

Article

“Is Cleopatra Black?”: Examining Whiteness and the American New Woman

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Abstract: In the 1920s and 1930s, conceptions of the “New Woman” and Egyptomania shaped American culture. Employing methods of critical race art history and material culture studies, I focus on a 1925 Callot Soeurs dress and silk pajamas (c. 1920–1929), taking into consideration both the semiotic qualities of Egyptian motifs as they circulated in early twentieth century American visual culture as well as the sensuous material aspects of the garments. Through primary sources like cosmetic advertisements, fashion magazines, and costume manuals, I contextualize the figure of Cleopatra as a symbol of white beauty and power in this period. Weighing both visual and material aspects, I argue that the repeated act of wearing these garments by white-presenting women placed them in a performative valence, where the wearer ironically became a white woman through her appropriation of Cleopatra and Egyptian motifs. Further, these motifs conferred modernity, cosmopolitanism, class status and an acceptable sexuality upon the wearer. As such, I address how material objects shape subjectivity, simultaneously reflecting and producing racialized and gendered discourses. By focusing on white womanhood, I draw upon critical studies of whiteness in order to disrupt its invisible normative status. This essay traces its operational logic and aids in dismantling the pervasive power of white supremacy that continues to circulate today.



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Forward: As a white scholar, I consider it my responsibility to examine how my own racial identity shapes my scholarship and to interrogate how race operates as a historical force within my research. I humbly offer this piece as a partial perspective on understanding the enduring supremacy of whiteness—as invisible, as normative, as aspirational, as securing privilege—with the hope that it may offer insights into dismantling its corrosive power.

1. Introduction

Two silk garments from the 1920s capture the energy of Egyptomania and present the opportunity to think through the relationship between exoticism in fashion garments and racial embodiment for white middle to upper-class American women. The first is a two-tone green silk gown, produced by French design house Callot Soeurs in 1925 (Figure 1).¹ A two-part ensemble, it features a slip-dress: off-white at the top with a deep emerald green bottom, accented with a beaded border, and an overdress: the same deep emerald green on the top two thirds of the dress, followed by a lighter green band across the bottom. Beaded motifs of white, light blue, and medium blue beads, fastened with golden thread, highlight the scoop neckline of the dress and flow down the center of the dress in a vertical column. Further, the beaded motif divides the emerald and lighter green sections of the dress with horizontal bands at the top and bottom of the lighter green fabric. Following a tunic style design, the boxy shape of the dress, which does not conform to the wearer’s body, was typical of the period for fashionable ladies (Olian 1990, p. iii). Although simple

¹ This dress is part of the Goldstein Museum of Design’s collection in Minneapolis, MN (1990.003.005a-b) as well as the Metropolitan Museum in New York City (44.95.1a, b).

in formal shape, the use of precious materials such as satin, silk, and gold thread reinforce the affluence of the wearer.



Figure 1. Callot Soeurs dress, 1925, Goldstein Museum of Design (1990.003.005a-b). The two-part garment is composed of an overdress of green satin with beading at neck, center front, hipline, and hem and a slip dress, off-white with green border of beading around bottom. (From the Collection of the Goldstein Museum of Design, Gift of Mrs. Roger (Katherine) Shepard).

The second example is a pair of black silk pajamas, by an unknown designer, produced c. 1920—1929 (Figure 2). A two-piece ensemble comprised of calf-length pants with an elastic waist band, and a loose-fitting top with no sleeves and a boat neckline, the pajamas feature a distinctive Egyptian pattern along the neckline and yoke of the top, and along the cuffs of the pants. The top also features two small inseam pockets on the front, behind the Egyptian pattern. The pattern itself features bold colors of hot pink, periwinkle, tomato red, chocolate brown and a soft green, which contrast against the dark black silk. Within the pattern three figures repeat: in one panel, a Pharaoh wears the bowling pin-shaped hedjet crown while driving a chariot; in another panel, two figures stand next to abstract plants, one nude with a round belly holding a bowl and some type of round fruit, the other wears a red tunic skirt and uses a horizontal shoulder pole to carry two pails. Geometric motifs frame the panels. The vibrantly colored pattern, abstracted simplicity of the figures, and graphically patterned borders all contribute to a lively exoticism in the outfit.

