and make them smooth, wrinkle-free-younger-looking. In this context, the natural aging process is systematically framed as a pathological condition which must be interrupted through measures such as "elective surgery" and or by bleaching out the signs of aging such as "age spots."

In this way, in the case of white women, skin-whitening is presented as a legitimate intervention designed to 'cure' and mitigate the disease of aging. Skin-whitening as a biomedical intervention is predicated on the pathologization of the natural aging processes in all women, white women in particular.

At least in the United States, racially white eastern and southern European women have used skin-whitening in order to appear as 'white' as their 'Anglo-Saxon' "native" white sisters. In the United States, women of colour also have practiced skin-whitening.

Many of the early skin-bleaching commodities such as Nodinalina skin bleaching cream, a product which has been in the US market since 1889, contained 10 per cent ammoniated mercury. Mercury is a highly toxic agent with serious health implications. According to Kathy Peiss, in 1930, a single survey found advertising for 232 different brand names of skin-bleaching creams promoted in mainstream magazines to mainly white women consumers in the United States.

If dark-skinned eastern and southern Europeans can "pass" for white with a little help from skin-bleaching creams, those with sufficiently light skin tones but who are legally categorized as racially black by their invisible "one drop" of "black blood", could also "pass" for white as well. The "appearance of whiteness" is the key to accessing the exclusive cultural and economic privileges whiteness accrues.

The fear of the infiltration of 'invisible' blackness has fuelled both the marketing strategies of industry and the anxieties of white women that they may not appear "white enough".

Peiss writes:

Dorothy Dignam's ads for Nadinola skin bleach and Nadine face power, appearing in mass circulation women's magazine, resurrected the Old South. "This line made in the South was largely sold to the Negro market; the advertising was a planned attempt to capture the white market also.

Her paean to "the beauty secret of Southern women," featuring plantations, magnolia blossoms, and hoop-skirted bells, erased any hint of Nadinola's black clientele. Although usually rendered obliquely, racial prejudice was an explicit talking point for

manufacturers Albert F. Wood: "A white person objects to a swarthy brown-hued or mulatto-like skin, therefore if staying much out of doors use regularly Satin Skin Vanishing Greaseless Cream to keep the skin normally white (Peiss 1998,150).

But even though the anxiety of bearing the invisible mark of black blood has, in part, fuelled white women's skin-whitening practices, Peiss rejects the actual possibility that some women of colour may have passed for white by using skin-whitening creams.

This is because, according to Peiss, African American women had "disabling" African features that would not allow them to pass for white. In this way, while skin-whitening helped 'dark skinned' eastern and southern European immigrant women to blend into the "secure" domain of whiteness, the racial border between whiteness and blackness is magically secured by the social and political order of the colour line.

Women might purchase a skin whitener that covered and colored the skin and simultaneously disclaim its status as paint. For women of European descent, whitening could be absorbed within acceptable skincare routine and assimilated into the ruling beauty ideas, the natural face of white genteel womanhood-although, as Jessie Benton Frémont testified, one glance at the hands could undo this careful effort to naturalize artifice.

For some people of African descent, the fiction was impossible: Whitening cosmetics, touted as cures for "disabling" African features, reinforced a racialized aesthetic through a makeover that appeared anything but natural.

What these more than "skin deep," uniquely "disabling" African features were is not stated by Peiss.

However, this crude insinuation hints at Peiss' refusal to entertain the possibility that skin-whitening may have been used not just by eastern and southern dark skinned women to "pass for Anglo-Saxons," but that women of colour who were sufficiently light skinned have also practiced skin-whitening in order to "pass" for white.

Since appearing white is the "only game in town," there are no other grounds outside of appearance on which whiteness as an exclusive racial identity can be secured. Peiss's historical documentation of the history of the formation and consolidation of the American beauty industry clearly demonstrates that skin-whitening has facilitated the "racial passing" of certain dark skinned women from eastern and southern Europe. In this context, the practice of skin-whitening is implicated in the American history of racial segregation and racial "passing."

