

Skin Bleach And Civilization: The Racial Formation of Blackness in 1920s Harlem

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Abstract

Unlike previous scholarship on skin-bleaching advertisements conducted by scholars such as Lawrence Levine and Kathy Peiss, this paper finds those advertisements reflected a definite and widespread preference for light skin among African Americans in 1920's Harlem. Newspaper records and historical archives demonstrate that tangible if permeable boundaries existed between "black," "brown," "light brown," and "yellow" "Negroes" in 1920's Harlem. Skin bleaching was far more than merely cosmetic: it was a profoundly micro-political form of self-masking and identity shifting mediated by the new mass market. The advertisements not only appealed to the desire to be beautiful but also to the desire to find a mate, get a better job, and associate oneself with the future, modernity, and progress. Skin bleaching was one practice in a universe of speech and speech-acts that constituted an African American version of the discourse of civilization. At one extreme, skin-bleaching represented part of a "Great White Hope" that lightskinned "New Negroes" might actually be able to escape their "Negro" past and become a new near-white "intermediate" race, as anthropologist Melville Herskovits pronounced them in 1927. Uncritical reconstructions of a unitary "black" subject position in 1920's Harlem obscures the deep divides and antagonisms based on class and color that striated Harlem society. Recognizing these truths suggests that multiple "Negro" racial identities were constructed through quotidian actions both pedestrian and potent.

Keywords: skin bleach, discourse of civilization, racial formation, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey

Introduction: Neither Simple Nor Sanguine

“To absorb a handful of Negroes in America and leave the unbleached millions of Africa in their savage blackness would be to deepen the gulf of racial cleavage as a world problem.”¹ These were the words of Kelly Miller, Dean of Howard University, in a 1926 newspaper column entitled: “Is the American Negro to Remain Black or Become Bleached?” No outraged letters to the editor followed, nor were Miller’s views out of step with public opinion in the early decades of the twentieth century. Miller’s comment illustrates that the practice of skin bleaching was part of a much larger discourse of civilization, a discourse that incorporated the uplift of Africa’s “unbleached millions” and that allowed one of the most prominent African American commentators of the day to seemingly offensively entwine the words “unbleached,” “Africa,” “savage,” and “blackness.” “Bleaching” was a potent double entendre, referring either to lightening the skin through bleach or through racial “amalgamation.” In all senses, bleaching was complicated and far more than merely cosmetic.

Skin bleaching can’t be understood in simple or sanguine terms, and it repels efforts to pigeonhole it as either callow self-hatred or bold racial resistance.² Rather, the argument of this article is that bleaching was part of seemingly contradictory ideas of progress, racial advancement, and civilization. African American skin bleaching practices in the 1920s constituted a profoundly micro-political form of self-masking and identity shifting mediated by both ideology and consumerism. The mask of face bleach exposes some of the other masks that Black folk assumed and fought over in that turbulent decade, as they struggled among themselves to define the boundaries and definitions of “the race.” Skin bleaching was thus a part of an embodied and everyday Black mass discourse of civilization that illuminates disagreements between titans such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey as well as the alchemy of racial transformations performed as everyday, private ablutions. If the formation of African American identity and the racial formation of Blackness proceeded not as a seamless natural evolution but through a series of incremental, politicized discourses, then skin bleaching helps to stain and delineate one chapter in the racial formation of African Americans.³

Skin Bleaching as a Contested Social Text

The larger context of the cosmetics, hair straighteners, bleaches, and beauty regimens of the 1920's was a mass market that targeted the new generation of young African American women working in wage labor in cities of the North in the wake of the Great Migration. Oftentimes created and marketed by African American women themselves, skin bleaches and hair straighteners created fortunes worth millions and accounted for a massive thirty to fifty percent of all advertisements in the Black press of the decade.⁴ Containing caustic chemicals such as hydroquinone, which suppressed the production of melanin in the skin, skin bleaches could cause severe dermatitis and even death in high dosages. The power of skin bleaching as a social text resides partly in the fact that it was part of an intimate, quotidian, private, and largely un-remarkable ritual, something hundreds of thousands of people did between washing their faces and brushing their teeth. Bleaching was a form of self-fashioning, an autobiographical revision of race performed on the surface of one's own body.

While lightened skin could enhance social mobility inside and outside of the Black community, the practice was also quite literally a form of disfigurement. James Baldwin wrote of his own twenties Harlem childhood that popular discourse frequently connected Africa's Blackness with her lack of civilization, and attempts to alter appearance were characterized by shame, rage, pain, and a lack of positive images of Africa and African Americans:

At the time I was growing up, Negroes in this country were taught to be ashamed of Africa. They were taught it bluntly, as I was, for example, by being told that Africa had never contributed "anything" to civilization.... One was always being mercilessly scrubbed and polished, as though in the hope that a stain could thus be washed away.... The women were forever straightening and curling their hair, and using bleaching creams. And yet it was clear that none of this effort would release one from the stigma and danger of being a Negro; this effort merely increased the shame and rage. There was not, no matter where one turned, any acceptable image of oneself, no proof of one's existence.⁵

Baldwin's memory of the connection between Africa's blackness, its lack of civilization, and the bitter bodily disciplines of washing, bleaching, and

processing demonstrate that bleaching helped to stave off what Miller called the “unbleached millions of Africa in their savage blackness.” The physical and psychological pain associated with skin bleaching belies attempts to minimize it or to valorize it as a form of social resistance. The practice can be better understood in terms of the African American discourse of civilization and related debates over the meaning of Blackness.

Scholars working in African American Studies and African American History have demonstrated how ideologies of race, gender, uplift, and respectability functioned to shape the Black public sphere of the early twentieth century.⁶ All of these discourses are important constituent parts of what can be thought of as an African American discourse of civilization. The concept of civilization encompassed one of the key clusters of ideas in the Progressive Era, uniting ideas relating to science, industrialization, consumerism, modernity, race, religion, gender, evolution and empire, thereby forming a set of received ideas about what it meant to be civilized. As Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, the idea of “civilization” in American thought has historically been “a dense weave of ideas and assumptions regarding not only proper comportment, manners, social bearing, and Judeo-Christian belief, but also regarding the fundamental social issues of property relations, the distribution of wealth, modes of production, and patterns of consumption.”⁷ The African American version of this discourse, which deserves further explication, sometimes used the dominant discourse in a recalcitrant manner, as when Ida B. Wells and other commentators activated its language to accuse white lynch mobs of being savage, barbaric, and uncivilized.⁸ The dominant if not hegemonic discourse of civilization among so-called Negroes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries connected Africa to primitiveness and savagery.⁹ Nevertheless, African American discourses of civilization of the twenties conceded the primacy of white constructs of civilization, without conceding the primacy of whites. Civilizationism, unlike other forms of white supremacy, offered Blacks a route to greater freedom. Whereas scientific racism forever confined Black people to positions of inferiority due to alleged natural qualities, and Christian racism damned Blacks due to the curse of Ham, the discourse of civilization at least gave African Americans a chance to achieve equality by attaining civility.¹⁰ As Kelly Miller wrote in 1905:

A young race, just like the individual, must first appropriate and apply what has already gone before. The white man has no exclusive proprietorship in civilization. White man's civilization is as much a misnomer as the white man's multiplication table. It is the equal inheritance of any one who can appropriate and apply it.¹¹

Class, color, race, and region all inflected African American self-positioning within or against the discourse of civilization and the practice of skin bleaching. In her study of Black women in interwar Detroit, Victoria Walcott argues that the self-contained nature of segregated Black American communities increased the circularity of values therein, so that the ideology of respectability was not confined to elites alone.¹² A similar circularity of values adheres in the case of the discourse of civilization. The desire to be civilized and the desire to expand and change what it meant to be civilized can be found across all classes and strata of Black life. Nonetheless, the signifiers connecting light skin with advanced civilization were typically densest among the middle and upper class segments of the Black population.

