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Colors in Conflict: Light vs. Dark Reloaded; or, the Commodification of (Black) Beauty

Simone Puff

If we believe recent studies “biracial” has now become the new beauty ideal in the US. This move away from a “white” standard to one that better reflects the realities of a twenty-first century multi-racial America, however, only extends skin color privilege to the group that is closest to those being “white.” In other words, while there is a trend towards a broadening of beauty ideals, this does not necessarily imply that old standards vanish, merely that they become less obvious when they are perpetuated. This essay discusses conflicts of “Light vs. Dark” based on different shades of skin color among African Americans. Approaching a series of articles and advertisements in *Ebony* magazine from a critical discourse analysis viewpoint, I argue that the dichotomy between economic interests on the one hand and the magazine’s attempt to instill in its readers a positive sense of Blackness on the other hand makes for a complex set of (color) narratives. They are in constant conflict with each other, having their roots in the commodification of a racialized version of Black beauty that is still biased towards the lighter shades of brown skin.

How you see yourself is through representation – how the world represents you. You want what you are shown, what is presented and promoted as privileged. – Heidi Safia Mirza¹

This past April *People* magazine declared songstress Beyoncé Knowles as the “Most Beautiful Woman in the World in 2012.” The cover image of

¹ Qtd. in Bim Adewunmi, “The Many Shades of Racism.”

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the April 27 issue shows her wearing a snow white gown and sporting a blond straightened hairdo. Thus, Beyoncé – a light-skinned African American woman – emerges as an almost uncanny look-alike of German supermodel Heidi Klum. Ironically, Beyoncé not only resembles Klum in appearance, with both the dress and hair color accentuating her near-white skin, but she even wears the former model's very own necklace that she allegedly borrowed for the photo shoot. In 22 years Beyoncé is only the second Black² woman awarded that title, and looking at light-skinned actress Halle Berry who made the list in 2003, it seems that the idea of beauty in the United States – and around the world – is inclusive of non-white models only in appearance; in actual fact, it is still a narrowly defined one.

This “light is right” attitude that Black people are encouraged to internalize by the media and the American society at large leads to bitter color conflicts within the Black community. “Light vs. Dark” is as much an issue today as it was in the past, except that today an ever increasing multi-billion dollar cosmetics and beauty industry promises to offer cures to what is still presented as undesirable: dark skin (see Glenn). Even though the US likes to portray itself as “color-blind” and “post-racial” in today’s day and age, certain shades of skin color still seem to be more valued than others. In this essay I elaborate on the conflicting discourses of skin color as seen in a discourse analysis of selected feature articles and advertisements from *Ebony* magazine, a general interest monthly targeted at African Americans. Based on a larger research project this paper looks at the commodification of (Black) female beauty that informs the discourse of skin color even in the twenty-first century.³

² I use the words Black and African American synonymously. While the term *Black* is capitalized when it refers to the racial group, the term *white* is intentionally spelled with a lower-case “w.” When used to refer to people, the label *white* has always been considered the human “norm,” and continues to be used for the group of people that is considered as having no race, as being unmarked, and as being attributed with all the power in majority-white Western societies (see, for example, Dyer 1-4). I intentionally want to draw the reader’s attention to that social imbalance by lower-casing the term.

³ The author would like to thank Dr Linda Carty and Dr Rennie Simson from the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York for valuable scholarly advice and feedback on this project.

Colorism in Context: Which Black Is Beautiful?

“If you’re light, you’re all right, if you’re black get back.” – The children’s rhyme that many African Americans recited while growing up was more often than not an early recognition of how they were perceived in the racist America they were raised in. Today, the meaning of this saying still has serious implications for Black people in the US, particularly for Black women. The US is still a society that continues to be dominated by “racial formation” (Omi and Winant) and the racialization of all of its non-white citizens. It also remains a society based on a patriarchal system of valuing women in terms of their beauty, which is seen as a valuable form of “social capital” (Hunter, *Race, Gender* 5). It comes as no surprise, then, that one such currency is light skin color.