Together these garments illustrate a lexicon of Egyptian motifs present in American fashion in the early twentieth century and reflect the fervor of Egyptomania in American culture at the time. While there has been long-standing interest in ancient Egypt by Westerners for centuries, renewed waves of interest often correlated with archeological findings such as the 1912 discovery of a bust of Nefertiti (currently in the Neues Museum of Berlin) and British archaeologist Howard Carter's November 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's intact tomb.² Fashion design, the decorative arts, theatre and mass media like advertising and

² For an examination of the archaeology of ancient Egypt, development of Egyptian national identity and impact of imperialism from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, see (Reid 2002; Reid 2015). For an anthology on wide-ranging cultural production influenced by ideas of ancient Egypt, see (MacDonald and Rice 2016).

film all participated in popular depictions of ancient Egypt.³ Further, within Egyptomania, the figure of Cleopatra emerges prominently through film and advertising for cosmetics.⁴ Cleopatra's racial make-up was a question for early twentieth-century Americans, as I will discuss later in this essay, which allowed her to operate as a canvas for fantasy. An Orientalist framing of Cleopatra, in an American context, placed her ambiguously between whiteness and blackness, depending on the depiction. It is this ambiguity that allowed her to be appropriated into whiteness and become an emblem for ideal white beauty.



Figure 2. Unknown designer, c. 1920–1929, Goldstein Museum of Design (1994.007.019). Women's black silk pajama top and bottoms with Egyptian motif silk at yoke and cuffs of bottoms. (From the Collection of the Goldstein Museum of Design, Gift of Felice Wender).

Against this backdrop of Egyptomania and the popular presence of Cleopatra, how might we use these garments to consider the relationship between clothing, femininity and racial embodiment? How did Egyptian motifs in dress function as performatives of whiteness for middle to upper class white women in this period? Additionally, why was the figure of Cleopatra, as a beauty icon, integral to this process?

To answer these questions, I model approaches of art historians working within the burgeoning field of critical race art history and material culture studies.⁵ Following the example set forth by scholars including Richard Dyer (1997), Martin Berger (2005), and Dianne Harris (2013), I have focused my inquiry on examining whiteness, in order to disrupt its normative status.⁶ While this may seem like a straightforward task, identifying and interpreting evidence of whiteness poses a distinct challenge precisely because of this status.

³ For object-centered surveys of Egyptomania, see (Coffin and Harrison 2017; Humbert et al. 1994).

⁴ Five versions of Cleopatra films were produced between 1908 and 1918 alone. See (Lant 1992, p. 102).

⁵ The Association for Critical Race Art History maintains a bibliography of texts relevant to this growing field. See, (Association for Critical Race Art History n.d.).

⁶ These scholars examine objects of study that aren't explicitly marked by race.

Berger captures the essence of this paradox in the title phrase of his book: *Sight Unseen*. While we often think of race as a visual phenomenon (the *sight*)—we see and attempt to assign racial status based on visual cues—the structures and underlying logic of that racialization remain *unseen*. Berger’s focus, therefore, is on how whiteness—as a racial logic—shaped interpretation of the visual world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Although whites did not see race as an issue in any of my primary texts,” he writes, “they nevertheless responded to the works in ways that betrayed their investment in being white” (Berger 2005, p. 8).

As Berger describes, the task of identifying and analyzing the unseen—whiteness as a racial logic, ideology, mode of perceiving the world—faces an evidentiary challenge: if you cannot always see whiteness, because of its normative invisibility, how do we find it? Further, this challenge can lead to inevitably tautological arguments: this demonstrates whiteness because it is whiteness.

To aid in this, I draw from Michael Yonan’s call for art history to more emphatically draw from material culture studies in order to “locate meaning as *always inclusive* of the object’s materiality” (Yonan 2011, p. 246). In trying to comprehend the racial work Egyptian-inspired garments did for American new women, I think together the material aspects of the garments and how they, in Berger’s parlance, “confirm meanings” already present in culture.⁷

I argue that these garments—through their material presence, form, and repeated wearing—served as performatives of whiteness for white-presenting middle-to-upper-class “new women” and simultaneously signaled the beauty, modernity, and palatable sexuality of its wearer.⁸ Through the Egyptian motifs, racialized otherness ironically transforms into whiteness.

