

Whitened Anxiety: Bottled Identity in the Emirates

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Introduction

This chapter briefly explores a failed relationship between identity, the body and medica-
materia¹ through the context of skin-bleaching in the United Arab Emirates, and Dubai
specifically. What is outlined here is a material failure of both human skin and the tools used to
alter it, expressed and performed by those who engage with skin bleaching techniques. In this
case, embedded within skin whitening creams, and in turn, white skin, is a relationship in the
form of a promise: an intense unwritten social contract imbued with both hope and hype. In this
context, skin is a conduit of the ‘self’; it is a material condition that delineates an individual’s
identity. Ethnography among plastic surgery in Brazil has explored how body alterations are
pitted against intense social disparity, politics, and values of race and sensuality (Edmonds 2010).
As Edmonds highlights, discourse surrounding the ability to change bodily features is, in many
ways, a language for the failures of the state. Patients in state funded cosmetic clinics alter their
faces and their bodies under a drive towards social mobility, even if these drives are largely prone
to failure. In engaging with skin bleaching technology in Dubai, what is often at stake for people
is their position in society, their marriageability, their access to wealth, and their very identity.
Weary of societal judgements and pressures, and cognisant of what they perceive as harmful
social prejudices, many Emirati advocates with whom I’ve worked speak against the use of skin
whitening creams and commonly refer to the practice as ‘racism in a bottle’.

As I have presented in ethnography elsewhere (2014), there *are* strong racist elements
embedded within bodily alteration practices in Dubai that reflect societal biases and values. This
chapter argues, however, that while these racist sentiments provide a limited view of whiteness in
Dubai, skin whitening practices are far more complex than that, and the growing practice of
skin-whitening is deeply rooted in local perceptions of the self, the foreigner, genetics, labour,
and the economy. Emiratis also make up only 9 per cent of the population of Dubai, a small
minority in their own city. As a result, body alterations, including skin-whitening, are also deeply
situated within local kinship practices and local understandings of inheritance. I will show that,

¹ I borrow the term ‘medica-materia’ here from Whyte, Hardon, and van der Geest (2002; 3)
who reclaim this Latin term within anthropology to emphasise the material *things* of therapy,
and to remind readers that these materials have ‘social lives’.

for many, 'racism in a bottle' becomes a bottled symbol of the body in itself, and whiter skin is imagined as the 'true-self'. While the material efficacy of bleaching products are successful in physically altering the outward appearance of the body, as urban centres in the UAE become increasingly multi-cultural, skin whitening products and techniques begin, in local terms, to fail as effective instruments of identity and the self. I argue that the material failure of skin-bleaching is defined through the broken promises for identity embedded within the creams and the skin. As the social efficacy of whitening products decreases, their use in the community intensifies; this produces often unachievable ideals of the body, and, for some, the material failures of skin bleaching are made recursive; they perpetuate themselves within circular modes of social practice.

Anthropology of the Body and Failure

The surface of the human body has been given considerable attention within anthropology over the last few decades. Much of this attention has developed from a need to re-analyse the body in non-dualistic frameworks. Western rationalistic tradition, further spurred by European enlightenment, structured the body in terms of Cartesian modalities. Here, the *human body* was constructed as a biological 'object', a thing separate from a *human being*, a separate element of a person which was constituted first through the soul, and, as biomedical discourse developed, eventually, through concepts of the mind. Many post-modern social theorists have outlined how these dualistic values became embedded in both biomedical discourse (Foucault 1994; Rose 2007) and the social sciences at large (Latour 1987). Other academic conceptions of the body similarly contest the limitations of Cartesian thinking, demonstrating the roles and social forms of the technical body (Mauss 1935, 1973), and, following Mauss, the habitual body (Bourdieu, 1977), through which cultural modalities and capital can be embodied. Following both post-modern thought and existential studies of lived experience, phenomenological ideas of the body propose the human corpus as the primary conduit of selfhood, where bodies are not owned, but rather performed (Csordas 1994; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]), and 'One's own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism' (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]). Furthermore, weary of the academic hegemony governing the scientific study of the human body, anthropology has responded with an analytical approach to the body that situates it inexorably into human social practice rather than examine the body as simply a 'thing' (A. Strathern 1994; Douglas 1966; Blacking 1977 among others). In this view, it is useful to conceive of the body as a 'mirror for society', and vice versa (Douglas 1966), that is 'always in the making' (Haraway,