“The Aristocracy of Color:” Black Colorism in the 1920s

As early as the middle of the nineteenth century, integrationists among Black Bostonians emphasized complexion rather than race, claiming the term “colored” rather than “black” or “African.”¹³ Not only did the Black community have “no broadly accepted new paradigm on race” in the early twentieth century, as Mia Bay has demonstrated, but the multiple and overlapping Black communities also debated Blackness itself.¹⁴ The debates continued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, T. Thomas Fortune, Alexander Crummell, John Edward Bruce and others all weighing in on the question of what to call people of African descent.¹⁵

Melville Herskovits, the pioneering Jewish American anthropologist of the African Diaspora, began his career in the 1920s by studying the social stratigraphy and physical anthropometry of “Negroes” in Harlem, New York. Working partly with a precocious young graduate student named Zora Neale Hurston, Herskovits made hundreds of thousands of measurements of tens of thousands of subjects, recruited from schools and street corners alike.¹⁶ Herskovits' work documented what was widely acknowledged to be true in

Harlem of the twenties, and what was reflected in literary works such as Wallace Thurman's 1929 *The Blacker the Berry*: the Black elite was disproportionately light-skinned, and Black men often preferred lighter-skinned partners. The light-skinned secretaries at a Harlem real estate office titter at Thurman's dark-skinned protagonist, Emma Lou, as she notices "the powdered smoothness of their fair skins and the marcelled waviness of their shingled brown hair." As one cruel Harlem swell remarked to his buddies upon passing her on the street: "Man, you know I don't haul no coal."¹⁷

In one study, Herskovits devised eight categories to describe the ancestry of Harlem residents based on genealogies he collected. He then compared the individual's measurements of, say, lip thickness, with an average measurement for white, African, and African-American groups, most collected by the U.S. Army among WWI soldiers. Herskovits' measurements of 581 members of the general Harlem population and 208 members of "well-to-do" and professional Harlem "Negroes," show the distribution of skin tones in Harlem and demonstrates that the elites were predominantly light-skinned, with very few "black" members. In the general population, the darkest two groups on the spectrum, who would have been called "black," formed 33.4 percent of the total, while they represented only 9.1 percent of the elites. The next darkest group, the "browns," formed another third of the general population, but only 20.7 percent of the elites. The Harlem elite was skewed heavily towards the lightest members of the community: "light browns" were 19.3 percent of the general population but 41.4 percent of the elites, and the lightest "yellows" were 14.3 percent of the general Harlem population but 28.9 percent of the elites.¹⁸

Table 1
Ancestry and Skin Tone among all Harlem residents and
among Elite Harlem residents, 1926

| Ancestry | Total Harlem Population | | “Well to do” and “Professional” Subset | |
|----------|-------------------------|------------|--|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| N | 163 | 28.1 | 14 | 6.7 |
| N(I) | 31 | 5.3 | 5 | 2.4 |
| NNW | 155 | 26.7 | 36 | 17.3 |
| NNW(I) | 37 | 6.4 | 7 | 3.4 |
| NW | 78 | 13.4 | 54 | 26.0 |
| NW(I) | 34 | 5.9 | 32 | 15.4 |
| NWW | 72 | 12.4 | 42 | 20.2 |
| NWW(I) | 11 | 1.9 | 18 | 8.7 |
| Total | 581 | | 208 | |

Based on Melville J. Herskovits, “Some Physical Characteristics of the American Negro Population,” *Social Forces*, vol VI, No. 1, September, 1927, p. 95.

Key:

(based on genealogies of participants)

| | | |
|---------------|---------|--|
| “black” | N= | Negro |
| | N(I)= | Negro mixed with some Indian |
| “brown” | NNW= | More Negro than White |
| | NNW(I)= | More Negro than White with some Indian |
| “light brown” | NW= | Negro and White |
| | NW(I)= | Negro and White with some Indian |
| “yellow” | NWW= | More White than Negro |
| | NWW(I)= | More White than Negro with some Indian |

Not surprisingly, class and colorism also impacted dating and marriage. In a review of sexual mores in Europe, newspaper columnist J. A. Rogers wrote that European women's sexual permissiveness most closely approximated that of "the darker Negro woman, who because of the American mania to be whiter and still whiter is last in the running."¹⁹ Herskovits' studies corroborated the tendency for Harlem men to prefer lighter-skinned partners, thereby "raising" the color of the offspring. Among his Harlem informants he found that 30 percent reported their fathers were lighter than their mothers; in 13.5 percent the parents were the same color, and in 56.5 percent, the mother was lighter. These percentages also matched the percentages Herskovits found by measuring the skin tones of Harlem families. His informants reported "the light-colored woman in marrying the darker mate obtains a husband whose regard she holds because she is the superior, while the darker man raises his social position and thus his opportunities among his own group by marrying her."²⁰ Preferences extended beyond skin tone to hair and phenotype as well: hair could be "good" or "poor," depending on how straight or kinky it was, respectively, and features could be "good" or "broad" depending on how thick the lips and nose were.²¹ Nor did this "mania to be whiter and whiter still" stop at the choice of a sexual partner and bride—it could even alter the complexion of the bride's maids! In 1928 a professor discovered that a light-skinned "colored" bridal couple in Washington D.C. had replaced the dark-skinned bride's maids from their party with lighter-colored ones when it came time to take the wedding photo in order to create "a more desirable group for the picture."²²

There is evidence of racial antipathy in all directions among Negroes of the 1920's, but the anti-black prejudice of the light-skinned was the most pronounced. Richard Bruce Nugent, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, recalls his dismay upon first meeting his future friend and collaborator Wallace Thurman when he discovered that Thurman was black. "He was black in a way that it's hard for us to recognize that people ever had to be black," Nugent told historian David Levering Lewis in 1976. When Langston Hughes first introduced Nugent and Thurman, Nugent remembered: "I looked over and there was this little black boy with a sneering nose.... I couldn't eat." Nugent left the cafeteria, thinking to himself, "how dare he be so black," but then returned and apologized, saying "I just never knew anybody black before."²³ The Nugent-Thurman encounter experience is testimony to the fact that anti-black color prejudice among people who today would be considered Black themselves was no trifling matter—indeed,

it could be powerful enough to induce nausea. Similar stories of intolerance abound. One woman was so affronted when a furniture store sent a “black” man to collect on her account that she stormed down to the office and told them she would not do business with any “black nigger.”²⁴

In 1913 the *Chicago Defender* noted that Southern elite “colored” institutions were notorious for practicing an “aristocracy of color” with lighter-skinned or “white colored” people favored over “real black” people. Booker T. Washington, who controlled patronage for African Americans during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations, only backed “light colored men, or men of light brown skin.”²⁵ The extent of color prejudice within the New Negroes could be severe and was institutionalized in Black churches, fraternal organizations, and professional office staff. One AME church in the lower Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1919 even reserved separate seating areas for light- and dark-skinned members, mimicking the segregation of Blacks and whites in the wider society.²⁶

Far from being a repository of race solidarity and color-blindness, blues music of the twenties was riven with color lines and even anti-black sentiments. Lawrence Levine argues that the most popular color preference among male blues singers was for a “brownskin woman.” Nonetheless, preference for light-skinned partners can be seen in the blues as well. Regardless of whether a particular song expressed a preference for one shade or another, the very existence of these preferences demonstrates what was at the simplest a tripartite racial division within “Negro” America: black, brown, and yellow.²⁷ Texas Alexander recorded the “Yellow Girl Blues” in 1928, singing “Oh black woman evil : brownskin evil too/ Going to get me a yellow woman : see what she will do.”²⁸ Light skinned women were not universally valorized in the blues. One blues declared “Some say, give me a high yaller,/ I say, give me a teasin’ brown” and others declared “You take yaller/ I take de black” or condemned the allegedly uppity or conniving ways of “yellow” women.²⁹

All this concern with women’s skin shades reflects the fact that African American women and their bodies were central to discussions of civilization and its meanings. A gendered division of labor and the maintenance of separate spheres were considered essential to civilization; hence elite African American commentators advocated domesticity and fretted that Black women’s rising hairlines, hemlines, and growing financial and sexual independence would unfit them for the roles of wife and mother.³⁰ Amidst proclamations from the African

American Federal Council of Churches in Christ that “no civilization can rise above the level of its respect for and ideals of womanhood,” Black writers linked Black motherhood to “the foundation stone of civilization” and criticized Black women for “venturing too far from Children, Kitchen, Clothes and Church.”³¹ Womanhood, motherhood, sex, race, and gender were inextricably connected in the discourse of civilization and in the practice of skin bleaching.