Peiss's analysis precludes the possibility of African Americans with light skins passing for white by using skin-whitening creams, while claiming that eastern and southern European women with "dark skin tones" could do so, implicitly offers skin-whitening as 'legitimate' when practiced by 'white' women and as 'illegitimate' and futile for women of colour.

This is also the paradigm of much of the published medical literature on the health risks associated with the use of skin-whitening creams with toxic chemical agents. Even though white

women have been using both lead and mercury based skin-whitening creams in order to whiten their faces and bodies for centuries, when it comes to warning the public about the dangers associated with this deadly practice, it is often the terribly damaged faces of women of colour which are used for visual illustration.

For example, almost all the medical literature published by western medical and dermatology journals offer us women of colour as victims of the dubious desire for unattainable corporeal whiteness. This same unattainable desire is often reinforced with horrifying images of the damaged faces and bodies of women of color after using cheap skin-whitening creams containing toxic chemical agents such as ammoniated mercury, corticosteroids, and hydroquinone.

The faces of Black South Africans permanently damaged by long-term use of Over-the-Counter (OTC) 2 per cent hydroquinone based skin-whitening cream.

The emphasis on such 'health risks' has facilitated the production, and marketing around the world, of new and, conceivably, 'safer' but highly expensive skin-whitening commodities and combatant technologies. The emerging 'high-end' skin-whitening commodities are marketed mainly to affluent Asian women to modify skin tone, also to white women as anti-aging therapy.

So, as one might expect, race, class and gender dynamics inform the marketing strategy of the new skin-whitening corporate drive. The symbolic and literal 'whitening' of darker bodies still conditions the advertising rhetoric for skin-whitening products.

In Africa, the practice of skin-whitening is traditionally associated with white colonial oppression. Those who practiced skin-whitening, were and are still condemned as self-hating dupes, suffering from an inferiority complex. Consequently, those engaging in this practice often do so covertly.

So it is only when users of skin-whitening seek medical help from the devastating effects of bodily damage caused by the use of toxic skin-whitening creams that news about this practice gets to the public domain. Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988) succinctly captures the contradiction between the colonizing effects of white supremacy and African women's yearning for respectability and idealized feminine aesthetics of beauty.

Lucia was my mother's sister, several years younger than my mother and a wild woman in spite of or may be because of her beauty. She was dark like my mother, but unlike my mother her complexion always had a light shining from underneath the skin, so she could afford to scoff at the skin-lightening creams that other girls used.

The association in the above quote of girls with "bad skin" with the use of skin-lightening cream is interesting. On the one hand, it suggests that skin-whitening has a therapeutic function. On the other hand, it may be referring to one of the sinister side effects of the use of skin-whitening: the systemic darkening of the affected area of the skin due to the accumulation of toxic skin-whitening residue inside the skin called exogenous ochronosis (cf.2).

Currently, many African countries have banned the commercial trafficking of skin-whitening. However, skin-whitening products, including those containing highly toxic chemical agents, are currently aggressively marketed to white women in North America as "anti-aging therapy." It is not clear how 2 per cent hydroquinone based skin-whitening cream can cause a permanent disfigurement of African women's faces and bodies while 4 per cent hydroquinone based skin-whitening cream can be promoted to white women as anti-aging therapy.

The following ad is for a skin-whitening cream called Lustra which contains 4 per cent hydroquinone.

This is the same chemical agent which has caused the disfigurement of the South African woman in the above image and of countless other women around the world.

This product is manufactured by a major US- based pharmaceutical company. Lustra skin-whitening cream is extensively promoted on internet shops, beauty salons and dermatology offices in the United States. The primary clientele of Lustra are white middle-class women

Currently, transnational biotechnology, pharmaceutical and cosmetics corporations are engaged in the research and development and the mass marketing of a plethora of new forms of skin-whitening products which can "bleach-out" the "dark skin tones" of women of colour and can remove corporeal evidence of the aging processes, 'unhealthy life-style' and overall pollution from the skin of white women.