2006; 144). In conjunction with phenomenological prospects for the body, this approach recognises that, ethnographically speaking, people often view the human body as a subject of alteration and change in order to affect social relations, construct new socialities, or reflect personal or cultural cosmologies. Rituals, habits, techniques and cultural practices of and on the human body, are, therefore, culturally productive. They are informed by, and in turn elicit, relational responses.

The myriad ‘things’ and technologies with which humans partner their bodies, then, produce subjectivities in participants, and these objects and relationships are often taken for granted. As Foucault, these technologies come to produce disciplinary power (1977, 1978, 1982). This view, however, has been criticised, most notably by feminist writers, as too eager to define technology as producing ‘docile bodies’ (Hartsock 1990). Instead, it is argued, the capacity for resistance must also be understood through subjective technologies (Ibid). A material culture approach, however, examines this production of subjectivity and objectivity through the tools and objects with which people construct their world, and – in some cases – their bodies. This basic idea is premised on the ability of material objects to absorb and reflect human emotion and relationships; these objects can become fetishes, and as Pels (1998: 91) describes, ‘animism with a vengeance’, or even persons in their own right (Leenhardt 1947; Geary 1986; MacGaffey 1991).

In *The Invention of Culture*, Roy Wagner has theorised how perpetual resistance and subjugation **is** interwoven through culture as it is constructed, themselves defining features of both invented and inventing cultural subjects and objects (Wagner 1975). Much of this attention to the surface of the skin, then, emphasises this cultural productivity, but often in terms of social change, upheaval, and body dynamisms. Very little attention has been given to the social ways in which the body is known to fail: not as a ‘failed material’ (in terms of biological malfunction), but in terms of *material failure* – when the aspects of the human body do not illicit the embodied objectifications that are expected of them. It is in these ethnographic moments of social crisis that bodily values and responsibilities can be illuminated.

Skin and Inheritance

Skin colour is a sensitive issue among modern Emirati families. There is a common

traditional perception in the Arabian Peninsula that skin colour is among the traits that are inherited specifically from one's mother. Some general bodily and facial features such as silky, black hair and nose structure are also said to be inherited from – or at least informed by – the mother. These perceptions become translated into value in cultural practice. For some, skin colour is one of the most important legacies that a bride-to-be can contribute to a family. Some have explained that it is not uncommon for young women's features, and especially skin tone, to be vetted and appraised by family matriarchs as part of marriage negotiations. The repercussions for this cultural viewpoint are manifest in social practice, where women are encouraged to 'fix' physical flaws before becoming married or having children so that their children do not absorb undesirable physical features from the unaltered parent. Such alterations include nose surgeries and skin whitening, among other cosmetic changes. The social motivation is that if a woman can lighten her skin before having children, her children will then have lighter skin naturally. These particular perceptions of engendered hereditary mechanisms are not globally unique, and they are paralleled in Lamarckist ideas of inheritance, where the building blocks of future generations are determined pro rata to the physical effects of the lived experience of the parents. What follows is ethnographic data collected on the practice of skin whitening in the Emirates. It was collected as part of a much larger anthropological project on the construction of genetics, illness, and the "self" in the face of rapid globalization in the region. Indigenous body practices in the Emirates (as they are most anywhere) are deeply informed by a vast range of social domains and influences that are necessarily intertwined and often recursive.

As part of my fieldwork, I met with a director of the local Health Care City (HCC) to discuss the over-abundance of cosmetic surgery practices at the 'city within a city'², and the steps being taken to encourage diversity among the clinics and real estate of the city. The cosmetic surgery sector in Dubai is already largely successful, but it is still growing. Motivated by both heavy cultural demand for procedures in the region and prospects for capital and real-estate, the government and landowners aim to make Dubai the world's crossroad for this area of medical tourism. Plastic surgery in general has become widespread in the city. There were, at the time of my fieldwork, far more clinics devoted to this specialty than all other medical practices combined. I was invited by the German Clinic for Neurology and Psychiatry to a networking event for all the clinics at HCC in the Oud Metha neighbourhood of Dubai, of which the

² "Healthcare City" is premised on a German development model in which the massive medical complex is a microcosm of the city, with its own hotels, shops, restaurants, apartments, etc. The complex parallels similar 'city within city' structures in other business and social domains across the Emirates and other Arabian nations.