The Black body, as Charles W. Mills points out, has historically been considered intellectually, morally, and aesthetically inferior, because it does not comply to the “somatic norm” of the white body (61, 120). Moreover, Blackness long served as what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “badge of inferiority” (53). The celebration of white aesthetics thus implies the necessity to try and emulate the white body for all others who want to reach full personhood (Mills 120). Additionally, as Margaret L. Hunter argues, women’s bodies in general are “manipulable commodities objectified for male consumption” (“Light, Bright” 31). Consequently, it would be naïve to see beauty as simply in the eye of the beholder. Rather, beauty needs to be conceived as an ideological product which is clearly based on the conception of a white supremacist as well as a patriarchal society (*ibid.*, 30).

The internalization of white values was coined as *colorism* by novelist Alice Walker. As such it is a global phenomenon among people of color, but it is particularly prominent in the African American community, who, ever since the era of slavery, learned that lighter skin equals more privilege in the United States (see Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose; Drake and Cayton Jr.; Frazier). What Alice Walker called “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people” (290) is an age-old hierarchy and a form of racism based on skin color, hair texture, and other physical features *within* a racial or ethnic community. In this hierarchy light skin is seen as the standard of beauty, while dark skin is labeled as undesirable. Despite the obvious reference to skin color in the word *colorism*, the meaning of the term goes beyond someone’s complexion: “‘Color,’” as the sociologist Mark E. Hill emphasizes, “is used . . . to refer to physical traits commonly associated with racial ancestry such as skin tone, hair texture, and facial morphology” (1,439).

Preference for light skin and other facial features that are closer to European standards of beauty in white America has had long-lasting effects on communities of color. One such consequence is that those communities have come to internalize dominant standards of what race critic bell hooks calls the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (22). Despite all the progress that was made during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and the subsequent “Black is Beautiful” movement, Black people, as hooks argues, “continue to be socialized *via* mass media and non-progressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values” (hooks 18; original emphasis). In other words, the popular 1960s slogan “Black is Beautiful” never took hold in the US society at large, and due to the pervasiveness of normative Eurocentric standards of beauty it quickly lost momentum in the Black community, too.

Looking at some of the most successful “Black” American female celebrities today, the front of what sociologist Margaret Hunter calls the “beauty queue” (*Race, Gender* 69) is mostly occupied by women who look like Beyoncé Knowles, Mariah Carey, and Halle Berry. What these women have in common is not only their A-list celebrity status as singers, entertainers, and actresses, but also that all of them are light-skinned African American women. Coincidence or not, none of these Black female celebrities look anything like Kelly Rowland, India.Arie, or Gabrielle Union, who are all dark-skinned and display Afrocentric physical features. Coincidence or not, none of the latter three are as successful in the entertainment industry as their lighter-skinned counterparts. Taking into account findings from a 2011 study which proclaims the biracial look to be the new ideal (Harris, “Economies of Color” 4; Penrice) I argue that the slogan “light is right” still rings far more true than the affirmative folk saying “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.” Exceptions prove the rule, as the saying goes, but when examining, for example, America’s film and music industry, many of the Black female celebrities of the twenty-first century closely resemble the twentieth-century trailblazers Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, and Dorothy Dandridge (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 135-162).

In the United States light skin has been – and in many instances continues to be – the “gold standard for beauty and desirability” (Harris, “From Color Line” 56), particularly for Black women.⁴ This is true for

⁴ With Black male actors, the color issue is often reversed, as dark skin comes to stand for “virility, menace, or sexiness” (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 135), which are attributes often desired for Black men in the movies.

real life⁵ as much as for the media and is reflected in various media outlets on screen and “on the page.” While in the past the media was seen as a mirror held up to society, mass communication scholars today grant the media some agency in producing meaning, too. In other words, media outlets constitute and are themselves constitutive of social reality. This social reality is shaped by both editorial and advertising content alike, with the latter still reflecting the commodification of a narrowly defined white beauty ideal.

The Beauty Myth, Advertising, and Ebony Magazine

Historically, as Kevin L. Keenan maintains in a study of Black people in magazines, “[a]dvertising has been criticized as inherently racist” (907) – as well as sexist, as I would add here. This is reflected not only in the models that are chosen but also in the products that are advertised. Over-featuring light-skinned (and white) models and excessively advertising beauty products that promote light skin and straight hair are common. Such practices send one clear message to Black consumers, above all, Black women: being light and bright is acceptable and desired, while being black and brown is not. The possibility to reap what can be called light skin privilege thus causes many Black women to try and approximate this light-skinned beauty ideal. “Blinded” by the white, so to speak, consumers are encouraged to buy into America’s white-controlled beauty myth that even Black-oriented magazines cannot fully escape.⁶