In North America and Europe, the emerging high-end skin-whitening products have been promoted as new 'therapeutic' regimes which can 'cleanse,' 'purify' and 'regenerate' aging skin. Consequently, in North America and Europe, skin-whitening commodities aimed at white women are often sold under the banner of 'anti-aging skincare.' In other parts of the world skin-whitening commodities are promoted to 'whiten' and 'brighten' the 'dark skin tones' of women of colour.

This growing industry is a lucrative one whose reach is greatly facilitated by systematic use of the internet as the main medium for the dissemination of advertising messages for skin-whitening products and related technologies. Some of the leading transnational corporations engaged in the 'trafficking' of skin-whitening products have extensive e-business domains.

Often these companies set up internet domains and e-shops in specific countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, just to name a few. In addition to such e-business sales drives, extensive use of the internet allows these corporations to avoid both the negative political implications and legal regulatory restrictions they could face if they were to openly promote skin-whitening commodities in North America and European markets.

The 'ethnic' skin-whitening market around the world is decentralized as well being covert. This is because many of the skin-whitening products which target poor women, particularly black women, including women of colour living in North America and Europe, are relatively cheap but often contain highly toxic chemical agents such as mercury, hydroquinone and corticosteroids.

In Europe and North America, the 'ethnic' skin-whitening products are usually sold in 'ethnic-oriented' grocery stores and "beauty" salons. Many of these low end' but toxic skin-whitening products are manufactured in the Third World and are imported both legally and illegally to North America and Europe. Even though the western health authorities are well aware of the health risks associated with these toxic skin-whitening products they have taken very little if any, action to control their importation or to regulate their sales.

The other, more robust trend is the marketing of expensive skin-whitening products to affluent Asian women in living in Pacific Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and others. This represents the largest slice of the skin-whitening global market.

Partly because of the covert nature of the trafficking and informal circulation of toxic skin-whitening commodities, it is hard to gain accurate estimates of the market share of the 'low end' but highly toxic skin-whitening market.

Similarly, because the 'high end' and, presumably less toxic skin-whitening commodities targeted to whites are promoted under the purview of 'anti-aging therapy,' it is as difficult to gain an accurate or even a generally reliable estimate of the North America and European market shares of skin-whitening products targeted to white women.

However, in Asia, where the skin-whitening market outside of Europe and North America is anchored, in 2001, in Japan alone, the skin-whitening market was estimated to be worth \$ 5.6 billion. According to the same report, the fastest growing skin-whitening market in Asia is China. In 2001, China's skin-whitening market was estimated to be over \$ 1.3 billion.

Based on the readily available mass of online advertising for emerging 'high end' skin-whitening products by transnational corporations, these products claim that they can 'improve' the 'appearance' as well as the 'health' of users. These skin-whitening commodities have powerful pharmaceutical properties; they can penetrate the skin and suppress the synthesis of the skin pigment, melanin . Indeed, the suppression of 'dark' pigment, melanin, is listed as an explicit example of skin-whitening health promotion benefits.

Frantz Fanon wrote about the "corporeal malediction" of dark skin and here's the antidote! The damned of the earth can thus swiftly alleviate their condition by peaceful, albeit commercial means.

In many of the advertisements for skin-whitening I come across during my research, a discursive link is made between youthfulness and whiteness and whiteness and racial superiority. Second, in these advertisements, the aging process of white women is often implicitly racialized by the construction of 'hyper-pigmentation,' 'age-spots,' 'dull' skin tone,' as signs of "pigmentation pathologies".

Consequently, skin-whitening advertising directed to white women often promises to 'cleanse,' 'purify,' 'transform' and 'restore' white women's 'smooth' and 'radiant' youthful white skin. Such

advertising tries to expand the skin-whitening market with the covert rhetoric of racializing aesthetics.

One recurring theme which runs through most of the promotional ads for skin-whitening posted at Asia registered internet sites is the claim that skin-whitening cosmetics can transform the 'yellow' skin tones of Asian women to flawlessly 'radiant' white. These advertisements often deploy the visual technique of 'before' images of 'unhappy,' 'dark' faces of 'Asian-looking' models and 'after' images of smiling 'whitened' faces of the same models.