German Clinic is one. Of the roughly 40 clinics that attended the event, nearly half were devoted to cosmetic surgery. Two of the directors of HCC, both relatively extroverted Emirati women, assure me this is not an accurate representation of clinics and is just the nature of the networking event as half the clinics were missing, but they did admit that it has become a challenge to create medical diversity at the city, and that cosmetic surgery is far over-represented. They have complained as well that the property owners of HCC are focused on real-estate, and not medicine, and as the real-estate industry was currently stagnant in Dubai, landlords were filling space in the city with countless cosmetic clinics, which are never short of demand.

It is difficult not to think that these body alteration practices, whether they are performed at home or in the growing number of clinics, are a post-colonial phenomenon. Combined with other trends in cosmetic surgery, wealthy Arab men and women appear to be mimicking Western features, and deserting what they feel are stereotypic Arab skin tones and facial structures. Plastic surgeons in the HCC, tell me business is booming. Women from all over the gulf come to Dubai for plastic surgery and many go to Europe for the same. According to doctors, women most commonly want nose alterations, breast enlargements, and skin whitening. While the former two are practiced at specialty clinics, the later is usually performed at spas and parlours, or at home with creams. Medical and clinical staff tell me these women do not come to the clinics unaccompanied. Their parents, husbands, or boyfriends want them to have nose ‘corrections’, as Arab men increasingly describe ‘the Arab nose’ as undesirable. These trends could be seen to echo metaphors of global miscegenation that appear in medical jargon. In Brazil, for example, valued procedures offered by the state include the ‘correction of the Negroid nose’ (Edmonds, 2007). This type of medical jargon, while designed to be ‘descriptive’ and direct, betrays deeply rooted cultural biases. Terminology that dictates ‘corrections’ imagines bodies that are ‘wrong’ or ‘broken’. This medicalised language is present in the Emirates, and it is invoked by Emirati nationals in terms of ‘fixing’ the Arab nose. Both men and women in Dubai visit clinics to receive reconstructive work, though the practices remain largely gendered, with women receiving the large majority of operations. Many procedures are, ethnographically speaking, motivated by social values and aesthetics, but plastic surgery has also become important for Emirati women specifically because facial features and skin are thought to pass on to her children. As one informant explained: ‘These places do such good business here because it has become so important to be beautiful, or we would never find husbands! It is a big problem here. Lots of men are making their girlfriends and fiancés have surgery because it is so important to the family.’

The sentiment is echoed on the street. Younger Emirati men with whom I was able to become close admitted that they strongly encouraging their girlfriends and wives to have surgery, especially nose alterations and breast enlargements. When I pushed for a reason for it, one engineer joked over coffee one afternoon ‘the face is good for the kids, the breasts, they are for me’. Within the Emirates, there are robust local knowledges³ of inheritance that exist quite independently from Western biomedical understandings of Mendelian and Darwinian models of modern evolutionary synthesis. That is, the influence that parents have over their child’s traits is often not perceived in local understanding to be egalitarian. Many men have explained to me that most traits come from the father, and that some are simply picked up from the mother, in what I understand to be mechanistic osmosis. This logic maintains that fathers provide the seed, the inherent blueprint of a new individual, but that children are able to absorb features from their mother in utero. Her traits and beauty are said to be absorbed by the foetus, but it is understood that mothers do not contribute to an inherent biological template of a child.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what is understood to be absorbed from the mother as there are often conflicting opinions. The idea that a man essentially contains the human template in his semen is akin to Western debates on preformation that pervaded recorded philosophy for at least two millennium (for a discussion of this idea, traced through Pythagoras, Aristotle, Descartes and Galileo, see Gould 1974). Preformation sciences that evolved from Greek philosophical tradition envisioned an already fully developed, but miniature, human being within semen. European thinkers of the 17th century searched for the miniature human in sperm through new microscope technologies.⁴ The homunculus was thought to be inserted into the woman’s womb where it could feed and expand, and perhaps absorb traits of the mother through menstrual blood or the placenta. ‘For Leeuwenhoek, his microscopic observation of testes and his on-going observations of his own semen confirmed his belief that mammalian ovaries were useless ornaments, and that the sole function of the female sex was to receive and nourish the man’s seed where the future human was preformed in its entirety’ (Friedman 2008:79). This ideology is partially influenced from certain Christian notions of creation (in