Advertisements of beauty products targeted at Black women in monthly consumer magazines like *Ebony* use emotional messages to pretend “that intangibles like love, popularity, and beauty themselves could be bought” (Susannah Walker 6). Because African American beauty culture has always been influenced by a white commercialized beauty standard, ads for skin bleaching products, for example, relate “light skin with femininity, beauty, and romantic success” (109). Studies of such cosmetics ads trace the development from overtly devaluing “the dark, ugly tones of the skin” like a Nadinola skin bleaching ad from the 1920s suggested (qtd. in Susannah Walker 38), to more covert language that portrayed light skin as the desired ideal. This is expressed by, for example, referring to Black men’s preferences in women, who – according to

⁵ Attesting to this fact is the 2012 documentary *Dark Girls*, an independent production that features numerous testimonials of dark-complexioned African American women who tell their stories of yearning for light skin.

⁶ I borrow the term “beauty myth” from Naomi Wolf’s book by the same title.

ads from the 1950s and 60s – would “notice and admire girls with clear, bright, Nadinola-light complexions” (*ibid.* 109).

In its early years *Ebony*, an African American consumer monthly first published in 1945, was known for having openly adhered to traditional (white) notions of American beauty by favoring light-skinned models on its covers and elsewhere. Additionally, it printed decidedly anti-Black advertisements for skin bleaching products that promised a better life to consumers who could get rid of, for example, “dull, dark, drab skin” (“Black and White Bleaching Cream,” *Ebony*, August 1961, 94). Confirming this practice, *Washington Post* correspondent Eugene Robinson remembers that “[t]he black-oriented magazines that came to our house, *Ebony* and *Jet*, were full of ads for ‘miracle’ creams that would lighten your skin” (112).

Several advertising campaign series that ran in *Ebony* in the late 1950s and early 1960s even played with the pervasive belief that Black men would find light(er) skin more attractive in Black women. In one black-and-white ad of the series, a woman receives flowers from her love interest, replete with his note saying “I want these roses to see how lovely you are.” The ad then assures the reader that “Wonderful things happen when your complexion is clear, bright, Nadinola-light,” while the text of the ad’s body encourages its female readers like this: “Don’t let a dull, dark complexion deprive you of popularity. . . . Chase away those bad-complexion blues with Nadinola Bleaching Cream” (*Ebony*, November 1959, 24). In another full-page (and full-color) ad, a light-skinned woman looks playfully up in the air while the Black man next to her seems to whisper something in her ear. This image is paired with the slogan “Life is more fun when your complexion is clear, bright, Nadinola-light” (*Ebony*, January 1962, 13). And yet a final example suggests more popularity and sexual attractiveness for the Black woman using the bleaching cream: “Look how men flock around the girl with the clear, bright, Nadinola-light complexion” (*Ebony*, October 1961, 8).

What merits attention when looking at all these ads is the decidedly white middle-class touch of the 1950s and 1960s, by showing women wearing pearl earrings and sporting well-maintained, “classic” (white) feminine hairdos. Conspicuous is that all models appear as very light-skinned, both in the black-and-white and in the full color ads, with almost no traces of “African” facial features. Their physical appearance makes them look racially ambiguous and – in a different context – suggests they could have just as well “passed” for white women. This calls to mind what Paul du Gay et al. wrote about representation in advertising in *Doing Cultural Studies*:

[T]he language of advertising, and the ways it works by attaching meanings to identities, suggests that representation is not so much about reflecting the identities we already have as telling us what sorts of identities we can *become* – and how. (39; original emphasis)

In the case of these Nadinola ads, the representation of Black women constructs them as having more success and status when they bleach their skin, by telling them how to adopt new identities, in other words how to *become*.

A cultural shift in both journalistic and advertising content only came in the 1960s with the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement. Since then *Ebony* has been firm in denying that it ever practiced a skin color hierarchy at all. Laura B. Randolph, one of the magazine's columnists, even claimed that the magazine "was the first to celebrate the rainbow of our beauty" ("The Write Stuff" November 1995, 18L). This, however, was not expressed in the magazine until the late 1960s; before the beauty idea was, at best, one-sided and "lightened" (see Brown).