Advertisements for skin bleaching creams appealed to consumers’ desires for beauty, attractiveness, social advancement, and self-betterment. Despite the fact that the extant scholarly literature has minimized these attributes, whiteness and lightness were some of the most common qualities used to sell these bleaching creams. Black newspapers carried ads with pictures of smiling models with light skin along with exhortations to “Lighten your black skin,” “Bleach your dark skin,” “Take the black out of your face,” “Light skin beauty over night,” and “The most wonderful skin whitener.”³² Oftentimes the advertisers appealed to women’s desires to attract a male partner and the much discussed Black male preference for lighter-skinned women.³³ The Nadinola Bleaching Cream promised “White Skin While You Sleep!” and asserted, “you can secure the light-toned beauty that all your friends will admire and envy with this double-quick, extra-powerful bleach.” In case the message was unclear, Nadinola bleaching cream clarified that the reason a woman would whiten her skin was to improve her chances of finding a mate. “Begin this very night,” Nadinola urged. “Learn the real power of beauty---the power to attract and hold men who admire a fair light skin.” A competitor tried a similar tack, advertising, “Light skin that men can’t resist!” and musing on “that alluring light skin –silken soft and smooth— doesn’t every man admire it, doesn’t every girl long for it?”³⁴ Cosmetic bleach advertisements commodified light skin and projected it into the desires and onto the bodies of Black Americans.

Whiter skin
while you sleep!



IF you want a whiter, prettier complexion, you can have it with Nadinola! You can secure the light-toned beauty that all your friends will admire and envy with this double-quick, extra-powerful bleach. Nadinola, the amazing skin-whitener, will bring you this new loveliness just as it has done for thousands of attractive women. No tedious waiting for results—no disappointments.

Just smooth on this fragrant, super-bleach at bedtime—let it start its wonder-work while you take your beauty sleep. You will be amazed how swiftly all oiliness and roughness disappear, how pimples and eruptions vanish, while your skin grows lighter and more beautiful day by day. If you have been disappointed in other bleaches, remember Nadinola *always* works, quickly, surely! Every package carries our written, money-back guarantee and simple directions.

Nadinola contains the most powerful skin-whitening properties known to beauty science, yet it is prepared so skillfully that it cannot possibly harm the most delicate skin.

Don't let the days go by while you *wish* you had a lovely, light-toned skin—start tonight with Nadinola! Stop at your favorite toilet goods counter today and ask for Nadinola Bleaching Cream. Fifty cents for a good-sized jar. (Extra large size \$1.) If you can't buy Nadinola where you live, send us 50 cents or a dollar and we will mail it to you *at once*, with valuable FREE Nadinola Beauty Booklet and generous gift sample of Nadine Face Powder. Address: Dept. A, National Toilet Co., Paris, Tenn.

Nadinola Bleaching Cream
 Makes skin whiter while you sleep

Figure 1: Advertisement for Nadinola Bleaching Cream, *The New York Amsterdam News* (August 14, 1929): 4.

Increasing one's beauty and romantic desirability was not the only motivation for using skin-bleaching cream. A related rationale was to increase one's standing in "society," one's success in business, and one's ability to project and embody a racialized ideal of beauty connected to Enlightenment, modernity, and civilization. The use of bleach for social striving particularly offended Marcus Garvey, who complained bitterly about the many skin bleaching and hair-straightening advertisements in Black newspapers. When he came to the United States in 1916, "there were many degrading exhortations to the race to change its black complexion as an entrant to society," he wrote, citing advertisements with slogans that explicitly linked bleaching and social advancement: "If you want to be in society lighten your black skin," "Have a light complexion and be in society," and "Take the kink out of your hair and be in society."³⁵ Lightening one's skin opened doors of opportunity for darker-skinned "Negroes" to join the lighter-skinned "colored" elite, and connoted civility and increased chances for economic and social advancement. A 1929 ad for Fan-Tan Make-Up Crème aimed at men promised, "Men find Fan Tan wonderful after shaving. They say it removes gloss and shine and gives that refined light tone so valuable in business and social life."³⁶ While both advertisements aimed at men and women appealed to aspirations for class mobility, those advertisements directed towards men were more likely to emphasize upward mobility than physical attractiveness. Skin bleaching was about much more than simply aesthetics, and aesthetics were about more than simply beauty.

Racialized Aesthetics

In the context of a competition for prospective partners that could be described as a mate market, Black women who applied bleaching cream were employing ideas multiplied like images in an echoing series of mirrors, disappearing in all directions into the curving distance of Enlightenment philosophy and Progressive Era civilizationism. At the intersection of race, beauty, and economics, they were using a commercial product to more closely approximate racialized ideals of beauty that themselves were not only engendered by contemporary market practices but also mirrored within their very fibers the memories of slavery and the strictures of Enlightenment economic thought.³⁷

In a provocative 1987 article, David Theo Goldberg argues that racism was not merely consistent with modernism, but rather that modernism's political, legal, scientific and moral discourses fashioned ways of thinking, expressing, and

behaving that were intrinsically racist.³⁸ He supports this assertion with an examination of the way Enlightenment philosophers such as Hume and Locke evolved congruent explanations of economic and aesthetic value and appropriateness. Not only did the emergence of racism depend on the eighteenth-century revival of classical ideals of beauty, but also beauty itself was understood in terms of classical economic theory. Beauty became thought of as a kind of property, and to lack it became a form of poverty. Beauty, like wealth, was inheritable, and its absence was seen as a fault of inheritance that became a form of racialized poverty. These associations had a host of economic and racial implications: just as economic poverty drove some to work for others, so too the “racial poverty” of non-European physical aesthetics justified property in human beings. Goldberg argues that Enlightenment aesthetics treated beauty as a measurement of the degree to which a person or object matched the “natural order of things,” just as the natural equilibrium of the market revealed the “natural” price of people and things. This naturalism solidified aesthetic judgments into a “natural law” that was predicated on racial characteristics and derived from the same basis as classical economics and morality. The racialized aesthetic values of “fair skin, straight hair, head shape, [and] well-composed bodily proportions” became the measure of determining an “individual’s place in the racial (and therefore social) hierarchy,” with intellectual abilities revealing inborn racial differences in mental capability.³⁹ Thus Hume sought to correlate blackness with a lack of intelligence, and Kant was willing to assume that black skin proved stupidity, as when he wrote, “the fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.”⁴⁰

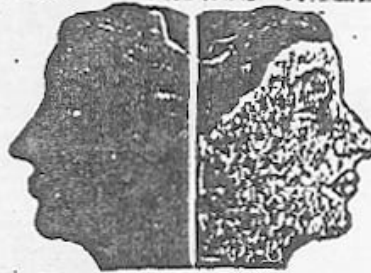
Goldberg’s work asserts that the discourse of racism that arose out of the Enlightenment was composed not only of material factors and socio-economic surfaces but also of racialized aesthetics that resurrected classical ideals of beauty and combined them with Smithian notions of the new, (yet counter-intuitively “classical”) economics. The assertion is not simply that whiteness has functioned as property in American history, an idea that Cheryl Harris has famously demonstrated using American case law.⁴¹ Rather, Goldberg’s insight is that the modern concept of aesthetic beauty itself follows the logic of classical economics, thereby associating racism and naturalism with economic concepts such as property, utility, inheritance and poverty.