³ I use ‘knowledges’ here in the plural to refer to the fact that there are many conflicting systems of knowledge in the region, many of which can be locally owned simultaneously. Nonetheless, these themes on heredity are very commonly produced.

⁴ See Nicolaas Hartsoeker’s (1694) *Essai de dioptrique* and Antoni Leeovenhoek’s (1677) letters to *Philosophical Transactions*. Reprinted and translated in S. Hoole (1800) ed. *The Select Works of A. van Leeuwenhoek (1798–1807)*. Hill (1985) has pointed out that neither scientists claimed to have seen the miniature human, though both advocated its existence. However, both scientists wrote and drew their observations of other preformed organisms.

Leeuwenhoek's case, Calvinism), where 'We ought to accept, in addition, that the body of every man and beast born till the end of time was perhaps produced at the creation of the world' (Pyle, 2003; 27)

My Islamic informants did not like this idea. While there seemed to be a sense of Islamic biological preformation, this is confined to adulthood. A cascading infinitum of homunculi assumes that each 'small man' contains a proportionately smaller one. My informants were clear that 'Only a man can do this thing (as opposed to a child), maybe when they are 13,' and whatever the case, they would add, life 'is an exhalation of Allah'. Conceptions of heredity in South East Arabia are complex, however, as I have mentioned, in many local discourses surrounding the 'Arab genome', it is clear that beauty, hair, skin, and some facial features are thought to be contributed by the mother. As a man is thought to provide a preformed, solid template, and as it is the woman's responsibility to mould these traits in utero, the failures of conception and the perceived failures in the physical appearance of children are placed upon her. The result of this knowledge encourages some women to take what they feel are the necessary steps to control these features to the best of their ability.

Identity in a bottle

One way in which Emirati women navigate their role in moulding bodies is to take part in a fast-growing Asian trend of skin whitening. It is easy to see the heavy bombardment of skin lightening advertisement on the streets and on local television. The fact that this trend seems to be ubiquitous in Asia is seen by some researchers as alarming and complex. Borrowing from Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital as it informs the construction of taste, Li et al (2008), for example, analyse these advertisements in four Asian contexts (India, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea). They show how the advertisements reinforce hegemonic power structures, but also empower women in a system of robust historical values. In Dubai, this contradictory power play can be striking. Many of my Filipino acquaintances hated working in restaurants, and would prefer to work in the Filipino-dominated retail sector of Dubai, but told me they could not receive employment because their skin was too dark, and, consequently, that they are trapped in catering careers. In neighbouring India, social values overwhelmingly emphasise the importance of white skin. Adverts and products in the UAE for whitening technologies are usually imported from India, and they often show Indian or Asian women who cannot attain their dream job, or cannot catch the eye of a young man for whom they desire. The man in one of these popular

advert, for example, ignores a darker woman, engrossed behind his newspaper while she works as a waitress and serves him coffee. After using whitening cream, however, the advert flashes to an office with a smart, successful, and whiter woman being congratulated by her boss. Another scene flashes to the ignored waitress, now whiter. The young man becomes suddenly aware of her beauty and cannot help but ask her out on a date.

Opponents of these ads refer to the products as ‘racism in a bottle’, and the term is used regularly in Dubai. Dr. Fatma al Sayegh, an Emirati Fullbright scholar, professor of UAE and Gulf History at the University of Al Ain, and a woman’s rights activist, has spoken out against the practice. The extreme measures that gulf women go to maintain whiter skin disturbs her. One such practice is brewing a homemade white paste derived from beauty products and home chemicals; this is then spread across one’s face when one goes outside. ‘I was scared by the customs,’ she says. ‘They say it is part of their culture, that when they leave the house and they put on this powder, which is like a mask, it turns them into someone different’ (Salem 2010).