Even from the 1960s onwards, the magazine has kept an ambiguous relationship to Black beauty, as is expressed in the continued practice to print advertisements for skin lightening creams. During the "Black is Beautiful" era the sales strategy for what were essentially the same products has been cleverly adapted. Nadinola, for example, started to advertise its skin bleaching products by commodifying the slogan "Black is Beautiful" as well as suggesting that women using the product could still love their "natural" complexion (Ultra Nadinola, *Ebony*, April 1971, 182). Other tactics were to use subliminal messages, such as the promise that Nadinola "fades away dark spots" (*Ebony*, August 1986, 132). In addition to these more subtle cues, products were in most cases no longer advertised as bleaching or skin lightening creams. Rather, euphemisms such as "fade creams" or "dark spot removers" have become part of the discourse in order not to offend a new group of customers who need to be convinced that they are not selling out to a white beauty standard but are merely enhancing their natural skin tones. As is implied by the word *fade*, two synonyms of which are "to grow pale," and "to cause to lose colour," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the side effect may be a lighter hue of skin. This is, in and of itself, a pleasant consequence for many in a society that continues to adhere to a "light is right" mentality.

Writing about Black Beauty: A Discursive Case Study

Looking at specific articles and advertisements from *Ebony* magazine in each decade after the 1960s allows important insights into the discourses of skin color that shaped the representation (and commodification) of Black beauty. The 1970s, for example, were a decade in which “Black is Beautiful” aesthetics were still unapologetically celebrated. The outlook into the future, as expressed in the journalistic content of *Ebony*’s magazine articles on Black beauty, was positive, although progress was noted as happening only at a snail’s pace. The feature article, “Have Black Models Really Made It?” (Rowan, May 1970), is a fitting example for the slow path to equality when it comes to beauty standards. In one paragraph the author mentions the fact that “blackness became a commodity” on Madison Avenue, but only at the threat of the advertising industry losing money if it failed to recognize Black purchasing power (160). The article also demonstrates that even though *Black* became a “fad” in America in the late 1960s, Black models in the 1970s were still faring worse financially than their white counterparts (153). The six-page feature story focuses mainly on the inroads Black models were making into what used to be a business celebrating ivory-white beauty. Along these lines, the relevance of different shades of Black skin is also briefly addressed. One model is described as having had difficulties in getting a job in the past because she was once considered “too dark.” Now, however, she is in high demand because those who are “very black and very kinky-headed” became *en vogue* with the advent of “Black is Beautiful.” By the same token, another model is quoted to have experienced problems (in the 1980s) due to her light skin color because she was no longer considered “Negro enough” (158). This, of course, was a by-product of changing social norms in the Black community. With that, mainstream America as well as some Black people started putting down African Americans of lighter hues. Essentially, some were no longer considered “Black enough” to represent the “Black race.” As Rowan concludes, “[s]uch ironies are a rather bitter truth for black models who range in skin color from *café au lait* to very black” (158).⁷

In light of the analytical conclusion on the part of this *Ebony* writer it is quite incongruous that on the page before the article as well as on its last page readers find ads for bleaching creams. The full-page color ad

⁷ Over the years, *Ebony* has repeatedly returned to the topic of Black models. As Constance C. R. White aptly professes in her feature on Black models in September 2008, “[m]odels are an ideal. They are standard-bearers of what a society considers beautiful, attractive or acceptable” (100). Taking this argument a step further, models and beauty queens can be seen as the litmus test for Black beauty and racial progress in America.

for “Ultra Bleach and Glow Skin Tone Cream” (May 1970, 151) shows the face of a racially ambiguous woman with an immaculate clear and light complexion. A few pages later, a quarter-page ad for Dr. Fred Palmer’s “Ultra Bleach and Tone Cream” also features a light-skinned woman with the ad’s slogan promising the user “brighter, clearer skin” (160). Such dichotomies are common and demonstrate that advertising content continues to reproduce some of the dominant structures that seem to have already been overcome in the editorial content sections of the magazine.