The connection between economic interests, racist aesthetics, and the discourse of civilization can be seen in an advertisement for Black and White

ointment reading “Bleach Your Dark Skin: Race Men and Women Protect Your Future.” The ad carries an illustration of a dark-skinned woman in profile looking to the left, backwards, and the same woman with light brown skin looking towards the right, and the future. “Be attractive!” the ad copy urges. “Throw off the chains that have held you back from the prosperity and happiness that belongs to you.”⁴² Like Janus, the Black woman is depicted in two guises, looking in two directions, towards the dark past and the light future. The phrase, “throw off the chains that have held you back” is an explicit reference to the contemporary chains of discrimination as well as the historic chains of slavery. Through the image, dark skin is clearly associated not just with the past and slavery, but also with backward-looking people. Those who are savvy will “protect their future,” and like the woman in the image, assume a new, lighter, forward-looking gaze, towards a future unencumbered with the visual markers of slavery and blackness. Thus aesthetics, economics, racism, and destiny are hybridized in the bleaching cream advertisements, just as Goldberg explains the concepts grew together and out of one another under the “sun” of the Enlightenment in the “field” of racial discourse.

Bleach Your Dark Skin

RACE MEN and WOMEN PROTECT YOUR FUTURE



Dark or Brown Skin May be Bleached and Made Soft,
Smooth, Bright—Rough and “ashy” Skin Made
Smooth as Velvet also Removes Freckles, Tan,
Risings, Bumps, Blemishes by using
Black and White Ointment.
By Mail 25c.

Be attractive! Throw off the chains that have held you back from the prosperity and happiness that belongs to you. Apply Black and White Ointment (for white or colored folks) as directed on package, to your face, neck, arms or hands. It is very pleasant to the skin and has the effect of bleaching dark, sallow or blotchy skin, clearing the skin of risings, bumps, pimples, blackheads, wrinkles, tan or freckles—giving you a clear, soft, fair, light, bright complexion, making you the envy of everybody. Black and White Ointment is way ahead of powder, which only covers up imperfections. Black and White removes them. Sold on a money-back guarantee, only 25c (stamps or coin) sent by mail, or if you send \$1 for four boxes of Black and White Ointment, a 25c cake of Black and White Soap included free. Address Plough Chemical Co., Dept. E, Memphis, Tenn.

AGENTS MAKE AN EASY LIVING.

representing us. Apply for territory and special deal. Black and White Ointment provides a chance for our people to make a good living. No experience required. Write now, to-day, while you think about it.

Figure 2: Advertisement for Black and White Ointment, *The New York Amsterdam News*, (January 4, 1919): 7.

These associations between race, civilization, and aesthetics bubbled to the surface in one particularly acrimonious and infamous exchange between W.E.B. Du Bois of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and his rival, Marcus Moziah Garvey of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Du Bois, like most of the light-skinned elite, had tremendous disdain for Garvey, as well as his working-class nationalist movement. In the opening lines of a damning and derogatory article, Du Bois, the patrician, New England-born, Harvard and Berlin-educated, distinctly light-skinned and European-featured NAACP founder, described Garvey as “a little, fat black man, ugly, but with intelligent eyes and big head.”⁴³ Given Du Bois’ stature as one of the preeminent intellectuals of the twentieth century, his work with the NAACP, and his articulation of the double consciousness of the “souls of black folk,” it is remarkable that his third sentence unleashes a series of ad hominem attacks that emphasize Garvey’s allegedly little, fat, black, ugly, and big-headed body.⁴⁴ By focusing so conspicuously on Garvey’s allegedly unbeautiful black body, Du Bois rhetorically undresses and mocks his rival, before scornfully dressing him in the next sentence “in a military uniform of the gayest mid-Victorian type, heavy with gold lace, epaulets, plume, and sword.” Garvey’s costume is all the more ridiculous, in Du Bois’ description, because Garvey’s stout, black, un-European body categorically does not belong in an ersatz-European “mid-Victorian” costume. Having thus mocked Garvey’s black body, and ridiculed his costume, Du Bois translates his aesthetic aspersions into a more direct charge: Garvey, writes Du Bois, “had no thorough education and a very hazy idea of the technic of civilization.”⁴⁵ As in the bleaching advertisements, Du Bois has interwoven class and color into the discourse of civilization to associate blackness and ugliness with a lack of civilization.

The connections in Du Bois’ mind between aesthetics and Enlightenment thought are even clearer in an article he wrote about female beauty in 1928. In “So the Girl Marries,” written for the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine in 1928, Du Bois claimed that the new beauty parlors of the 1920’s

did for colored girls’ style of beauty what two sophisticated centuries had been doing for blonde frights. When the finished product stood forth all silked and embroidered, briefly skirted and long-limbed with impudent lip-stick and jaunty toque--- well, Thrift hung its diminished head and Philosophy stammered.⁴⁶

The two centuries since the Enlightenment had given the world not only the intellectual apparatus that created the discourse of civilization, but it had also created European beauty culture. Through the new Negro beauty parlors, colored girls were catching up to the techniques of blonde Europeans, while the aesthetic quality that Du Bois chooses to hail—long-limbed bodily proportions—is part of the neo-classical, economically based aesthetics of the Enlightenment. Aesthetics, economics, and philosophy are conjoined then in Du Bois’ thought, in a manner consistent with Goldberg’s theory of the discursive field of racism. “Thrift hung its diminished head and Philosophy stammered” because “colored girls” achieved these European-derived techniques and standards of beauty through commercialized aesthetic practices—hair styling, skin bleaching, using cosmetics, and shopping for fashionable clothing—disrupting but also reaffirming those very Eurocentric discourses of economics, aesthetics, and philosophy. Du Bois’ attack on Garvey’s allegedly ugly, ungainly, black male body and his praise of bleached, straightened, wealth-possessing and long-limbed, light-colored female bodies are both parts of the Enlightenment-derived capitol “P” Philosophy that entwined racism, aesthetics, and economics.

Garvey fired back in response to Du Bois’ calumnies, effectively counter punching with his own body blows at his rival’s expense, supported by a sophisticated aesthetic theory of his own. Labeling Du Bois with the old stereotype of the “unfortunate mulatto,” Garvey reprised Du Bois’ insults in order to deflect them. “Now what does Du Bois mean by ugly?” Garvey asked. “This so-called professor of Harvard and Berlin ought to know by now that the standard of beauty within a race is not arrived at by comparison with another race....” If anyone is ugly, it is the mixed “monstrosity” of his rival, Garvey wrote, “and not the ‘little fat, black man with the big head,’ because all this description is typical of the African.” Garvey showed that if Du Bois was willing to signify on his body, he was willing to go one step further, implicating his rival in all of the bodily appetites as well. Garvey tells us that Du Bois likes to dance, dine, and sometimes sleep with white people, and “the erudite Doctor” keeps a French Beard. “Surely that is not typical of Africa, it is typical of that blood which he loves so well.”⁴⁷ By so clearly and directly invoking what Mikhael Bakhtin calls the “lower bodily stratum,” Garvey was using a timeworn strategy to embarrass and diminish one’s opponent by linking him with bodily functions and appetites, used since at least the time of Rabelais to deflate the egos and pretensions of elites.⁴⁸

While Du Bois linked Garvey to an ersatz European costume in order to ridicule his “hazy grasp of the technics of civilization,” Garvey linked Du Bois to Europe to demonstrate his fealty to Eurocentric concepts of beauty, while claiming for himself the aesthetics of “the African.” This kind of aesthetic declaration of independence, along with a reversal of polarity between Europe and Africa, marks a significant departure from Eurocentric Enlightenment aesthetics. While Garvey no doubt misrepresents the “typical” African, he exposes and punctures DuBois’ European Enlightenment-based theory of beauty by embracing his own stout, black, big-headedness. In *The Philosophy and Opinions*, Garvey reverses DuBois’ worship of European bodily aesthetics, bemoaning slavery’s “curse of many colors” that had diluted the pigment of “the black race” and longing for a return of “a race type and standard of our own which could not, in the future, be stigmatized by bastardy, but could be recognized and respected as the true race type anteceding even our own.”⁴⁹ Garvey embraced the concept of race and hoped for a return to a lost standard of racial “purity,” without explaining what that meant or how it could be achieved.

