

## **Post-Fanonian or Not? The 'Yellow Bone' Factor and Re-Writing Blackness in Popular Culture**

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Racist ideologies have generated a deep sense of alienation and self-hatred among black people. Pseudo-scientific categorizations of race and skin colour have placed dark-skinned Africans in the lower echelons of the social hierarchy which has meant that the lighter one is or becomes, the better one's social status. As a result, a fair complexion is still desired, particularly by many black women, because light-skinned women are afforded more job and romantic opportunities than their darker-skinned counterparts. The obsessive consciousness of skin colour, in black communities is so pervasive that there is a term, "yellow bone," for the naturally light-skinned black women, specifically in the United States. Therefore, those who bleach their skin, such as the Kwaito singer Nomasonto "Mshoza" Maswanganyi-Mnisi, automatically become yellow bone by virtue of lightening their skin, albeit unnatural ones. The term has been popularised by the highly politically charged American cartoon series, *Boondocks* and is now accepted and widely used in black South African communities.

Skin-lightening practices differ according to social class. Most importantly, it is based on race, class and gender because it is black women who are engaged in skin-lightening practices. Among those who are affluent, especially celebrities from the United States and South Africa, it has become a strategy to climb the social ladder. It is worth mentioning that the less risky procedures are the most expensive ones because they are

performed in surgeries, unlike the cheaper and more harmful skin-lightening measures that are taken by poor women and which can cause skin damage. I examine Mshoza's skin bleaching story – as widely publicised via various media platforms – and, by examining the general perception of 'yellow bone', I explore the ways in which Mshoza's case can signal post-Fanonian black consciousness. In this case, Post-Fanonian black consciousness connotes a shift of mind-set about blackness as an identity, one that uncouples history as an *a priori* in defining one's racial identity. Fanonian blackness is thus an anti-thesis of such, because it encompasses excessive self-consciousness, inferiority complexes and it is neurotic in nature as an identity defined in negation. The question that I pose, then, is: does the 'yellow bone' syndrome or skin bleaching constitute a re-writing of blackness, and are these practices to be read as a subversion of the discourse of race or simply an affirmation of Fanonian blackness?

Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), sees language as the foundational basis of racism and how Blacks conceive their bodies and others. He states that language is "one of the elements in the coloured man's comprehension of the dimension of the other" because "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (8). Fanon is of the view that language mediates our experiences of the world, and even for how we perceive the self/other dialectic. He goes on to argue that "mastery of language" affords one power because language, as per the European Enlightenment, is associated with reason. Since the language of the coloniser is presented as superior, the language of the colonised has to be subjected to subordination. This means that a conquered culture is equivalent to a defeated culture which means that the colonised are never seen as having their own culture and language.

As a result, the colonised are taught the coloniser's language as soon as possible. Laden with political implications, such language is bound to alienate and dislocate the subject of colonisation. Therefore, Fanon's thoughts on the relationship of black people to European language(s) appear to overlap with their relation to whiteness.

European language, culture and thus whiteness become to be viewed as superior by the colonised and as such they aspire to be like the colonisers. According to Fanon, there is always a lack in blackness, that which cannot make the black individual fully human, because racist discourse maintains that "the negro is the link between monkey and man – meaning, of course, white man" (18). Fanon suggests that racist ideology places black people in the intersection of animal and human, rendering them nearly human. To master the coloniser's language, then, is to become white or "putting on the white world" (23), because "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (25). How does this, then, relate to the 'yellow bone' factor and skin lightening, and how can Fanon help one understand such practices? The body itself is articulated through language and therefore, the desire to master the European language is the desire to whiten oneself. Therefore, I propose that those Blacks who speak whiteness "whitely" or "white-like" (Gordon 4) or, in other words, those who imitate whiteness through language also fall in the same category – for appropriating whiteness – like black women who lighten their skin. Most importantly, these practices can, then, enunciate the ways in which black people as a group are entrapped in a system built on inequality, one that preys particularly on women. It should be noted that skin-lightening is a gendered practice, because women are the target market of such products.

Such practices, then, may communicate something about women's social position, especially one that sandwiches them between race and gender.