I now want to take the reader to the internet-based advertisements for skin-whitening products by the world's largest cosmetics company a leading promoter of new skin-whitening cosmetics the L'Oreal cosmetics company. L'Oreal's advertisements for skin-whitening products posted at internet sites run by L'Oreal subsidiaries such as Lancôme, Vichy Laboratories and L'Oreal Paris systematically deploy a mixture of racializing rhetoric and dazzling visual images.

Many of these advertisements which are directed mainly to Asian women use images and narratives with implicit references to the aesthetic 'inferiority' of 'dark' and 'yellow' skin tones of Asian women. In these ads, this implied is often reinforced with illustrations of the pathological nature of 'dark' and 'yellow' skin tones of 'Asian-looking' models.

With over US\$14 billion sales, L'Oreal is the largest cosmetics company in the world. The company can be best understood as an economic 'super-structure' consisting of, at least, 12 major subsidiaries such as Lancôme Paris, Vichy Laboratories, La Roche-Posay Laboratoire Pharmaceutique, Biotherm, L'Oreal Paris, Garnier, L'Oreal professional Paris, Giorgio Armani Perfumes, Maybelline New York, Ralph Lauren, Helena Rubinstein skincare, Shu Uemura, Maxtrix, Redken, SoftSheen-Carlson™.

Not all of the above listed L'Oreal subsidiaries deal with the promotion of skin-whitening cosmetics. However, this extensive list of L'Oreal subsidiaries illustrates the company's economic power and structural complexity. L'Oreal is also a 20 per cent shareholder of a major French based pharmaceutical firm, Sanofi-Synthelabo.

A recent merger worth 60£ billion with another European based pharmaceutical firm, Aventis, makes Sanofi-Aventis the third largest pharmaceutical company in the world behind Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline. I emphasize the financial link between Sanofi-Aventis and L'Oreal cosmetics in the present work partly to highlight L'Oreal's close connection with the pharmaceutical industry.

Skin-whitening, in this context, can be thought of as a lucrative 'spin-off' both for L'Oreal as well as a way to valorize research and development of pharmaceuticals outside the highly regulated biomedical domain.

The influence of the pharmaceutical industry is evidenced by much of L'Oreal's promotional rhetoric for skin-whitening cosmetics and related technologies.

L'Oreal's ads for skin-whitening cosmetics increasingly blur the line between cosmetic and pharmaceutical claims. Such close integration between the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries has serious social, medical, and political implications. In fact, L'Oreal has already designated some of its subsidiaries, such as Vichy Laboratories and LA Roche-Posay Laboratoire Pharmaceutique, as quasi-pharmaceutical outlets through which the company can successfully promote skin-whitening and other cosmetics under the rubric of skincare biomedicine. The following ads for Vichy Laboratories attest to this opportunistic cosmetic/pharmaceutical industrial cross-fertilization.

Discover your healthy skin profile: skin type and hydration. Make an appointment with your Vichy dermatological skin care consultant to identify your skin type, its hydration level and receive a skin diagnosis and personalized skincare recommendation. Vichy Laboratories are devoted to the health of your skin. Backed by dermatological research, Vichy offers you a complete line of skincare products containing Vichy Thermal Spa Water. Dehydration, dryness, skin aging and dull complexion. Vichy, health skin's answer to all skin conditions.

Not all of Vichy's advertising messages are couched in such biomedical rhetoric. For instance, when targeting women of colour, Asian women in particular, their 'dark' or 'yellow' skin tones are often conceptualized as pathological targets amenable to 'fixing' and transformation. L'Oreal's internet domains registered in South Korea and China, Singapore, Taiwan aggressively promote skin-whitening products with such provocative brand names as "BI-White," "White "Perfect" and "Blanc Expert." In one of the most stunning acts of commodity racism, an ad for Vichy's skin-whitening brand, "BI-White," features what appears to be an Asian woman peeling off her black facial skin with a zipper. As her black skin is removed a new 'smooth,' 'whitened' skin with no blemishes takes its place. The implications of this image are blunt and chilling. Blackness is false, dirty and ugly. Whiteness is true, healthy, clean and beautiful.