While the feature story on Black models in the 1970s specifically dealt with the perception of models, some articles in *Ebony* at that time also focused on the “everyday” concept of “Black beauty.” One example is Lerone Bennett, Jr.’s “What is Black Beauty?” that was first published in November 1980 and later reprinted in June 1984 in the wake of the controversy over light-skinned model Vanessa Williams becoming the first Black Miss America. Bennett starts out with an epigraph by W. E. B. Du Bois in which the scholar praises the beauty of Black women (159). This intertextual reference to one of the most prominent African American intellectuals of the twentieth century is extended later in the text when Bennett cites a lengthy fictional dialogue about Black beauty from Du Bois’s essay “Dusk of Dawn” (160-161). Together with the closing quote of the article by the ancient Queen of Sheba – “I am black and comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem . . .” (161, original emphasis) – it seems as if Bennett wanted to “evoke” Black ancestors from the past, to show *Ebony*’s readers that Black female beauty has always been celebrated all over the world. This impression is intensified, on the one hand, by the image on the first page of the article, which is a reprint of the artist Charles White’s charcoal drawing, “Negro Woman.” This black-and-white drawing of almost a dozen Black women, many with decidedly African facial features and textured hair, was originally used to illustrate the cover of an *Ebony* special issue on “The Negro Woman” in August 1966. On the other hand, Bennett starts his feature story with a personal account of meeting a Nigerian soldier at an arts festival in Lagos, Nigeria. As Bennett writes, the soldier was exhilarated at the sight of African American women whom he considered to be “the most beautiful women in the world” (159). The Nigerian’s account is used in contrast to the view of “many White Americans, and unfortunately, some Black Americans who find it difficult to give Black beauty its due” (159). This, effectively, gets Bennett into the topic of his article, which demonstrates progress but also some remaining ambivalence towards the meanings of *Black* beauty.

Bennett continues by juxtaposing results from a nation-wide survey by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (“What Do Blacks Think of Them-

selves?”)⁸ with a readers’ poll that invited *Ebony* readers to nominate everyday Black women for the title “Most Beautiful” (“Ten Most Beautiful Black Women”). The women selected in the poll “represent all shades,” according to the lead text (163). Taking this as his main argument for progress, Bennett, in his own article, comes to six conclusions that read like a paean to Black beauty. One of his core messages is that “Black beauty cannot, should not, and must not be appraised by alien standards” (160). Furthermore, he promotes a strong sense of inclusiveness, employs the metaphor of Black beauty being like a rainbow, and evidently embraces the necessity to celebrate all shades of skin color: “There are many mansions in the house of Black beauty, and they are all lovely, and Black” (161).⁹ By heralding all these “mansions,” race unity is clearly emphasized. This seems to be an overt attempt to counter post-1960s views that some shades of “Black” were better than others. Concurrently, pre-1960s standards of “light is right” are suggested to be equally *passé*. Bennett’s prime example is Lena Horne, who was long regarded as the epitome of Black female beauty. She is now seen – according to the writer – as “one segment of the Black continuum” (161), not more and not less. Bennett also stresses that Black beauty needs to be defined by both external as well as internal factors and heralds the magazine’s readers for whom Black beauty is “not a purely ornamental concept” (161). He concludes with the remark that this inclusiveness, which is in the “soul of the Black beholder,” would also be the “stand-point of *Ebony*,” praising the magazine for seeing that “every Black woman is beautiful in her own way” (161).

Despite the fact that, in the early 1980s, *Ebony* might have been accepting a greater range of skin color than before the call for “Black is Beautiful,” white America did not necessarily agree. This becomes transparent in the controversy around the election of Vanessa Williams as the first Black Miss America. In the cover story of December 1983, which celebrated this milestone in Black history, Lynn Norment cites the psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint who maintains that, “[u]ntil you get a Miss America with Negro features, I don’t think you can say color was irrelevant to her selection” (133). Vanessa Williams’s crowning as Miss America became an important media event in the discourse of skin color in *Ebony* that year. An extended discussion among *Ebony* readers

⁸ Kenneth and Mamie Clark were two well-known psychologists whose doll tests had become iconic in the context of the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. The 1980 survey was commissioned for *Ebony* by the magazine’s founder and publisher John H. Johnson.