Fanon tells us that racism has blackened the people of African descent to the point of nothingness. Therefore, black people have tried to escape blackness by appropriating whiteness, albeit in problematic ways, so as to retain their personhood. The ways in which they attempt to retrieve their sense of being comes by taking on a European language or by desiring white (wo)men. For black women, however, their desire for white men can be said to be the desire to be like white women, since the social position of the latter is above both black men and women. Similarly, skin lightening practice is racist and sexist at once, because it does not only exploit black women, but it also renders their race and gender illnesses that must be cured through such means. Although Fanon instantiates black men's desire for white women as symptomatic of resenting blackness, his analysis is amenable to women who lighten their skin. One could say that skin lightening practices may depict black women as envious of white women's social position. Fanon asserts that the black man believes that to be loved by a white woman "proves that [he is] worthy of white love" (45). Put differently: to be loved by a white woman affirms his personhood, that he is a human being like the white man. Therefore, one can go as far as to say that black women lighten their skin so as to negotiate their way up in order to be desired like their white counterparts.

Fanon shows the internalisation of white supremacy among black people and how they have internalised their subjugation. The desire for white women is a metonym for the desire for whiteness:

to marry a white woman is to marry “white culture, *white beauty*, white whiteness” (45, emphasis mine). This implicit resentment of blackness is dramatised in mate selection where the yellow bone is preferred by black men over darker-skinned women. Therefore, the burden is put on darker-skinned women because they become a constant reminder, if not a symbol, of worthlessness, and, therefore, of Fanonian blackness. The desire for whiteness, seemingly, has not disappeared; instead, it is now dislocated and directed to yellow bones. This is evident in the way black men valorise a fair complexion which seems to perpetuate normalisation of whiteness, making it an ideal beauty.

The state of “objecthood” (82), according to Fanon, is the “feeling of nonexistence” (106) which leads darker-skinned women to fall prey to skin-lightening products. He maintains that:

For several years, certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for “denegrification”; with all the eagerness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their tests tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction. (83-84)

Even though Fanon speaks about black men particularly and while he may have intended to use the term ‘man’ as a universal term to refer to black people, it does not whitewash the fact that skin-lightening is gendered, because it is black women who are indulge in this practice. Moreover, what Fanon gestures to is the way in which racism and the denigration of black people has generated an industry of skin-lightening products. This also illustrates the nexus of colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism which results in the exploitation of black women. He holds that to whiten the “Negro” suggests that blackness is pathologised – a kind of sickness or what W.E.B. Du Bois calls a ‘problem’ – thus the

“disease” of being black needs to be eliminated by skin lightening products. However, this endeavour does humanise black people, because according to racist ideology, being black runs deeper than the colour of one's skin. Being black is a set of associations such as ‘savagery’, “cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships” (Fanon 84-5). Thus, skin-bleaching could be said to have triggered this line of thinking – the desire to “denegrify” black people – but it is, of course, an extreme measure. Skin bleaching is, therefore, a consequence of this kind of thinking. However, bleaching one's skin cannot erase the historic meanings inscribed on the black woman's body, because it cannot transcend blackness as a racial construct, but can significantly disturb the semantics thereof – so as to loosen the fixated meaning of blackness.

It appears that the need for black women to re-write and redefine their identity has everything to do with a history of denigration. Susan Bordo recounts the stereotypes that perpetuate the objectification of black women. She maintains that black women have been misrepresented as “amoral Jezebels who can never truly be raped, because rape implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having” (6). This alludes to the ways in which the black woman's body is objectified and sexualised for the purposes of reproduction and men's pleasure. And also, Bordo reveals negative gender stereotypes which construct black women as whores who have no sense of respect and ownership of their bodies. This view, moreover, suggests the dehumanisation of black women and renders them ‘animal-like’, which means, in many respects, their objecthood becomes a justification for the physical and sexual violence they suffer. It is the “legacy of slavery

[that] has added additional element to effacements of black women's humanity," due to the fact that during colonialism and "slavery her body [was] not only treated as an animal body but [it was] property, to be "taken" and used at will .... its status approaches that of mere matter, thing-hood" (6). Burdened with this sordid history on her body, the black woman has to find ways of re-writing her Self. She has to write back her body into personhood, but the question is: how does she achieve that? Does she re-write her Self through marrying a white man, as Fanon indicates, or bleach her skin white in order to attain a sense of self-worth, of personhood?<sup>32</sup> What does whiteness mean to her, then? Attempting to answer these questions, I am persuaded to believe that the ultimate goal for black women in resorting to such practices is the underlying desire to eliminate their sexualisation, to retain their worth and, hopefully, happiness. Therefore, whiteness becomes the means to an end, the end being desire, because the meaning of whiteness is loaded with connotations such as social mobility: romantic and job prospects. This also indicates that blackness, too, is not entirely restricted in its historical meaning. Therefore, skin-lightening practices may be the way black women re-write blackness, one that refutes the system which placed them in the denigrated position.