L'Oreal calls this marketing strategy 'Geocosmetics':

More than half of Korean women experience brown spots and 30 per cent of them have a dull complexion. Over-production of melanin deep in the skin that triggers brown spots and accumulation of melanin loaded dead cells at the skin's surface create a dull and uneven complexion. Vichy Laboratories has been able to associate the complementary effectiveness of Kojic Acid and pure Vitamin C in an everyday face care: BI-White.

Another L'Oreal advertisement for skin-whitening brand is called "White Perfect." This particular skin-whitening brand is sold in L'Oreal's Asian markets and online e-shops. In that way, those who live outside Asia can purchase this and other L'Oreal skin-whitening brands over the internet.

In this ad, the racist aesthetics of "White-Perfect" reinforces the biomedicalized intervention of Asian women's skin coded by the sign of "Melanin-Block™." L'Oreal's advertisements for skin-whitening cosmetics are often reinforced by constant interplay between the ideological precepts of white supremacy and the technologically-mediated suppression or "blocking" of the capacity for Asian women's bodies and skins to produce skin pigment, melanin.

One of the ways in which L'Oreal enacts the biomedicalization of women's bodies and the racialization of the aging processes of women (gendered degeneracy) is through the visual technology of dismembering women's bodies. A close examination of L'Oreal's advertisements for skin-whitening products shows a systematic fragmentation of women's bodies. Almost all the L'Oreal advertising images which I have come across use cropped faces of women. One of the visual techniques used by L'Oreal is the pairing of two cropped faces: one of which bears certain pseudo-pathologies such as 'age spots,' 'premature-aging,' 'hyper-pigmentation,' and 'wrinkles.' The other cropped image would feature the whitened, 'smooth, wrinkle-free' face of a woman.

As a result, L'Oreal's advertising often visually conceptualizes the practice of skin-whitening both as a violent technological fragmentation of women's bodies as well as an instrument of bodily transformation. As the following advertising for L'Oreal's skin-whitening brand, Blanc Expert, shows, the visual fragmentation of women's bodies is often reinforced by the claims of the power of these skin-whitening products to penetrate deep inside the body thereby transforming both the inside and the outside of the users of these products.

Lancôme's exclusive Melo-No Complex™ limits the activity of the messenger NO, a newly-discovered stimulator of melanin, produced by keratinocytes. The complex, by targeting keratinocytes, boosts whitening action by 15 times. A powerful combination of active whitening ingredients targets melanocytes to more effectively inhibit the source of melanin production and as a result, diminishes the skin's yellowish tone.

The image symbolically illustrates the technological prowess of advanced skin-whitening biotechnology; its ability to penetrate, fragment, colonize, and discipline the bodies of women. In this image, the fragmentation of women's bodies is symbolically illustrated by a beam of light shot through a tube. Upon penetrating the skin, this phallic beam of light produces a new "radiant," white face.

In this powerful visually fragmenting technology, the symbolic order of masculinist technology and the aesthetics of white supremacy are rendered as flesh in the "flawless", perfectly whitened and fragmented face of a woman of colour.

In this context, the aggressive world-wide marketing of skin-whitening commodities can be legitimated as benevolent 'cures' designed to transform and transcend the "dark" "diseased," bodies of women of colour. Ironically, not all women of colour can afford the "radiant" whitened faces this technology promises. The following is a price list for L'Oreal's Blanc Expert line. As I indicated earlier, this particular skin-whitening brand name is aggressively promoted to Asian women. Blanc Expert Mela-No Cx Blanc Expert Advanced Whitening Spot Corrector (30 ml= \$125 US), Blanc Expert Mela-NO Cx Supreme Whitening Spot Corrector (30ml= \$100 US), Blanc Expert Advanced Whitening & Anti-Dark Circles Eye (100ml= \$ 77 US), Blanc Expert Mela NO Cx Advanced Whitening Night Renovator (100ml= \$ 83 US). This one has the 'cutest' and the most ironic name: Blanc Expert Mela-No Cx UV Expert Extra Large Double Protection SPF 50/PA+++ (30 ml= \$59 US).