There has been much social research into skin-bleaching as evidence of self-hate and low self-esteem outside Muslim and Arab communities, especially among black-skinned Caribbean groups. Arguments generally propose that participants become critical of their bodies, and even sometimes self-loathing as a result of the cultural legacy inherited from the psychological scars of subservience and slavery (Abrahams 2000). The results, as Abrahams has written, was

‘the traditional denigration of everything black or African-looking... Black mothers told their black children they were ugly because their lips were thick. Their kinky hair was ‘bad’. Brown was better than black; the paler the brown the better. White was best. So, as in America, everybody black tried to straighten their hair and bleach their skin’ (Abrahams 2000).

Others have singled out, more broadly, colonialization, and specifically, plantation culture, as bequeathers of psychological scarring (Beckford 1972). Indeed, this broad category is more fit to the gulf region as there does not appear to be cultural memories of slavery among the Arabs of the region, yet the hegemonic relationships produced during French, British, and Portuguese colonialization are engrained in both living memory and cultural memory more broadly. In this light, skin bleaching is more a product and adaptation of self-hate, mechanized by the principles that David Fischer poignantly explains in his notion that ‘cultural legacies leave historical

shadows' (Fischer 1989). Other studies recognise these historical shadows as 'burdened with emotions' concerning ethnic and personal identity, noting how these emotions might contribute to actual addictive dimensions of whitening body alterations in the Congo and among migrants in Italy (Vassalo 2009). Similar historical shadows exist in Jamaica, where colonial relationships created socially hierarchical skin tones, which still shape whitening practices (Charles 2011).

However, what makes skin lightening complicated, at least in Arab culture, is that it may not be to mimic western appearances. Dr Al Sayegh thinks

'it is not a culture of fairness [of skin] as much as an obsession with the opposite. Some Emirati people here are darker than others and I remember when I was studying in America and England, the preferred skin type was tanned. The ideal man was tall, dark and handsome. It was the opposite to what western men looked like. Here, too, it is the same thing. People are obsessed with something that is not ordinary. Fair skin is not common, so people like to look unusually white.' (Bhattacharya, 2010).

I believe the obsession is deeper than that. According to the Emirati women with whom I spoke, the obsession with whiter skin on women has always existed in the gulf. 'Traditionally,' they claim, 'one of the reasons Bedouin women wear a leather burqa [not to be confused with the more common burka] is not necessarily for modesty, but to protect from the sun and to keep the skin pale.' Emirati representatives from the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding teach that before the Western world arrived in the gulf, women in the gulf would prepare a paste and plaster their cheeks and nose with it under their burqa to beautify their skin, and so the burqa was more of a self-imposed beauty product than an instrument of repression and patriarchal control of women. The Centre for Cultural Understanding in Dubai is often exceptionally apologetic regarding cultural practices 'commonly misunderstood' by foreigners to the region, and it is important to note that not all historians in the region acknowledge the same narratives of cultural motivations for tradition. Yet, if maintaining pale skin was important to women, it makes sense that they have developed ways to utilize traditional garb in their beauty regime.

In any case, skin whitening practices were known to be important long before there was Euro-American immigration in the region. Emirati men speak about their appreciation of whiter skin, saying: 'We do prefer whiter skin. It is more beautiful. Darker skin makes a woman look hard, and lighter skin adds to a woman's purity.' It is purity, both cultural and genetic, that is key

in understanding the tradition. In this context, skin, and specifically its colour, can be seen as an aspect of ideal norms of sexual dimorphism. This next section unpacks this idea of the colouration of sexual dimorphism, and its relation to ideas of purity, looking at traditional Emirati garb.