⁹ This alludes to the Biblical passage “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2 King James Version). Bennett seems to suggest that not only are the different shades “lovely,” but they are also God-made and therefore good.

and the general public provoked extensive further coverage. This started with a reprint of Bennett, Jr.'s 1980 feature story "What is Black Beauty?" in *Ebony*'s June 1984 issue. In this case, the "raging dispute" (48) over Black beauty standards, as it was called in the reprinted version of the article, had a lasting effect on the discourse of skin color. This is shown in many follow-up articles on Black beauty and the significance of different shades of skin color. As the June 1984 reprint of Bennett's article explained, the fact that it seemed that Williams's election was based on externally defined white beauty standards led to an intra-racial dispute. Some African Americans even claimed that the only reason Williams won was because of her near-Caucasian looks. Ironically, the very same issue of *Ebony* confirms this view – although perhaps inadvertently. An ad for a "fade cream," which features a light-skinned woman and promises that "[n]othing else . . . does the job of fading the way Palmer's Skin Success Cream does," supports the notion that beauty is, indeed, still defined by external non-Black standards (22; my emphasis).

In the 1990s, based on the articles in *Ebony*, standards of Black beauty were expanding to also include women of color in mainstream America. Lynn Norment's article "Black Beauty is In" (September 1990) emphasizes that it is not just one type, but "various shades of brown-black skin" complete with full lips and sometimes short-cropped hair that could make it in the model and fashion industry (25). Even so, the same magazine issue once again contains advertisements for bleaching creams. Among these is an ad for Vantex Skin Bleaching Creme (94) distributed by Fashion Fair Cosmetics. This is a division of Johnson Publications that was founded in 1973 by John H. Johnson's wife Eunice W. Johnson ("Fashion Fair Cosmetics," November 1992, 71). The fact that the Johnson Publishing Company is a stakeholder in a company which sells beauty products to Black women – including skin lightening products – makes for an interesting conflict of interest. Until today, Fashion Fair Cosmetics promotes and sells this specific skin bleaching cream, which was once described as one of Fashion Fair's "most popular products" ("Fashion Fair Cosmetics" 74). It was advertised in full-page color ads in *Ebony* until the mid-2000s.¹⁰ Even more striking is that after that time, it remained a part of the editorial content in *Ebony*'s beauty sections. In October 2008, among other products, it was listed in the magazine's beauty section to help improve one's complexion ("On the Spot", 65), and in September 2009 it was ranked as the number one product in a list of "Black Beauty Bests" (112). It remains an inherent contradiction that throughout the years of promoting Black

¹⁰ It seems as if the last time a full-page ad for Vantex ran in *Ebony* was in December 2006 (131).

beauty in all its shades *Ebony* continued the advertising of a bleaching cream that would only promote a light-skinned version of Black beauty.

Black beauty continued to be covered in *Ebony* in the 2000s, both on an “external” or physical level as well as on an “internal” or spiritual and cultural level. The former category mainly includes covering Black models and the beauty industry. The article “The Business of Black Beauty” (Welteroth, September 2009), for instance, discusses the variety of products that are now available: “Black women are overwhelmed by marketers competing for our dollars. Whether dark-chocolate or tawny-hued, relaxed, natural or weaved, today, Sisters have options in the beauty aisle” (110). It is this availability of options that is presented as a sign of racial progress, yet the aforementioned contradictions with regard to skin bleaching creams remain.

A good example for beauty from “within” is the September 2007 column “Two Sides,” in which two young Black women relate their personal understandings of Black beauty (“Is Black Still Beautiful?”). One of them is Kiri Davis, who directed the award-winning short documentary *A Girl Like Me* (2007). Her key argument in the opinion piece is that beauty is cultural and defined by Black people’s “distinctive and unique roots” (*Ebony*, September 2007, 233). Thus, Black beauty mainly comes from accepting oneself from within and from refusing to take someone else’s standards for one’s own.

This is not always that easy, particularly because mainstream American society still continues to define the standards of beauty. While there is clearly more diversity than in the past, some standards have not changed in four decades. An example of this is the story of a Black model from the popular television show *America’s Next Top Model* in the feature article “Black Out: What Has Happened to the Black Models?” (September 2008). As *Ebony* editor Constance C. R. White records, a hairstylist favorably commented on a hair-straightening job of a Black model on the show by saying to her, “[n]ow you look beautiful because you really had nappy hair” (100). Such comments, even in light of the recent “Afro-Renaissance,” which involves more Black women in the public sphere going “natural,” speak to the fact that Black women’s looks are still often measured against a white-defined gold standard. It is thus not surprising that until this day, ads for chemical hair relaxers and skin bleaching creams – although less frequent than in the past – are still promoted through the advertising pages of *Ebony*.

