

## **From White to Very White to Kinda Brown: Analysis of Racist Practices in the Cosmetic Industry**

*“Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? . . . Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs’ tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother . . . had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair.”*  
— Angelou ‘And Still I Rise’

In the U.S., all women are subject to stringent beauty standards, as beauty is synonymous with a woman’s individual value. Pale, flawless white skin, long, flowing blond hair, tall and thin feminine body, and graceful and delicate facial features complete with blue eyes compose the hegemonic, Eurocentric beauty standards by which all women are measured. While many women may lack beauty when compared against this unattainable and narrow ideal, women of color experience the most subjugation. In order to achieve the hegemonic Eurocentric beauty ideal, women are encouraged to alter their natural looks through cosmetic surgeries and products. Given that cosmetic products may be safer, more affordable, and more accessible than invasive surgeries, many women may choose this avenue to strive for beauty ideals. However, the cosmetic industry privileges white consumers over consumers of color by limiting the accessibility of cosmetic products that pair with darker skin tones. As Maya Angelou highlighted in her poem (quoted above), white is the standard of beauty that women of color cannot attain. The continual exclusion of racially diverse beauty products and advertisements reinforces the idea that women of color will never have the same place in the beauty hierarchy as white women. Racial exclusivity in the cosmetic industry, as primarily seen through the lack of racial diversity in beauty products and advertisements, is a form of institutional racism. The reproduction of

Eurocentric masculine-driven beauty ideals within cosmetic industries upholds a racial, sexual hierarchy that privileges lighter skin tones over darker ones.

The culture of racial exclusivity found in the cosmetic industry is not a recent development. Examples of racial oppression are littered throughout the history of the cosmetic production. White women have always been the primary market for mainstream beauty brands, while black women and other women of color have always been more of an afterthought. Until the early 1940s, makeup was produced and advertised for white women. This changed when mainstream brands began creating and marketing skin lightening creams for women of color (Hope, 2016). An example of one skin-bleaching product advertisement in the 1940s shows a clear skin color change from brown to white after applying the cream (Image 1, Lucky Brown, 1940). A similar advertisement shows a man looming over the shoulder of a woman who has used the skin lightening cream, and his gaze suggests that he finds her new skin tone attractive (Image 1 Lucky Brown, 1940). These advertisements suggest that women of color were expected to try to literally change their skin color through the use of harmful skin products in order to achieve the white Eurocentric ideal of feminine beauty. Further, the inclusion of positive male appraisal communicates that women would also change their skin color with the goal of becoming more attractive to men. These examples are forms of institutional racism that served to reproduce whiteness by persuading women of color that they would not be deemed beautiful unless they conformed to whiteness. Unfortunately, this presented women of color with a lose-lose situation because they would never be able to become completely white—they just had to try and cover up their blackness as much as humanly possible. This often fostered internalized racism, whereby some women of color adopted racist attitudes



Image 1: Lucky Brown (1940). Label from Lucky Brown Skin Lightener.

against themselves and other women of color. Consequently, racially oppressive beauty standards were upheld by men and women of color and not just by white people.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, there was minor progress towards racial inclusivity

in the cosmetic industry. The Black is Beautiful social movement strove to expand beauty ideals and gave rise to small, independent companies that produced makeup for women of color. Some mainstream makeup companies like Covergirl and L’Oreal followed suit and made attempts at racial inclusivity with their makeup products; however, racial equity was, and continues to be, lacking. The historical development of beauty standards and the continuation of upholding white beauty standards has allowed for the reproduction of whiteness on an institutional level. The commercialization of white beauty has contributed to the cultural representation of women of color as “negative, out-of-place, or disturbing” because they are at the bottom of the socially constructed beauty hierarchy (Hall, 1997, p. 236). The cosmetic industry contributes to racial formation that ascribes meaning to different bodies, such that white women are valued over black/brown women (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 4). These racially defined appraisals of women’s worth, maintained by the beauty industry, are definitive forms of institutional racism.