The dishdash and the abaya

For Emirati men, a spotless dress is a public declaration of purity and the upholding of Islamic value. The dishdash – a long, white, immaculately starched tunic – is the mark and pride of an Emirati man. The pure white garment, however, is woven piece of self-contradiction. It is a gown used to imply that the wearer is cleaner, wealthier, more pureblood, and more powerful than non-Emirati men in the UAE, who, even if there is no legal sanction, are not allowed to wear such garments. The dishdash is simultaneously a proclamation of the modesty of its owner. In addition, it transforms – at least visually – the wearer into something he is not; its whiteness serves as an inversion of the dark figure underneath. The visual inversion is, however, a metonym for the character of the man, too. The clean white garment, bleached beyond impurity covers what many in the Arab world know to be the impure man underneath: rife with the propensity for violent emotions, strong sexual desires, and the need to eat and to expel waste. In the context of the abaya, traditionally worn by Emirati women, the inversions of purity and colouration take on a further level of complexity. The dishdash is as white as the abaya is black, and the woman underneath the abaya can, in gulf tradition, be seen to hide herself from the eyes of others; she is a performance of purity, a fragile and delicate woman who keeps herself for her husband and takes care of her home. Janice Boddy has shown in her ethnography among Islamic women in Northern Sudan how practices on the body (specifically female genital cutting), and making the body ‘pure’, operate under semiotic mechanisms of ‘enclosedness’, constructing and protecting the community at large (1982). As a device of concealment, the abaya operates under a similar semiotic mode: women encapsulate their bodies with fabric while simultaneously delineating the boundaries of the community and home. The white of the impure man’s dishdash is paralleled by the inversion of the black of the pure woman’s abaya.

Alternatively, the colouration and its implications in design can be seen to be psychologically opposite. Taken in the context of the world – full of filth as it is – it is the Emirati man who is above all else clean and secure in Islam; at this scale, the dishdash is an outer sign of his inner state, reiterating his internal whiteness as a garment over his skin. It could then

make sense again that the dishdash is as white as the abaya is black, hiding a woman who – in Gulf society – is dirty with menstruation, who so easily tempts men and causes impure desires, polluting his mind and causing his thoughts and energies to stray from Islam. The dishdash appears to be both these things at once; its only consistent philosophy being that its appearance be in contrast to everything around it, a material form that separates man from woman, rich from poor, and foreigner to national. This is its most useful, and, perhaps, only inherent feature. It acknowledges the intensity with which many men in the Emirates battle and defend against ambiguity, and responds diminishing grey areas of lived reality, leaving a literal binarism of black and white.⁵ In this way, for men and women both, gown parallels skin, and part of the underlying mechanics of the garments is that they create status by exaggerating boundaries and borders. Cultural ideals of purity maintain that these boundaries be in black and white, and skin whitening becomes a practice in symbolic inversion.

Being white, becoming whiter

The problem of white skin after globalization presents a major philosophical problem now for some Emirati. As a boundary between realms of purity and impurity, the ideal of white skin serves to perpetuate cultural secrecy, a retreat to the private culture within a culture. Whiter skin is important in local imagination not only because it is pure, but also because it is specifically *not* African or Hindu, at least not historically. It is here that ethnography on skin-whitening informs a larger debate on individual and cultural anxieties. It is still, within common discourse, a point of pride for some Arab women to have white skin as a demonstration of their superiority over their Indian and African neighbours, and indeed even other Arab neighbours. For example, locals claim that the Yemeni, and to a lesser degree Omani, have the unfortunate luck to be both poorer in money and darker of skin. These are traits that Emirati often see as indicative of one another. Even between other Emiratis, the desire for fair or lighter skin is a critical concern. My informants have reiterated that mothers often refuse marriage to their sons if the potential bride is too dark of skin.