Racial Alchemy

Even, perhaps especially, the forward-thinking elites, the so-called “Talented Tenth,” were infected with this racial prejudice against blackness. Edgar M. Grey argued that “the abiding mental leftovers from slavery are still with us and we have not as yet grown out of the habit of estimating our values in terms of whiteness.”⁵⁰ Some believed that bleaching could even affect a kind of racial alchemy, progressively lightening either a subset or the entirety of the race. This could happen in at least one of three ways. Without a doubt, skin bleaches aided tens of thousands of fair-skinned African Americans to pass as white.⁵¹ Because men were said to have an easier time passing as white than women, the light-skinned women who remained in the Black community would marry darker-skinned men, gradually lightening the entire “Negro” population. Skin bleaches could also help an individual attract a fairer-skinned partner, thereby lightening or “raising” the color of one’s progeny. Kelly Miller predicted that the erasure of intra-racial color lines would precede an inevitable erasure of inter-racial color lines. “The rise and spread of the mixed element has...merely overlapped a like number of blacks. The lighter color gains upon the darker, like the illuminant upon the darkened surface of the waxing moon, without increasing the total surface of the lunar orb.”⁵² A third, and more surprising prediction was that skin

bleaches might help a subset of “colored people” distinguish themselves as a non-black race.

The idea that colored Americans were turning into a new, non-black race had some currency in the 1920’s, especially among the so-called “New Negroes.” In another of his studies from that decade, presented of all places at the 1927 Pan-African Congress, anthropologist Melville Herskovits stated that physical measurements of the “New Negro” demonstrated that they formed an intermediate race between Africans and white men. Furthermore, he predicted that the Negro would eventually be absorbed into the white population. The work was discussed approvingly on the women’s page of *The New York Amsterdam News*, the kind of forum usually devoted to recipes, beauty tips, and lengthy lists of hostesses and hosts of society gatherings. In a column titled “The Feminist Viewpoint,” the progressive, forward-thinking author wrote, “Isn’t it good to know that we who are called the American Negro are a new race? This mixture of three great primary races --- white [sic], Negro and Mongoloid (Indian) --- makes us neither white [sic], Negro nor Indian, but a whole new race.”⁵³ Kelly Miller concurred, arguing that the numbers of “unadulterated negro types” and “the other extremes which cannot be easily detected from white” were diminishing, while the “average of the race is approaching a medium of yellowish brown rather than black.”⁵⁴ In another version of the same essay, Miller wrote, “A new sub-race is forming under our very eyes.” Miller, like others, expected “pure blooded Negroes” to disappear outside the rural South. “The near whites will have crossed the line or bred backward on the color scale. A new Negroid race will have arisen.”⁵⁵ Edward R. Embree’s 1931 *Brown Americans: The Story of a New Race* repeated the theme that “Negroes” constituted a new race. The author began his volume with the bold statement: “A new race is growing up in America. Its skin is brown. In its veins is the blood of the three principal branches of man--- black, white, yellow-brown. ...The group is new in its biological make-up; in its culture it is almost entirely cut off from the ancient African home.” For many the New Negro constituted a new Negro race, and light skin was the physical marker of this new racial destiny.⁵⁶

Marcus Garvey accused his opponents of not just trying to form a new race, but of trying to become a near-white race.⁵⁷ In his response to Du Bois’ fat, black, and ugly characterization, Garvey quipped that Du Bois’ self-hatred led him to condemn anything black as ugly, which is why in 1917 “he had but the lightest of colored people in his office, when one could hardly tell whether it was

a white show or a colored vaudeville he was running at Fifth avenue.”⁵⁸ Garvey claimed this extreme colorism within the NAACP was not just a farce but part of a larger racial project:

Now what does he mean by advancing colored people if he hates black so much? In what direction must we expect his advancement? We can conclude in no other way than that it is in the direction of losing our black identity and becoming, as nearly as possible, the lowest whites by assimilation and miscegenation.⁵⁹

Garvey’s accusation that the light-skinned colored elites of the NAACP wanted to become a separate, non-black, near-white race would seem outrageous except for the fact that it had a basis in reality. We have already seen that certain elites advocated and welcomed the idea that the New Negroes were becoming a new race. Underlying this belief was the assumption among many of the most progressive that the color line would eventually disappear altogether. Miller believed that “It must be taken for granted in the final outcome of things that the color line will be wholly obliterated.”⁶⁰ Ralph Linton, the Sterling Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, published an article called “The Vanishing American Negro” in 1947, in which he stated that “most anthropologists agree there will be no ‘Negro Problem’ in another two hundred years: by then there will not be enough recognizable Negroes left in this country to constitute a problem.”⁶¹ In 1949, writing in the pages of *Look* magazine, NAACP executive secretary Walter White actually advocated using skin-bleaching creams to allow Black Americans to “pass” as whites and thus end racial strife. White’s suggestion was met with derision in the Black community; times had changed since 1917 and the radical assimilationism that White advocated had lost its audience in the intervening thirty-two years.⁶² But White’s whitening proposal of the late forties supports Garvey’s assertion of the late teens that some of the NAACP’s leadership wanted to use bleaching creams to advance “colored people” towards a whiter future.

W. E. B. Du Bois, of course, vigorously denied that there was anti-black color prejudice in the NAACP, and accused Garvey of importing a “Jamaican color scheme” with which he “ignorantly” misunderstood the class and color situation in colored America. Du Bois alleged that Garvey simply misread the American scene by transposing a Jamaica tripartite color system onto American society, in which, Du Bois claimed, “it came to be generally regarded as the

poorest possible taste for a negro even to refer to differences of color. Colored folks as white as the whitest came to describe themselves as negroes.”⁶³ It is true that Jamaicans had an especially well-defined tripartite color scheme. As Vere E. Johns remarked of “coloured” Jamaicans in 1929, “if a person is even a shade removed from black, never refer to such a one as ‘black.’”⁶⁴ But the racial polarity of Enlightenment aesthetics is so entrenched in his thought, perhaps, that Du Bois did not recognize the irony of signifying on Garvey’s black body before denying colorism in the colored community. The fact that he was writing for a general circulation magazine also might have caused him to shade the truth in deemphasizing the prejudice of the colored elite of which he was a prominent member. What Du Bois was willing into existence, as much as reporting, perhaps, is a process of racial formation, a volitional process by which “colored” people chose to identify as negro or Negro in the interwar period.⁶⁵

In truth, as we’ve seen, colored society was riven with colorism in the 1920’s, contrary to Du Bois’ denials. Many so-called “Negroes” saw a chasm of class, skin-color, and even biological *race* between the mostly lighter-skinned African-American elites and the darker-skinned working classes. “Black America was just as color-conscious as white America at that time,” remembers G. James Fleming. “You’d go to parties and you might see black men, but no black women.”⁶⁶ As Kelly Miller wrote, “it is doubtless true that the Negro has the will to be white. The face lotions and hair straighteners on which Negro papers thrive prove this, as does the well-known propensity of the darker male to mate with the lighter female.”⁶⁷ The color divisions within Black America in the 1920’s were so powerful that they ran within individuals as well as within communities. In 1908 Miller described the “American negro,” with a lower-case “n,” as “a promiscuous assortment of individuals with diverse physical and spiritual dispositions and actuated by the antagonistic instinct of the Ishmaelite.”