Despite increasing criticism, popular makeup brands like MAC, Maybelline, Covergirl, and Bobbi Brown have received from consumers more recently, their efforts at racial inclusion have been surface-level at best. To address the issue of racial exclusivity, beauty companies have tried to include more than just a few shades of brown or other

pigments for women of color. However, the proportion of makeup for white skin tones continues to exceed those produced for black and brown skin tones. Of the 20-30 shades put out in a foundation line, only five or six will feature darker pigments (Hope, 2016). Aside from the quantitative inequity of shades available for women of color, other attempts at racial inclusion in makeup lines have been accused of cultural appropriation, tokenism, and whitewashing models of color. A pertinent example of how cultural appropriation permeated efforts at racial inclusion in cosmetics can be seen in MAC's *Vibe Tribe* makeup



Image 2: MAC Cosmetics(2016). Vibe Tribe Collection. Licensed by MAC.com



Image 3: MAC Cosmetics (2016). Vibe Tribe Collection. Licensed by MAC.com



Image 4: L'Oréal Paris (2008). Fera-Highlighting Line. Image owned by DailyMail.com

line (Images 2 & 3, MAC Cosmetics, 2016). The company refuted accusations of cultural appropriation by claiming the makeup line was created with music festival culture in mind; though it's clear in Images 2 and 3 that the makeup line is not coincidentally reminiscent of Native American culture (BuzzfeedYellow, 2016). The advertisements feature clothing and product packaging that include patterns reminiscent of Native American culture. Further, the use of "Tribe" in the line's name is another reference to Native American tribes. Last, the names of products are appropriative of sacred Navajo Nation Lands, such as "Painted Canyon" lipstick bringing to mind the Navajo Nation's Painted Desert land (Buzzfeed Yellow, 2016).

A notorious example of whitewashing

celebrities of color was seen in one of L'Oreal's 2008 advertisements featuring Beyoncé (Image 4, L'Oreal Paris, 2008). While the advertisement may seem benign on its own, when compared to pictures of Beyoncé outside of advertising, there are observable differences. L'Oreal clearly altered Beyoncé's appearance to more closely align with white beauty ideals. Her skin is nearly white and her hair is almost blond, which is clearly different from her real-life brown skin and hair. This advertisement is also a marked example of intertextuality, for it can be traced back to the skin-lightening advertisements that permeated the 1940's. The skin-bleaching advertisements set the precedent that women of color need to make their skin as white as possible in order to be considered beautiful, and it seems that Photoshop has taken the place of skin-lightening products. The racialized message portrayed through this modern advertisement is fairly similar to what was illustrated in the 1940s: the closer to whiteness Beyoncé gets, the more beautiful and advertisement worthy she is. Consequently, the whitewashing of Beyoncé reveals that L'Oreal's attempt at racial inclusion, by featuring a woman of color in their advertisements, is more accurately a form of tokenism. These failed attempts at racial inclusivity and representations of diversity are indicative of the cosmetic industry's concern with maintaining their reputation. They do this by creating the impression that they care about inclusion, but in reality this amounts to blatant efforts at projecting a spirit of inclusion while masking a reality of racial exclusion. Sarah Ahmed claims that prioritizing the maintenance of organizational pride, companies can ignore and refute accusations of racism (Ahmed, 2012). The cosmetic industry generally believes that if they have black celebrities as the faces of their advertisements and if they release lines of makeup exclusively for women of color, that they could not possibly be racist. As a consequence,

these forms of shallow racial inclusion make it so these companies can remain ignorant of what are actually practices rooted in institutional racism (i.e. whitewashing, tokenism, and cultural appropriation).

It is important to analyze the roles of power structures and economic interests when considering why cosmetic companies continue to be racially exclusive today. White men serve as the CEOs of major companies like MAC, L'Oreal, and Maybelline. These men hold a lot of decision making power within their companies, but they also hold a lot of social power in society. They make decisions about what images of beauty to promote, which affords them the power to organize the social hierarchy of beauty. This relates back to the idea that the beauty standards in this country are predicated on Eurocentric *masculine*-driven beauty ideals, which clearly play off of the larger racial, sexual hierarchy in the United States. In this context, the white male CEOs of beauty companies regulate all women's bodies through the perpetuation of unattainable appearance ideals, which dissimilarly benefits white women over women of color. However, this does not mean that their racially exclusive practices go unquestioned. These companies generally put forth arguments about their lack of racial inclusiveness that are from economic and capitalist perspectives. Often times these mainstream companies will claim that it is too difficult and costly to create products that are compatible with darker skin tones (Barton, 2017). Additionally, they will argue that the market for women of color is not as large or lucrative as the market for white women. However, both of these claims are inaccurate. Not only do African-American women alone spend 7.5 billion annually on beauty products (which is 80% more than white women spend), makeup pigments for darker skin simply require different chemical combinations (Hope, 2016). Considering that the economic arguments

against racial inclusion in beauty products are not sound, then it follows that the reasons behind racial exclusivity are based on social aspects. Tiffany Gill, an associate professor of history and black studies at the University of Delaware explains, “many brands are unwilling to cater to women of color in fear that it will damage their brand, in fear that it will make their brand less glamorous, less beautiful if it’s attached to black women, if it’s attached to darker skin women” (Barton, 2017). Overall, these cosmetic companies are giving economically backed excuses for racially exclusive practices, which stem from deeper values around racism and bodily prejudice. It seems that the primary motivation for upholding institutional racism then, is to maintain whiteness and white power and not strictly to increase profits.