A major problem arises for the ambitions of these women in that, for most, light skin does not come naturally. Gulf women have to work very hard to have lighter skin, and there

⁵ It is important to note that this is not without contradiction. The abaya is claimed by some to be a celebration of the mystery of women. The implication is that the woman underneath is more attractive because she is mysterious, and so rather than Islam abhorring ambiguity, it values the unseen. (no better way to show something than to hide it!)

now exists a great social contention in which there is now a massive Western population in the gulf that comes across this skin genetically. This presents a crisis for many women who feel subject to the terms of mobility dictated by some forms of Islamic society. Faced with newfound choices for long-term sexual partners, Emirati men are overwhelmingly selecting for whiter skin, and they are also increasingly partnering with women from abroad, from within Islamic society and from without.⁶ As the Emirati director at Health Care City, herself a sheikha who has gone to university abroad, explained:

“Men are allowed to go abroad, and go to school abroad, and they meet partners abroad and bring them back here. Many woman are not allowed to go abroad, except on vacation. Men can marry who they want, but woman are only supposed to marry Emirati men. It cannot last forever. We have already run out of men. There aren’t any left for us women!, and so, yes, this is partly why they do these things (plastic surgery, skin whitening). This, and anything else men want them to do.”

Many of the sheikhs, seen to be representatives of manhood and male ideology in the Emirates, wantonly advertise their white-European and Arab-Mediterranean partners and lovers, and the value that they place in the children produced from these relationships. The danger to women’s identity here is, therefore, not necessarily one of shifting values, but rather a question of ‘rights’ towards parallel values. Anthropologist Simon Harrison has theorised this contention by identifying certain colonial and post-colonial identities as scarce resources, arguing that ‘ethnic groups may sometimes conceive themselves as in conflict not so much because they have irreconcilably different identities, but rather because they have irreconcilable claims or aspirations to the same identity. In these situations, the sharing of a common culture, or of aspects of a common cultural symbolism, can be deeply divisive and contentious’ (1999; 249-250). Within the Emirate, there is intense pressure for local women to succeed under these divisions.

Novel discourses in the region explain skin colour as a genetic trait, but conflate this with a local knowledge system that maintains that the Arab genome is cosmologically pre-determined. Some women now claim that they must take measures to counter the effects of genetics, or in other cases, they feel they must live up to their true genetic potential.

As the concept of the local genome becomes increasingly integrated as a proud

⁶ It is legal in the Emirates for both men and women to marry outside tribal kinships and Islamic faith under certain conditions. However, many citizenship and kinship privileges remain strongly patrilineal.

component of the local body, and as whiteness has long been owned as a category of the local self, women find themselves in a new predicament of self-hood. Skin colour becomes akin to concepts of wealth, dependency, and ownership—perhaps shielding themselves from foreign eyes, a return to comfortable cultural categories. Emirati women alone spend close to AED 1 billion (US \$272 million) per year on beauty products and treatments. Simply being lighter than average is no longer enough, and many women feel they must be as unnaturally white as possible to begin to compete with the influx of whiteness from abroad. There are many local fears that contend that this trend is unsustainable, alluding to ideas of failure. They are concerned that the body ideals and imaginations that motivate skin whitening for local Gulf women can never be objectified. Critiques concerning the destruction of the body and skin turn to pathology and race, but, as has been noted elsewhere (Brown-Glaude 2007), pathological discourse in skin-whitening often belies the underlying motivations for participating in body cultures.

In viewing the skin-whitening phenomenon as pathology, it is difficult to assign origins to the trend. Is the enhanced skin whitening trend simply the end product of a transition to modernity: a somewhat inevitable conclusion to ‘Westernization’? As Littlewood has acknowledged in discussions on anorexia and bulimia, ‘To take a particular society with its distinctive pattern of psychopathology... and then argue that “the cause” is simply the most immediate aspect of everyday life to which it appears to have a formal relationship... is partial.’ (Littlewood 2002). As techniques enacted upon the body, certain contexts of eating disorders and obsessive skin-bleaching share difficulties in ascribing causation.. One can hastily blame the presence of Western influence, yet these theories do not adequately explain and incorporate why there is such a proud ‘ownership’ of whitening as a cultural tradition. Social research in Japan suggests that the underlying psychology of emerging cultural anxieties may be dependent on recognizing imbalance in the contemporarilization of traditional society: ‘disorders of civilization’ (Lock, 1992). The analogy to skin whitening is that it can then be seen as a proactive practice, to help push the modernized self forward into society. Although anorexia and skin whitening may bear some philosophical similarities as acts of phenomenological body imaging, it can be argued, especially in context of traditional notions of Islamic purity, that skin whitening is a way of keeping the Emirati ‘self’ within the confines of tradition, vis a vis the contemporary ‘self’s’ emerging role in ‘modernized’ society. In this light, whitening is a protective mechanism. The whiter Gulf self, then, is not a modernized self, but an enhanced ‘traditional’ self, or perhaps even caricatured.