The intervention of Black Consciousness, then, spearheaded by Steve Biko, has played a significant role in redefining blackness in South Africa. Through the slogan, "black is beautiful," he argues that one is "challenging the very deep roots of the black [woman's] belief about [herself] ... you are saying you are okay as you are, begin to look at yourself as a human being" (115).

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<sup>32</sup> In this case, Fanon's gendered terms are based on the chapter, "The Woman of Color and the White man," where he analyses the black woman's desire for the white man; the subsequent chapter does similarly so on black men and white women.

Biko refers to blackness as a social class and a political identity. He might also be reproducing the historical meaning of blackness, here, one that defines itself in dialectical terms with whiteness. However, one cannot take away its subversive spirit, the way in which black consciousness attempts to overturn the historical meaning of blackness by instilling self-pride in the minds of black people. However, considering the prevailing desire to become white through skin-lightening, it seems that there is a need for a new black consciousness, one that is not limited by self-negation. In this case, desire, even for happiness, plays a crucial role in how black women (re)imagine their bodies. Therefore, Mshoza is one case in point in South Africa who seems to be gesturing beyond race, albeit problematically, by deciding to bleach her skin and be proud and vocal about it. The *Atlanta Black Star*, an American online magazine, paraphrases Mshoza claiming that “her new skin makes her feel more beautiful and confident” (“Celebrities Bleaching their Skin”). She seems to be aware that the dark skin is associated with ugliness and inferiority, thus skin bleaching becomes her strategy to climb the upper echelons of the social class. In the same magazine, Mshoza maintains, “I have been black and dark-skinned for many years, I wanted to see the other side.... to see what it would be like to be white and happy.” Her association of whiteness with happiness which can suggest that skin-lightening for her is a pursuit of happiness, perhaps, since to be black is to be miserable. It is here that the practice of skin bleaching becomes complex because it appears to move beyond race, tapping into the realm of the symbolic. By this I mean the focus seems to shift into connotations of whiteness. It thus illustrates the meaning of whiteness in imagination of black people which mingles whiteness with wealth and, therefore, with contentment.



In *Rolling Out*, an online magazine, she has been quoted saying she wants to be “Christina Aguilera white” because she is “tired of being ugly”. Clearly, Mshoza unambiguously desires whiteness, and her specificity in the kind of whiteness she desires tells us that she conforms to the widely-accepted standards of what it means to be beautiful which are mostly defined by the mainstream media. According to her, white is synonymous with beauty. Mshoza claims that her decision to bleach her skin “has nothing to do with [her] esteem and issues with being black”, but it does suggest that she resents her blackness. The act of bleaching her skin indicates the ubiquitous negative perception of blackness among black people themselves. Such indoctrination means black people look at themselves through their oppressors’ eyes, even going so far as to perpetuate their own denigration unaided. This shows the power of racist ideology, especially its ability to reproduce itself. The statement, “I’m tired of being ugly,” could be read as an indirect lamentation, if not a metonym for desiring to be white. In other words, she is saying “I’m tired of being black”. According to Fanon, such a frame of mind is symptomatic of the colonized mind-set, because the colonised “becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (9). Thus, whiteness gains currency in the act of rejecting the black identity. Fanon’s diagnosis, here, may illuminate the ways in which to understand skin lightening practices, because skin bleaching is not only a sign of dissatisfaction of one’s phenotype, but also, simultaneously, an indication of both shame and desire simultaneously. In other words, it suggests the shame about one’s skin colour which is misguidedly perceived as ‘ugliness’. Therefore, the desire for a fair complexion is interpreted as the desire to be ‘beautiful’, due to the notion that the ‘yellow bone’ has become synonymous with beauty and attractiveness.

The difference, then, between the 'yellow bone' and the skin bleaching woman is that the 'yellow bone' is perceived by the society as the ideal beauty and therefore the ideal partner, since she is regarded as close to whiteness. On the other hand, the dark-skinned woman is made to believe that she is ugly and the only way of attaining beauty is to lighten her skin. Due to privileging of light-skinned women, the society passes the racist ideology – which maintains that black is ugly – on to dark-skinned women until they no longer view themselves as possessing any beauty. Consequently, she has to desire the 'ideal' beauty and this is precisely what we are persuaded to believe in the case of Mshoza.

