Dr. Dilks

English 307WI

7 April 2018

The Continual Themes of Racism and Sexism in Dove Soap Advertisements

In his *Language and Power*, Norman Fairclough posits that "Consumerism is a property of modern capitalism which…[is] a shift in ideological focus from economic production to economic consumption" (199). Advertisements are the epitome of consumerism and capitalism: they tell us of a product that we should want because it will, somehow, make us better; in order to get this product, we must pay for it. It follows that advertisements rests on classism: the cost of a product determines who can, and who cannot, afford to buy it. Thus, advertisements frequently, and subliminally, perpetuate racism and sexism, which date back to Victorian times. Quite often do these messages blur without our knowing because they have become deeply integrated into our society. Specifically, I refer to Dove advertisements and their continual use of racism and sexism. However, first it is pertinent to understand from where racism and sexism in soap ads stem.

https://bit.ly/2GEx5M2

Anne McClintock writes, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest,* of how Victorian soap advertisements carry themes of "industrial capital…class

control…and the imperial civilizing mission" (208). Each represent what is clean, and therefore, good. This is especially true when we analyze Pears' Soap. McClintock discusses three "ritualistic" fetishes seen in this specific ad (above) and in all Victorian soap ads: the soap, the white apron, and the mirror. Notice, first, the white boy's white—most likely cotton—apron. This fetish signifies cleanliness, or "domestic purity" (McClintock 214). For the Victorians, McClintock notes of their fascination with cotton and whiteness. Therefore, his white apron symbolizes imperialism and the "profiteering of the imperial economy" (211). The white boy stands over the Black boy holding the soap: the "precious talisman of racial progress" (McClintock 214). The Black boy is cleansed with Pears' soap, which turns his dirty, Black skin into the ideal clean, white skin. This is the imperial civilizing mission of Victorian times. He is shown his new skin with one of Britain's fetishes, the mirror. The mirror serves not only as a symbol of self-consciousness, but as McClintock explains, it "renders the value of the object as an exhibit, a spectacle to be consumed" (219).

Pears' Soap advocates for the imperial civilizing mission declaring that Black skin is dirty and that white skin is clean. This theme has perpetually been used for so long that it has become deeply embedded in our modern society. In fact, the diluted racism in most soap ads today quite frequently go unnoticed. Not only have we carried over racist themes of the dirty Black skin and the clean white skin, we have continued the use of the Victorian fetishes of the soap and white clothing.

Though less overtly racist, Dove ads today display a diluted sense of racism. Dove carefully writes that their soap, "VisibleCare Créme Body Wash" constitutes "Visibly more beautiful skin." They subtly mirror this with the three women above. There is a Black woman on

the far left with the “before” skin. She has the ‘bad’ skin that is unmoisturized, cracked, and what we do not want our skin to be. As our eyes progress right, there is another woman whose skin is lighter than her predecessor. In a sense, she displays the ‘okay’ skin. Lastly, we end with a white woman with blond hair: society’s epitome of perfect. She is seen under the “after” skin, or the skin that is the ideal. It is smooth, moisturized, and truthfully, white. She has the skin that we should all want to have. Dove, similar to Pears’, subliminally tells consumers that Black skin is unideal and “dirty,” and that we should aim to have clean skin, which of course is white. They tell us that their soap produces “[v]isibly more beautiful skin” and they unquestionably tell us that that “beautiful skin” is white.

https://nbcnews.to/2Iv4Pfp

Together, they all wear a white towel —the same fetish that conveys cleanliness and “domestic purity” (McClintock 214). As with the white boy wearing the white apron in the Victorian ad, the white towel symbolizes the removal of dirt and the “erasure of signs of labor” (McClintock 230).

Unsurprisingly, Dove ads are specifically directed toward women. McClintock confirms that this is due to soap “belong[ing] in the female realm of domesticity” (209). With this, Dove tells women that their “new revolutionary line of body washes that actually improve the look of

your skin." They market this new body wash specifically to women to inform them that they need to buy this product because they need to improve the look of their skin.

Dove also released yet another subtly racist advertisement with a young Asian girl whose visage is woebegone. The ad reads, "1 in 5 girls would consider plastic surgery." The argument of this ad is that young girls should not get plastic surgery. They rest this argument with the tacit premise that getting plastic surgery is somehow bad. They argue for "real beauty," thus arguing that if one has gotten plastic surgery, they have a lack of "real beauty," or are unauthentic. As Stuart Hirschberg tells us in *The Rhetoric of Advertising,* one way of transferring significance is "encourag[ing] the audience to discover meanings and to correlate feelings and attributes that the advertiser wishes the product to represent in ways that allow these needs and desires to become attached to specific products" (292). Therefore, with a wretched appearance next to the words "plastic surgery," Dove teaches young girls that not only is plastic surgery bad, but they should feel pity towards other girls who have had plastic surgery because those girls do not have "real beauty." In other words, they nuance a superiority complex: girls who have had plastic surgery have fake beauty, or are, frankly, not beautiful; girls who have not had plastic surgery have real beauty.

https://bit.ly/2uZkDVE

Furthermore, Dove carefully uses a young Asian girl with a dejected appearance to convey that girls of color are the main audience of who are considering plastic surgery. Hirschberg writes

> Advertisers use highly sophisticated market research techniques to enable them to define and characterize precisely those people who are most likely to be receptive to ads of a particular kind. (Hirschberg 294)

Therefore, using an Asian girl as the face of this ad does not necessarily mean that Dove is attempting to be diverse, instead they are directly targeting girls in the Asian community. This further perpetuates the idea that white skin is the ideal skin and that white girls do not necessarily consider getting plastic surgery. Along with that, Dove does not have ads with information on boys who may consider getting plastic surgery. They disassociate beauty from masculinity, therefore presenting that (masculine) men do not give thought to plastic surgery, and that they do not need it.

Since soap was first introduced as a commodity in Victorian times, there has continually been an idea that Black skin is dirty. Pears' Soap, for example, juxtaposes Black skin to white skin arguing for how white skin is clean and ideal. This racist theme has long been carried into twenty-first century soap advertisements. Dove is a prime example of a modern soap ad that features implicit racism. From displaying a Black woman with "before" skin that is cracked and bad to a white woman with "after" skin that is smooth and model, Dove perpetuate racist thoughts without explicitly saying that Black skin is dirty. Furthermore, their attempts to diversify their ads are merely sophisticated advertising techniques that target specific communities. With the plastic surgery example above, Dove does not use a young white girl as the face because white girls are "perfect" and every other young girl aspires to be perfect.