Indeed, this idea gives fuller meaning to ‘racism in a bottle’ in which the commercial products are not simply indicative of Gulf Arab prejudices, but are bottled identities themselves. It is a present and central anxiety of those few in Dubai who abhor the trend. Such voices of opposition speak out against it with comments such as: ‘Your nationality should be part of who you are naturally, we shouldn’t have to purchase it at the store,’ and ‘there is nothing natural about [these products], they are thoroughly un-Islamic.’ It is difficult to explain the paradox. The ‘impure product’, this chemical external presentation of the self that one can purchase at drug stores and supermarkets, is nevertheless advertised on billboards across the city, ‘for purity of skin’, or inviting the viewer to ‘be yourself’, an oversized and whiter South Asian man or woman smiling down on the polluted individual as they drive to work or walk the skyscraper laden Sheikh Zayed Road, and more recently, Bollywood’s most famous actor, standing tall at Dubai’s busiest intersection, holding a bottle of Vaseline product under the slogan ‘fair and handsome’ in English and Arabic, and Facebook side scrolling adverts in the region with Bollywood actors and actresses that warn us “people see your face first”. As genetics become increasingly crucial in local knowledge and kinship systems, families become increasingly focused on the physical attributes of women in an effort to construct a category of local aristocracy that incorporates novel notions of the body into perceptions of wealth and power. With an influx of migrant and expatriate labour taking residence in Dubai who are both light and dark of skin, for many families, physical attributes become a crucial component in assessing marriage potential because of a declared need to keep contrast between different bodies. Because Lamarckist understandings of inheritance still persist in the region, often outside the discourse of genetics, many women feel that they *can* still take action to create a ‘true’ self, or to be what they claim they are ‘supposed’ to be, or, to borrow terms from genetics, to create the phenotype they know their genotype to be. As Harrison (1999) has theorised above, however, these practices are not an attack against structures and values of society, but rather a comment upon the appropriation of these values. As a result, bleaching techniques, as effective as they may be as chemical materials, become, ultimately, productive modes of failure in which embodied identity ceases to coalesce.

Conclusion

Given the evidence of deeply rooted biases inherent in almost all realms of social interaction in Dubai, my informants’ critiques of skin whitening products as “Racism in a bottle”

must be taken seriously. However, the phenomenon is complex, and racist sentiments provide only a narrow view of whiteness in Dubai. My argument is that, in a sense, the *true* self is what is being marketed. In general, gulf Arabs see themselves as the owners of whiteness in contrast to the world around them, both in the present and historically. They embody it in their skin, and adorn it with their clothes. Racism is fervent, yet that is perhaps not what is in the bottle. The influx of otherness into the region, especially from the West, has forced an externality of the Arab self. Whiteness remains central to identity, yet ironically no longer a phenotypic inherency at, say, birth. “Bottled identity” can be seen as a set of attempts to reconcile this paradox, motivated by a premise of sociality which is constantly reproduced, but, as of yet, constantly failing to cohere. Skin, genes and whitening products have a shared aristocratic hope and promise for identity, but this identity is perpetually under threat from an increasingly chaotic world. Skin, under these conditions, becomes productively failing, reproducing anxieties and practices as it navigates gendered and globalising contestations. The promise of commoditised identities causes skin-whitening products to become fetishized, for what they can do and for what they should provide for their users. When these expectations, however, so often fail to cohere – when social phenotype ceases to be a socially understood genotype – this productive failing becomes self-replicating. In the Emirates, like in many other places in the world, the flesh is understood to betray the person, and the promises of intervention become less of a seductive allure, and far more of a perceived necessity. The body becomes a battle ground between selves and society, and body industry becomes an arsenal. Both skin and creams break their promises: they fail to ‘do’, socially, what they claim to do, and until the terms of engagement for the globalised body are deconstructed and locally rewritten, this failure remains static.

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