In spite of the magazine’s attempt in the editorial sections to endorse a unique standard of Black beauty that is based on self-definition, throughout the time period studied there is almost no critical discussion of skin lightening creams. This is conspicuous in light of the fact that excessive skin bleaching has harmful side effects, and products sold in

neighborhood stores and on the Internet often contain toxic ingredients such as mercury, steroids, and the lightening agent hydroquinone (Downie, Cook-Bolden, and Nevins Taylor; Hunter, *Race Gender*).¹¹ There are likely several reasons for largely neglecting the discourse strand of health as a physiological aspect of the complexion discourse. For one, it can be assumed that *Ebony*'s parent publishing house Johnson Publications' interest in increasing the profits of one of its own businesses is a contributing factor. It follows, then, that the magazine's dependency on advertising revenue from other cosmetic companies might prevent an honest discussion of, for example, health risks associated with bleaching. These advertising companies might see such criticism as a direct attack on their clients' products, and consider suspending their advertising in the magazine. Another, yet unrelated, reason could be that skin bleaching became even more of a taboo issue with the call for "Black is Beautiful," for it entirely contradicts what was suddenly seen as a progressive Black aesthetic based on loving one's natural Black self. It seems plausible that *Ebony* wanted to be careful not to offend its readers by criticizing what, for some, was an entirely personal and, for others, a deeply politically-charged issue. For these reasons, criticism of skin bleaching is simply in the realm of the "not sayable" in the discourse of skin color (see Foucault 51). The concepts of the "sayable" and the "not sayable" show the "blind spots" of certain discourses, in other words, the things that are not addressed. In addition, certain power structures are exposed, among these the gate-keeping function *Ebony*'s editorial board might have exercised.¹² Two likely reasons are the wish not to aggravate white corporate advertisers and consequently harm its own business on the one hand, and, on the other, the fear to broach issues that are considered too sensitive and socially undesirable among its readership.

¹¹ Until the mid-1960s, skin bleaching creams were advertised as containing ammoniated mercury, which was – at that time – seen as the most "dependable bleaching ingredient," as an ad for "Palmer's Skin Success Bleach Cream" promised in *Ebony* (May 1963, 100). Hydroquinone is still advertised as an ingredient in "fade creams" like Ambi and Vantex, and this despite the fact that Ronald Hall describes the chemical as possibly carcinogenic according to some scientists. It is banned in the European Union, Japan, and Australia but approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States. Every few months, or so it seems, the FDA issues a warning against mercury and other toxic ingredients found in cosmetics. In March 2012, another such statement warned that women in at least seven states were found to have poisoned themselves by using toxic lightening creams, soaps, and lotions (Alexander).

¹² Basically gate-keeping refers to "the process through which certain information passes a series of checkpoints ('gates') before being finally accepted as news material" (Fourie 76).

It is more than just a little ironic that *Ebony*, the name of which stands for very black color, often featured light-skinned Black people on its early covers, and that some of its advertisements have continuously heralded light skin color as the epitome of beauty. To this day, skin lightening products are featured in the popular African American periodical, although to a lesser extent than in the past. *Ebony*, just like any other (Black) consumer magazine, operates in what Cornel West sees as the “ever-expanding market culture that puts everything and everyone up for sale” (xvi). Taking this as a prerequisite, Stuart Hall’s quote on popular culture – which the mass market magazine *Ebony* has certainly become a part of – offers useful insights as a conclusion to the previous analysis:

[P]opular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (Hall 477; original emphasis)

It is the idea of being imagined and represented based on popular desires and fantasies that should be stressed here. Evidently, what is desired is often colored – no pun intended – by what mainstream society dictates. A magazine like *Ebony*, which Michael Leslie once called an “advertising vehicle” (431) will, therefore, always find itself waging battles between “Light vs. Dark.” These dichotomous conflicts of color arise from an external societal desire for a white (or light-skinned) beauty ideal and a more internal desire of the magazine’s African American readership to appraise and celebrate Black beauty in all its shades. Ultimately, intra-racial color conflicts still exist in today’s society because beauty is still commodified along color lines and shades of skin. As long as Black women like Beyoncé Knowles and Halle Berry are the only ones to make it to the top of “Most Beautiful” lists in mainstream America, and as long as skin bleaching creams continue to be advertised to Black women in African American magazines, the battle between “Light vs. Dark” will continue to appear as a remake, both in Black America and in the US society at large.

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