While there has been minimal progress in dismantling institutional racism in the cosmetic industry, not all hope is lost. There have been valuable gains on smaller scales within the beauty industry that have empowered women of color and provided them with avenues to resist racial oppression. Over the last few decades, small, independent beauty brands have emerged. Women of color founded brands such as Koyvoca, Cocotique, and Lipbar over the last few decades in order to fill the gaps left by mainstream brands. These brands focus on creating products for women of color, and have been met with gratitude by women of color seeking more makeup options (Hope, 2016). While they may not have the same amount of popularity as hallmark beauty brands, they model racial inclusivity that mainstream brands should adopt. In the last year, the popular singer and songwriter, Rihanna, has founded and launched her own beauty line, Fenty. Fenty’s mission statement is to be inclusive of everyone while at the same time focusing on a wide range of hard-to-match skin tones, creating formulas that work for all skin types, and pinpointing universal

shades (Mueller, 2017). Since launching in late 2017, the company has experienced large success in fulfilling this mission statement, and six of the darkest foundation shades sold out in the first two weeks (Mueller, 2017). Perhaps of most importance to Fenty's success is that Rihanna advocates for inclusivity of all skin colors, including lighter and darker shades together. Fenty can serve as an example to the dominant beauty brands that being racially inclusive doesn't mean that they have to eliminate whiteness—instead, equity is key.

Lastly, important gains have also been made in production side of the makeup industry. Balanda Atis, a black female chemist, pioneered the Women of Color Lab for the popular cosmetic company L'Oreal. The lab began when Atis' boss, notably a white male, advised her to settle for the efforts at racial inclusion that the company had already attempted (i.e. adding a few more darker shades of foundation). Unsatisfied with the inferior quality of the makeup L'Oreal had for darker skin tones, Atis embarked on a research project where she collected over 20,000 individual skin tone samples in order to determine a new chemical compound for darker makeup (People in America, 2016). Atis discovered that the compound "ultramarine blue" greatly improved the texture of makeup for darker skin tones, and petitioned to increase its usage in makeup for all L'Oreal products made for women of color (People in America, 2016). Overall, these examples highlight how women of color are striving for visibility and inclusion in the beauty industry by speaking out against racist beauty ideals and practices. It should be noted however that issues remain with how the burden of solving racial exclusion in the beauty industry continues to fall on women of color; though it is a problem of the industry and of society as a whole that promotes racist beauty standards, as it's portrayed as their problem alone.



In summary, the racist practices that plague the cosmetic industry today have clear ties to both historical and modern conceptions of racial difference that privilege whiteness and reinforce white dominance. Powerful cosmetic companies want to protect their reputations against allegations of racist practices, which they usually try to remedy with “easy fixes” that involve shallow efforts at racial inclusion. The institutional racism found in the cosmetic industry points to larger issues of race and racism in society at large that are hundreds of years in the making. While the systemic issue of racism that permeates the cosmetic industry may seem discouraging, there are counter-representations that are actively working to challenge racial exclusivity and oppression. However, in order for progress to be made, society as a whole needs to challenge structures of white domination that serve as the foundation for other forms of racial oppression, such as those found in cosmetics. This is no easy feat, and it clearly can’t be done overnight, but feminist logics can provide insight on how to move forward. Patricia Hill Collins, a black feminist scholar, claims that the standards of beauty need to be redefined in order to bring about meaningful change. Similar to the aims of Fenty beauty, this does not mean redefining the binary to “proclaim black women as ‘beautiful’ and white women as ‘ugly’, but it means expanding definitions of beauty to include both white and black bodily features (Collins, 1990, p. 169). Further, the portrayal of beauty standards as a stable feature of society is harmful for both white women and women of color. This perspective allows for an endless cycle of racial, sexual oppression to become normative in society because “controlling images become hegemonic and taken for granted” (Collins, 1990). Men and women alike of all different racial identities need to challenge the normative belief that women’s appearance-based human value is a part of the natural order of society. A shift away from the organization of

society based on “seeable” or “public bodily differences” has the potential to lead to a society that does not profit off the objectification of all women and the specific oppression of women of color (McKittrick, 2006, p. 46). Conclusively, the racist practices in the cosmetic industry cannot be treated as an isolated problem, and the larger context of race and racism in the United States has to be taken into account in order to combat institutional racism of all types.

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