Within the veins of the so-called negro race there course traces of the blood of every known variety or sub-variety of the human family. Not only within the limits of the race itself, but even within the veins of the same individuals, the strains of blood are mingled and blended in inextricable confusion. Indeed, if there be such a thing as natural race antipathy, the negro, both as a race and as an individual, would be confronted by fightings within and fires without.⁶⁸

Accordingly, the bleaching ads' appeals to whiteness, lightness, and brownness in the interwar era were not merely attempts to appropriate aesthetic qualities of other races, but more profoundly efforts to call forth the whiteness that lay within black bodies. One advertisement for Fan Tan Make-Up Creme depicted two smiling models, one male and one female, with their faces neatly bisected longitudinally into dark and light portions. The bifurcated faces with their frozen smiles appear almost ghoulish, a disquieting visual representation of the Manicheanism of American racism. The advertising copy promoted a "new French Discovery which brings a marvelous whiteness and brilliancy to dark skins."⁶⁹ In this case, Du Bois' color line ran not between whites and Blacks or blacks and "high yellows," but right down the middle of the faces of the users of bleaching creams.⁷⁰



**FREE
Unless Your Skin Is
5 Shades Lighter
Instantly!**

Now you can test FREE the remarkable new French Discovery which brings a marvelous whiteness and brilliancy to dark skins. And unless it makes your skin gloriously light and lovely in the twinkling of an eye it will not cost you one penny.

You just spread this new French Creme on face, neck and hands. In ten seconds your skin is ten shades lighter. Not a bleach, not a liquid powder, but an entirely new and different French type creme developed by a young French chemist. Banishes gloss and shine for 12 hours—holds face powder all day long—conceals freckles and skin blemishes. Wonderful for evening wear. Whitens red, rough hands. Men find it invaluable for after shaving—gives that refined, creamy-ivory tone.

This new discovery is called Fan Tan Make-Up Creme. Get it today at any drug or department store. Use it for ten days. If not delighted, money cheer-

fully refunded. If you live outside New York, mail coupon and it will be sent you. When Fan Tan arrives, pay postman only \$1.00, no postage, no c. o. d. charges.

Fan Tan Laboratories, Dept. L-151,
2110 S. Michigan Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

Please send me one large size Fan Tan Make-Up Creme. When package arrives I will pay postman only \$1.00, no postage, no c. o. d. charges. If not delighted I will return the creme in 10 days and you will refund my money.

Name

Address

City..... State.....

FOR SALE AT ALL GOOD DRUG AND DEPARTMENT STORES

Figure 3: Advertisement for Fan Tan Make-Up Crème, *The New York Amsterdam News*, (September 4, 1929): 7.

George S. Schuyler's satirical 1931 novel *Black No More* was an intervention into racial discourse as well as a satire of those very discourses linking bleach and civilization. Schuyler was a frequent critic of advertisements for skin bleaching products in his newspaper columns, and his novel parodied the linkage between skin bleaching and racial progress in his depiction of "Madam Sisseretta Blandish," who "because of her prominence in making Negroes appear as much like white folks as possible" was elected four times as a vice-president of the "American Race Pride League." She was also head of the Woman's Committee of the local Social Equality League, a stand-in for the NAACP. When the main character, Max Disher, converts himself into a blond and blue-eyed white person, Blandish faces the loss of her lucrative bleaching and straightening business. She remarks, acidly, "I always said niggers didn't really have any race pride."⁷¹ With the absurd Madame Sisseretta Blandish, Schuyler skewers the very real contention that using deracinating cosmetics could be an expression of racial pride. In his journalism, Schuyler similarly linked Black racist programs of racial formation and white-focused beauty practices, as when he wrote that the attempt to capitalize the "n" in *Negro* was "a superficial dodge...somewhat akin to whitening skin and straightening hair."⁷² In Schuyler's mind as in the bleaching advertisements, whitening skin was conceptually linked to ineffectual plans for racial progress.

Conclusion: Bleach and the Formation of Blackness

Scholars in whiteness studies have admirably destabilized the idea of whiteness, demonstrating the historically-contingent fabrication of that concept. Meanwhile, historian Barbara Fields has justly critiqued whiteness studies for not similarly interrogating the formation of blackness. "Whiteness, according to its bards, may be identity; but blackness, as their silence confirms, is identification, authoritative and external."⁷³ Although Fields rejects the concept of "racial formation" altogether, her critique can also be used as a prod to investigate the alchemy of racial identity formation among Black Americans. In fact, Kelly Miller made that very comparison in 1914, when he wrote: "The rapid assimilation of European nationalities into one homogeneous type proceeds apace without noise or notice. The negro element, too, is slowly developing an ethnic solidarity which indicates its immediate, if not ultimate, physical destiny in this land."⁷⁴ Skin bleaching, advertisements for skin bleaching, and debates about skin bleaching were all part of a universe of speech and speech acts that

illuminates what it meant to be civilized and what it meant to be “colored” in the 1920’s.

The consolidation of different “colored” communities into a Negro or Black race was partly the result of an internal, emic project that was social, ideological, gendered, classed and the object of political contestation and debate—not the result of natural categorization or external, etic social pressures. Rather, it was produced in the clash of discourse between titans like Miller, White, Garvey and DuBois, the parody of Schuyler, and the even more powerful micro-politics of labor, consumer behavior, beauty practices, women’s lives, popular cultural imagery, everyday life, and transnational geopolitics. It was through that internal project that those who would become labeled as “African Americans” came to slowly enlarge the definition of Blackness, blurring the distinctions between different shades of people of African descent, even as some crossed the color line, slipping into lightness.

This is not to argue that white racism did not have an impact on the development of Black self-definitions. But certainly white racism did not determine that discourse, which was gradual, contested, and polyphonic. Phenotypically brown and light-skinned people of African descent eventually became Black because they actively rejected the “not-black” and “white black” options, not simply because of the external pressures of white racism and the one-drop-rule of hypodescent. In fact, the ability of tens of thousands of people with African ancestry to pass into whiteness belies the universality of the one-drop “rule.” Such etic strictures have been granted far too much authority in the narratives of the construction of Black identity, when that narrative is rehearsed as anything other than natural. By reading beauty practices into the discourse of civilization, we can come to a better understanding of how people shaped and were shaped by discourses of race, gender, beauty, and civilization.

As we’ve seen, tangible if permeable boundaries existed between “black,” “brown,” “light brown,” and “yellow” “Negroes” in 1920’s Harlem. In this setting, skin bleaching was far more than merely cosmetic. The advertisements not only appealed to the desire to be beautiful but also to the desires to find a mate, to get a job, and to associate oneself with the future, modernity, and progress. Skin bleaching was one practice in a universe of speech and speech-acts that constituted an African American discourse of civilization. Advertised through appeals to civility, social ambition, and beauty, at one extreme skin-

bleaching represented part of a “Great White Hope” that light-skinned “New Negroes” might actually be able to escape their past and become a new near-Caucasian race, much like the Italians, Jews, and other near-Caucasian races of the day. For others, skin bleaching was a means of “raising” the color of the race by attracting a lighter-skinned partner. Uncritical reconstructions of a unified “African American” subject position in interwar America is not only anachronistic but also obscure the deep divides and antagonisms based on class and color that striated that era. Rereading the bleaching ads in light of the discourses of civilization, aesthetics, skin color, and racial formation suggests that people constructed multiple racial identities through quotidian actions both pedestrian and potent, including actions as common and complex as applying skin bleach.