This list clearly demonstrates two important points: that these products are highly expensive and that they contain relatively small amounts of skin-whitening products. There is a common joke in

Africa to describe the practice of face whitening: "Fanta Faces & Coca Cola Bodies." Fanta, in this context, refers to the orange colour of a soft drink. The dark colour of the Coke soft drink in contrast refers to the unbleached bodies of African women. This analogy is particularly apt because, like skin-bleaching cosmetics, Coca Cola and Fanta soft drinks are western products which are extensively marketed in Africa.

In its broadest sense, skin-whitening as 'anti-aging therapy' aims at intervening, 'halting' and if possible, 'reversing' the aging processes of mainly white women. I have suggested earlier that advertisements for skin-whitening products which are marketed to white women often use language suffused with the racialization of the aging processes of white women and the biomedicalization of women of colour's skin tones.

In this market, the paradigmatic face against which both women of colour and middle aged white women must be appraised, and ultimately found wanting, is the 'smooth/ radiant/youthful-looking' white face unmarked by age, labour or class. This technologically-produced 'radiant,' 'age-spot-free,' 'pigmentation-free' young-looking white face is now the universal standard for the "beautiful" face.

The cover of the 2002 L'Oreal Annual Report underscores the emergence of the "smooth". 'radiant', technologically produced, "air brushed" white face. In this image, a female with exceedingly blue eyes and perfectly white skin gazes vacantly. Her face shows no hint of life or emotions. This image is simultaneously as frightening as it is ambiguous. It is difficult to tell whether we are confronting a computer-generated animation or an image of an actual woman. This ambiguity is not innocent. The image at once suggests the corporeal possibility of a perfectly white skin and also whiteness as an abstract aesthetics. The ambiguity of the corporeality of this image can be read as an ironic comment on the image itself. In this reading, this computer-generated visual simulacrum recuperates the exclusionary aesthetics of whiteness.

L'Oreal has also developed other powerful tools which are designed to monitor the states of women's skin and bodies. One instrument of surveillance is a silicon-based semiconductor sensory device called SkinChip®. First developed for biometric fingerprinting ID and related surveillance technologies, this technology has now been adapted as a 'diagnostic' tool designed to monitor changes in the 'interiors' of women's skin such as "pigmentation" and "hydration" levels and other 'pathological' signs. Monitoring the "interior" of women's skin to gauge their "pigmentation" status has the potential to usher in a new and sinister form of eugenicist white supremacist aesthetics. The fact that SkinChip has been imported from biometric surveillance technology is not insignificant.

Surveillance technologies such as SkinChip also reinforce the aesthetics of white supremacy and the global expansion of skin-whitening as a capitalist commodity. L'Oreal is currently developing a personal-size version of the SkinChip device so that women can regularly monitor what is happening "inside" their bodies and on their skins.

I hope that I have demonstrated that the emerging skin-whitening industry is a lucrative globalized economic enterprise with profound social and political implications. L'Oreal's

advertising for skin-whitening commodities reinforces and consolidates the globalized ideology of white supremacy and the sexist practice of the biomedicalization of women's bodies.

It is in this specific context of the continuum of the western practice of global racism and the economic practice of commodity racism that the social, political and cultural implications of skin-whitening must be located and resisted. Consequently, feminist/antiracist and anti-colonial responses must confront this social phenomenon as part and parcel of our old enemy, the "civilising mission" ; the violent moral prerogative to cleanse and purify the mind and bodies of the "dark/dirt/savage".

On March 10, 2004, two weeks prior to the American invasion of Iraq, Time magazine's cover featured the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. The caption reads: "Life After Saddam: an inside look at Bush's high-risk plan to occupy Iraq and remake the Middle East" . Hussein's face is painted white by a white man wearing a white casual shirt with matching casual white pants and a white baseball hat using a white paint brush. The colour of the dictator's unpainted skin looks exceedingly black and menacing. The lower half of the dictator's face and neck are riddled with bullet holes.

<http://www.thenewblackmagazine.com/view.aspx?index=2382>