Therefore, her conception of beauty reveals desire, not necessarily of belonging to the white race, but of the privileges that come with being white in South Africa. Fanonian black consciousness, then, may after all be undermined by the practice of skin bleaching, especially in South Africa where whiteness is synonymous with wealth, beauty and happiness in black communities<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, if Fanon maintains that black is associated with "Black magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism", does that mean that desiring whiteness is driven by the urge to escape blackness? I doubt that such consciousness is prevalent in this day of 'high culture', one that is marked by consumerism. The capitalist system exploits darker-skinned women by selling whiteness and fair complexion as the 'norm' and the ideal beauty to which darker-skinned women must aspire. It is the same system that defines the ideal beauty by using media as its

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<sup>33</sup> I realise that it is the second time I am applying the plural when referring to black communities; I use it to indicate their linguistic, cultural and economic heterogeneity. By economic heterogeneity I mean structural inequality and class difference or simply the social strata.

vehicle to carry the message that says 'become light-skinned and be closer to whiteness or stay ugly and unhappy'. However, this is not to say that the capitalist system is devoid of racist ideologies, because it still renders blackness inferior to whiteness. It would not be presumptuous, then, to say that blackness in South Africa becomes a token for social class, perhaps, due to the prevalent structural inequalities. Therefore, desiring whiteness is seemingly the means to escape disenfranchisement that darker-skinned women are subjected to. The culture of consumption – that the capitalist system breeds – constructs whiteness (and fair complexion) as a product to be sold to black people, and particularly to darker-skinned women.

Similarly, television programmes and advertisements almost always portray fair-skin and whiteness as the ideal beauty. As a result, dark-skinned women fall victim of such hegemonic beauty. For example, the former soap opera actress, Maggie Benedict, who plays the role of Akhona on *Generations*, has been brutally insulted on social media for being 'ugly' until Duma Ndlovu, the renowned South African playwright, intervened by writing an open letter on his Facebook page. He makes these interesting remarks, relating to one viewer who complained on Facebook about Benedict:

The "Dear Mfundi Vundla" posts that have been doing the rounds (about Akhona) are downright hurtful, humiliating and insensitive. Some people on Facebook think that they have the blanket licence to comment about people's looks. In fact, there is a growing number of people who display a dangerous sense of self hatred, criticizing anything that is not fair skinned....Black consciousness taught us to be proud of our blackness, and our culture and heritage, those that are still left behind in the doldrums of appreciating anything that is white and light, are themselves victims and slaves of their oppression.

Clearly, Ndlovu is referring to Biko's BCM – to which he too once belonged – because he sees its relevance to the prevailing self-denigration one can observe, especially in the black South African youth. What I find equally intriguing is that Maggie Benedict is the only dark-skinned woman on *Generations*, and that one of the reactionary comments, says that she should join *Muvhango*. What is different about *Muvhango* is that its chief characters are mostly darker-skinned, perhaps since the main focus of the show is the Venda royal family<sup>34</sup>. *Sunday World*, the online newspaper, published a story in 2012 about a listener of YFM (the youth radio in Johannesburg) who made a complaint to Broadcasting Complaint Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) against the radio broadcaster for insulting Benedict. The concerned listener “alleges that [*Generations*] actress Maggie “Akhona” Benedict was branded as “ugly” and that her looks were likened to those of US movie star Wesley Snipes” (Malatji). The remark shows the self-hatred that is projected on dark-skinned women. The relevance of Akhona's case is that it provides one with insight into what it means to be a dark-skinned woman in a society that does not appreciate dark-skinned women, not even on television. How much more, then, for those women who are not on television screens? Therefore, it becomes understandable, albeit corrupting to young black women who look up to Mshoza, when she wants to be “Christina Aguilera white”, so that she, too, may attain happiness and most importantly, acceptance.

We learn that skin lightening tends to be harmful to poor women who buy “R15 tubes” (Shota 12), since they cannot afford to go to surgeries like Mshoza. Babalwa Shota, in *Sunday Times* (2014),

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<sup>34</sup> Among South African soaps, *Muvhango* is still the only show that unequivocally celebrates black cultures through Venda culture. Also, Venda people is one of the ethnic groups of South Africa that is mostly darker-skinned, and it is rare to find a fair skinned Venda person. Perhaps, this is why some viewers think Benedict is suitable for *Muvhango*.

reports that cheap products “can cause skin sensitivity in mild cases and cancer in severe ones” (12). She believes that such dangers are overlooked by these women. By doing so, they privilege beauty and its immediate benefits over life. Shota asserts that she has “interviewed women with disfigured faces, blotchy sores and black burn marks” (12) that were caused by cheap skin whitening products. Even though Shota seems to emphasise these women’s victimhood – in their efforts in trying to turn into yellow bones,’ she also acknowledges that “being black and a woman is hard enough,” due to “the reality ... that many a dark-skinned girl, just like in the movies, will mostly be cast as sidekick in real life too” (12). The question of agency or lack thereof becomes a complex one, because victimhood and agency appears to be entangled. Therefore, dark-skinned women’s conformism to ‘ideal beauty’ is justified by their social upliftment resulting from the skin-lightening practices, albeit with a price, because the disadvantage is permanent skin damage and health risks.