In summary, skin bleaching was an earlier age’s counter-intuitively progressive-minded effort to approximate racist Enlightenment ideals of beauty and “raise” the color of the race, away from the blackness and savagery embodied in what Kelly Miller called the “unbleached millions of Africa.” Skin bleaching offers a window into a constellation of speech and speech acts in the African American discourse of civilization, and reveals that some thought the New Negro was becoming a new non-black race, that some thought that the color line would disappear entirely, and that others predicted, with greater accuracy, that bleaches would aid in the internal consolidation and phenotypical homogenization of the “Negro” race. Three years after his original inquiry, “Is the American Negro to Remain Black or Become Bleached?” Miller answered his own question with the prescient observation, “No, the Negro will not be bleached, but browned, by the process of intra-, not inter-, racial amalgamation. Both physically and socially, the Negro will become one with himself before he becomes one with white America.”⁷⁵ At the nexus of the social, the sexual, the racial, and the economic, cosmetic bleaches worked their caustic transformations on discursive terrain that was far from skin deep.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Humanities for supporting the writing of this article.

Notes

¹ Kelly Miller, "Is the American Negro to Remain Black or Become Bleached?" *New York Amsterdam News* (September 1, 1926): 15.

² Lawrence Levine stresses that the aesthetic most often advertised by the skin crèmes of the 1920's was not whiteness but brownness--- which does nothing to explain the dozens of ads that did indeed promise "lighter" and "whiter" skin. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 286-287. Kathy Peiss uses the trope of agency to improbably transform skin bleaching into an act of resistance, celebrating it as a bold and defiant form of female self-fashioning. Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan, 1998), 204. Most recently, Davarian Baldwin has taken a similar tack in *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 55.

³ On "racial formation" see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. Critical Social Thought, ed. Michael W. Apple (New York: Routledge, 1986).

⁴ Guy B. Johnson, "Newspaper Advertisements and Negro Culture," *Journal of Social Forces* (1924-1925): 706-709. The predominance of these advertisements also reflects the reticence of white businesses to advertise in Black papers as well as the relatively anemic state of Black business enterprise outside of the cosmetic sector.

⁵ James Arthur Baldwin, "East River, Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem" in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, (New York: Dial Press, 1961), 80.

⁶ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender & Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁷ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad 1876-1917* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000), 50.

⁸ "Trial by Torture" (Editorial), *The New York Amsterdam News* (October 2, 1929): 20; Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and The Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 127.

⁹ Lee D. Baker, "Missionary Positions" in *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, ed. Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006): 37-54; Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199-202.

¹⁰ Steven Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1996); George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Kelly Miller to Thomas F. Dixon, Jr., September 1905 in *As to the Leopard's Spots: An Open Letter to Thomas Dixon, Jr.* (Washington, DC: Hayworth, 1905), 11-12.

¹² Walcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 8. Walcott borrowed the concept of circularity between classes from Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 5, 9-13; who in turn borrowed the concept from Mikhael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

¹³ Scott Hancock, "The Elusive Boundaries of Blackness: Identity Formation in Antebellum Boston," *The Journal of Negro History*, 84: 2 (Spring 1999), 119. See also: Ernest Allen, Jr. "Afro-American Identity: Reflections on the Pre-Civil War Era." *Contributions in Black Studies*, no. 7 (1985): 45-93.

¹⁴ Bay, *The White Image*, 189.

¹⁵ For more on the debate over identity and race designation at the turn of the century, see the extensive footnote in: Shawn Leigh Alexander, *T. Thomas Fortune the Afro-American Agitator: A Collection of Writings, 1880-1928* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

¹⁶ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, IL: Illini Books, 1980), 63. Herskovits, like his mentor Franz Boas, was a Jewish liberal engaged in a political battle against eugenicists who were advocating programs such as sterilization of the "unfit." By doing some of the first large scale scientific studies of the physical anthropology of the "Negro," Herskovits hoped to disprove the racist work of much physical anthropology. Still, it is remarkable how little known this formative decade of Herskovits' career is, and it is worth considering how this era shaped his later thinking on race and the conservation of culture in the African Diaspora, a construct that he did so much to define. Melville J. Herskovits, *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing* (New York: Knopf, 1928); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 115-118.

¹⁷ Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker The Berry* (New York: Scribner 1996 [Macaulay, 1929]), 89, 98.

¹⁸ The categories were: Negro; Negro mixed with Indian; more Negro than white; more Negro than white, with Indian; equal parts Negro and white; equal parts Negro and white with some Indian; more white than Negro; more white than Negro, with some Indian. For more detailed information, see the tables in the Appendix. Melville J. Herskovits, "Some Physical Characteristics of the American Negro Population," Paper presented before the National Academy of Sciences, Philadelphia, November 18, 1926, reprinted from *Social Forces* 6, no. 1 (September 1927): 95.

¹⁹ J.A. Rogers, "Sex: As Europe Accepts It," *New York Amsterdam News* (October 3, 1928): 16.

²⁰ Melville J. Herskovits, "Social Selection and the Formation of Human Types," *Human Biology: A Record of Research* 1, no. 2 (May 1929): 260-261.

²¹ Idem., "Some Effects of Social Selection on the American Negro," *Publications of the American Sociological Society* XXXII (1926): 82.

²² J.A. Rogers, "Can Humanity Be Humanized?" *New York Amsterdam News* (April 18 1928).

²³ Richard Bruce Nugent, interview with David Levering Lewis, "Voices from the Renaissance" Box 1, David Levering Lewis MS, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Thurman transformed his experience of intra-racial anti-black prejudice in Harlem into the aforementioned novel *The Blacker the Berry*.

²⁴ Edgar M. Grey, "Racial Traits—Negro's Self-Contempt," *The New York Amsterdam News* (February 16, 1927): 15.

²⁵ "Not Money But Amount of White Man's Blood in Negro's Veins Gives Standing in Race Society," *Chicago Defender* (August 15, 1913): 3. Such claims to authenticity based on dark skin color are still salient in the African American community, as is the connection between Blackness as the "real." See John L. Jackson, Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28.

²⁶ Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 202-203.

²⁷ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 285-291. For examples of color distinctions in the blues, see Charlie Pickett, "Crazy About My Black Gal," August 2, 1937, Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson, eds., *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 216; Washboard Sam, "Brown and Yellow Woman Blues," Chicago, June 26, 1941, *ibid.*, 285; Son Bonds (Sleepy John Estes), "Black Gal Swing" Chicago, September 24, 1941, *ibid.*, 37; Louie Lasky, "Teasin' Brown Blues," Chicago, April 2, 1935, *ibid.*, 164.

²⁸ Michael Taft, ed. *Blues Lyric Poetry, An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1983), 4.

²⁹ “Give Me a Teasing Brown,” and “You Take De Yaller, I Take De Black,” Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs*, 146.

³⁰ Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 84, 114-120; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20-37, 49-61; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes toward Black Women, 1880-1920*, vol. 11 of *Black Women in United States History: From Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 73-5, 142-3; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 100-101.

³¹ “Ten New Commandments,” 16; Dr. Elliott Rawlins, “Will the Women of To-day Make As Good Wives as the Wives of Yesterday?” *The New York Amsterdam News* (March 25, 1925): 12; “A Quaternity of K’s” *The New York Amsterdam News* (February 4, 1925): 16.

³² Marcus Mozhiah Garvey, Jr., “The Colored or Negro Press” in *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, Part 2*, (Paterson, NJ: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1925), 79.

³³ Kelly Miller, “Amalgamation Again,” *The New York Amsterdam News* (March 6, 1929): 16; Edgar M. Grey, “Racial Traits—Negro’s Self-Contempt” *The New York Amsterdam News* (February 16, 1927): 15; Herskovits, “Some Effects of Social Selection on the American Negro,” 82.