I want to reiterate that skin whitening practices should not be read as a form of “denegrification” because such a reading neglects significant factors that inform the practice. Seemingly, black women do not necessarily view skin-lightening as a race-based elevation, but as a way of reimagining their space in society. Susan Bordo, writing about the health implications of breast implants, contends that women have manipulated stereotypes and hegemonic beauty standards to their own advantage by “having implants purely to enlarge or reshape their breasts” (12). She argues that these women are willing to risk their lives as long it is “worth the resulting boon to their self-esteem and “market value”” (12). She goes on to assert that:

These women take the risk, not because they have been passively taken in by media norms of the beautiful breasts ... but because they have correctly discerned that these norms shape the perceptions and desires of potential lovers and employers (12).

Bordo suggests that women are never simply victims, because in their victimhood there is agency, one that manifests in their manipulation of established norms of beauty. Their conformism is informed by the desire to be desired, while at the same time increasing their chances of finding employment. The same mechanism proves to be apparent in skin-whitening practices, because it means that darker-skinned women can now contest for their space in romantic affairs and in job prospects. Therefore, in a society that bases beauty (or one's worth) on fair skin, the darker-skinned woman does not have much of a choice but to play by the cultural rules in order to survive. Thus, the re-writing of her blackness comes in a form of symbolic whiteness: desire.

It is history that accords light-skinned black people a superior status over their darker counterparts. Consequently, the desire to lighten one's skin colour becomes a way of desiring privileges that a fair complexion affords. This can explain why the 'yellow bone' is most desirable to black men, and it shows how the nexus between 'yellow bone' and whiteness is formed. However, it appears to be the black man who perpetuates the predicament of dark-skinned women, because their obsession with yellow bones seems to be an indirect desire for white women. This also could be interpreted as the way in which black men seek to re-write their own blackness, so as to reverse their denigration. For Fanon, racist ideologies have forced black men into effacement. As a result, they sought to write themselves back into personhood by desiring whiteness and white (wo)men. If Fanon believes that

“the white man injects the black with extremely dangerous foreign bodies” (23), then the black man gets ‘un-homed’ in his own body, due to the fact that it is constantly invaded by external forces: the violent convergence of self-perception and projected inferiority. This all becomes complicated in the case of the black woman because her body plunges into the intersection of race and gender; thus, she faces double denigration. To whiten her skin should be read as an attempt to relieve herself from the historic weight of blackness while she simultaneously has to deal with the implications of gendered identity. This may, after all, be a gesture towards the “envisaged self” that Biko talks about in finding ways of writing themselves out of the denigrated position. However, this subversive writing of blackness, as depicted by women like Mshoza, is rather palimpsestuous because while it bears the aesthetic value, it does not entirely erase the historic inscription. In this light, skin-lightening practices render the black woman’s body a shadow of both blackness and whiteness. Perhaps, this is definitive of the post-Fanonian phase – albeit laden with its own complications.

In conclusion, the desire to become a ‘yellow bone’ and, therefore, white – through skin whitening practices – can prove to be socially compensating on the individual level. However, skin bleaching remains problematic because it is misleading to think that beauty can only be found in whiteness. Such practices undermine the historic fight against the denigration of black people and, particularly, black women. Moreover, it appears to reinforce white supremacy, while, simultaneously, rendering blackness inferior. Inversely: if Mshoza is one of the black women whose voices have been exhausted by the excess of ‘black is beautiful’ sloganeering – by desiring to be Christina Aguilera *white*

– re-writing their bodies, then, means re-writing their identities and, therefore, taking ownership of their destinies. One has to consider that Mshoza identifies with Christina Aguilera on the basis that they are both women celebrities. She might, after all, be gesturing towards post-Fanonian blackness, and therefore, skin-lightening, the 'yellow bone' factor, might be a metaphor for the wrestle with white privilege.

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