³⁴ Nadinola Bleaching Cream, “Whiter Skin While You Sleep!” (Advertisement), *The New York Amsterdam News* (August 14, 1929): 4; Nadine Face Powder, “Light skin that men can’t resist!” (Advertisement), *The New York Amsterdam News* (September 4, 1929): 5.

³⁵ Garvey, “The Colored or Negro Press,” 79.

³⁶ Fan Tan Make-Up Crème, “Lighten your skin to any shade you desire,” (Advertisement), *The New York Amsterdam News* (August 14, 1929): 7.

³⁷ One level, but not the only level, in which this was true was in the history of slavery and slave markets, by which white men fetishized, commodified, and raped light-skinned Black women. Slave owners sometimes freed, educated, or allowed their enslaved progeny to achieve their freedom, which helped to create the class-based color distinctions in the African American community of the twentieth century. Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *Journal of American History*, 87 (June 2000): 13-38; John G. Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1976), 37-98; Stephan Talty, “Spooked: The White Slave Narratives,” *Transition* 10, no. 1 (2000): 48-75.

³⁸ David Goldberg, "Raking the Field of the Discourse of Racism," *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 18 No 1 (Sept 1987): 58-71.

³⁹ Goldberg, "Raking the Field": 64, 66.

⁴⁰ David Hume, *Philosophical Works, Vol III* (Germany: Scientia Verlag, 1964), 250; Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 113; both cited in Goldberg, "Raking the Field," 66-67.

⁴¹ Cheryl I. Harris, Whiteness as Property *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1709-1791.

⁴² Black and White Ointment, "Bleach Your Dark Skin," (Advertisement), *The New York Age* (January 4, 1919): 7.

⁴³ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "Back to Africa" in *Century Magazine*, 150 no. 4 (Feb 1923): 539. On "big-headedness" as an attribute of Black bodies, see Jackson, *Real Black*, 63-87; the trope of big headedness appears in the foundational legend of the Nation of Islam, with the story of Yakub, the Black "big head scientist" who forms the white race. [Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the BlackMan in America* (Newport News, Virginia: United Brothers Communications Systems, 1992), 117.] It is striking if not causally related that Garvey and DuBois' dispute over big headedness and whiteness inside of Blackness and helped to form the concept of the Black race.

⁴⁴ This infamous confrontation between Du Bois and Garvey has been discussed in: Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Dover, Mass.: The Majority Press, 1976), 297-299; William Jeremiah Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 257; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 81-82. Lewis is unique in minimizing Du Bois' insults, which he terms part of "storytelling at its best about hilarious doings," p. 82.

⁴⁵ Du Bois, "Back to Africa": 541. The battles between Du Bois and Garvey over the "technic of civilization" prefigure battles between their successors over "Technics." See: Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 56-7; Cheryl Lynette Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 137, 147.

⁴⁶ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "So the Girl Marries" in *Crisis* 35 no. 6: 192-193, 207-209 (June 1928). (New York: Crisis Publishing Company, 1928): 192-193, 207-209. Du Bois claims, rather improbably, that the new skin bleaches did not lighten but instead "delicately darkened." There were products that darkened the skin, such as sun tan oils, but bleaches were not among them. Levine, *Black Culture*, 290.

⁴⁷ Marcus Moziah Garvey, Jr., "W.E. Burghardt Du Bois as a Hater of Dark People" in *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques Garvey, (Paterson, NJ: Frank Cass and Co., 1925), 2:310-320. An attempt to challenge white standards of beauty likewise lay at the heart of Richard Boyd's Negro Doll Company, which was endorsed by the National Baptist Convention and sought to challenge the depiction of beauty as "flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked." "The Negro or Colored Dolls," *National Baptist Review*, January 1, 1909, cited in Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 194.

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 246-61; Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44-88.

⁴⁹ Marcus Moziah Garvey, Jr. "Purity of Race" in *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques Garvey, (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 1:37.

⁵⁰ Edgar M. Grey, "Racial Traits—Negro's Self-Contempt," *The New York Amsterdam News* (February 16, 1927): 15.

⁵¹ In 1929, Kelly Miller estimated that the number of Negroes who could pass as white at less than 100,000. In 1969, however, Walter White estimated the number of Negroes who "disappeared" into whiteness at 12,000 a year. Kelly Miller, "Crossing the Color Line," *New York Amsterdam News* (August 21, 1929): 20; Walter White, *A Man Called White* (New York, Arno Press, 1969), 3; Mencke, *Mulattoes*, 9, 11, 20, 76, 166-8, 181-2, 200, 204, 223.

⁵² Kelly Miller, *Out of the House of Bondage* (New York, NY: Neale Publishing Company, 1914), 53.

⁵³ "The American Negro," *The New York Amsterdam News* (February 15, 1928): 7.

⁵⁴ Miller, *House of Bondage*, 58.

⁵⁵ Miller, "Remain Black or Become Bleached," 15.

⁵⁶ Edward R. Embree, *Brown America: The Story of a New Race* (New York: Viking Press, 1931), 3-5; Tellingly, when Viking reissued the book in 1943 as *Brown Americans: The Story of a Tenth of the Nation*, it is the nation and not the new race that takes center stage. The reissue obliterates the original introduction and replaces the idea of the "new race" with the Second World War's language of liberalism, freedom, and the "melting pot," indicating the literal erasure of an older racial paradigm with the ascendancy of a new one. Edward R. Embree, *Brown Americans: The Story of a Tenth of the Nation* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943), 1-5.

⁵⁷ Matthew Frye Jacobson argues in *Whiteness of a Different Color* that between 1840 and the 1920's, so-called Hebrews, Celts, Alpines, and Slavs were not thought of as white "ethnics" but as distinct white races, in a hierarchy that descended from the "whitest" of the white people, the Anglo Saxons. It was only with the rise of the term "Caucasian" in the mid-twentieth century that these many "near-whites" became solidified into a single "scientific" white race. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Harvard University Press: 1998), 39-137. Thomas Guglielmo challenges this model in: *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). There is a rich literature on "whiteness studies," much of it inspired by David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991). For a critical take on this literature, see the special issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001).

⁵⁸ Garvey, "Du Bois as a Hater," 311.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁶⁰ Miller, *House of Bondage*, 45.

⁶¹ Ralph Linton, "The Vanishing American Negro," *American Mercury* 64 no. 278 (Feb 1947): 133.

⁶² Walter White, "Has Science Conquered the COLOR LINE?" *Look*, 30 August 1949, 94-95; Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: New Press, 2003), 341-347; Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 158.

⁶³ Du Bois, "Back to Africa," 542.

⁶⁴ Vere E. Johns, "Colour In Jamaica," *New York Amsterdam News, Magazine Section*, 18 December, 1929, p. 4.

⁶⁵ The term "negro" was not uniformly capitalized in the 1920's. I use both forms in this essay to retain the original variability.

⁶⁶ G. James Fleming, Interview, Baltimore, Md., June 1976, with David Levering Lewis, David Levering Lewis MSS, "Voices from the Renaissance," Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

⁶⁷ Kelly Miller, "Amalgamation Again," *The New York Amsterdam News* (March 6, 1929): 16.

⁶⁸ Miller, *House of Bondage*, 49.

⁶⁹ Advertisement for Fan Tan Make-Up Creme, *The New York Amsterdam News*, (September 4, 1929): 7.

⁷⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*

⁷¹ George C. Schuyler, *Black No More* (New York: Modern Library, 1999 [1931]), 39, 28; Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 111.

⁷² Cited in *ibid.*, 112.

⁷³ Barbara J. Fields, "Whiteness, Racism, and Identity," *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 60 (Fall 2001): 51.

⁷⁴ Miller, *House of Bondage*, 49.

⁷⁵ Kelly Miller, "Amalgamation; Race Problems," *The New York Amsterdam News* (January 2, 1929).