Before we proceed, a final note on the messiness of iconographical analysis and the tracing of cultural signs must be made. Art historian Louise Siddons, in the article “African Past or American Present? The Visual Eloquence of James VanDerZee’s *Identical Twins*” notes how the process of iconographical analysis depends on a translation of the visual into the verbal and thus relies on an assumption that artists created “legible, definitive readings” (Siddons 2013, p. 445). Siddons submits that we should reframe our inquiries away from such a one-to-one translation of meaning, and ask *how* we expect works to convey meaning, suggesting that we recognize that signification is multiple and often contradictory (Siddons 2013, pp. 445–46).

Rather than attempt to trace or verify the “authenticity” of Egyptian motifs, I acknowledge that the signs under examination here, (the use of Egyptian motifs in dress, and Cleopatra in advertising), can be interpreted in multiple ways. Particularly with regard to dress, whether a white woman or woman of color wore these garments would operate differently in the social realm. As previously mentioned, part of the challenge of examining whiteness—of making visible what’s normal and taken for granted—is the implicit tautology of arguments about hegemony. Despite this, I think that such an examination remains important. Although cultural signs are harder to pin down, I would like to suggest that their iterative production reproduces what they signify. In other words, we are able to trace the continued production of whiteness in the 1920s–1930s because of their repetition and predominance in the visual realm at this time. This is true even when, ironically, otherness is appropriated as a tool to further whiteness.

In what follows, I first contextualize the garments in terms of modern dress form and demonstrate the legibility of their Egyptian motifs. Then, I turn to the figure of Cleopatra, whose popularity as a beauty icon for advertisers in this moment manifests

⁷ Berger writes: “Images do not persuade us to internalize racial values embedded within them, so much as they confirm meanings for which the discourses and structures of our society have predisposed us. Instead of selling us on racial systems we do not already own, the visual field powerfully confirms previously internalized beliefs.” (Berger 2005, p. 1).

⁸ I limited the scope of this paper to examining whiteness and the American “new woman.” Other scholars have made important contributions to understanding the experiences of “new negro woman” during this period as well as the relationship between blackness, modernity, and primitivism. See (Archer-Straw 2000; Cheng 2010; Francis 2012; Patterson 2005; Willis 2008).

the intersections between modernity, femininity, consumption and whiteness. Drawing from scholarship by Alys Eve Weinbaum and Judith Butler, I synthesize the operation of these material and visual signs and argue that we read these garments as performatives of whiteness. I conclude by way of Cecil B. DeMille's 1934 *Cleopatra*, in order to underscore how the indeterminacy of Cleopatra's race allowed for her white appropriation, and further reinforced the potency of Egyptian motifs in modern women's dress.

2. The Garments

The relatively loose-fitting form of the Callot Soeurs gown and black silk pajamas is in tune with modern fashion sensibilities and reflect the general acceptance, by the 1920s, of decades-long efforts at dress reform for women as well as fashion's interest in the exotic. Although the well-known early twentieth-century designer Paul Poiret declared that he "freed" women from the restrictive corset through his designs, scholars have noted a longer history of dress reform starting in the nineteenth century (Cunningham 2003, p. 210). A range of women in Europe and America sought to make fashion rational during this period. While some advocated maintaining outer dress in compliance with current styles and reforming restrictive undergarments (such as the corset, corset cover, bustles, petticoats), others rejected clothing styles that they felt suggested inferiority to men. These women are often described as being part of an "anti-fashion" movement and sought a rethinking of women's dress—to even include trousers (Cunningham 2003, p. 6). By the twentieth century, department stores, dressmakers and haute couture designers accommodated modern women's desires for more practical clothing appropriate to their activities including activity-specific leisure wear and employment outside of the home (Cunningham 2003, pp. 207–8).

Designers took inspiration for new silhouettes from what they deemed as exotic cultures, including the Near East, Asia, as well as ancient Greece (Cunningham 2003, p. 210). As Akiko Fukai notes in "The Discovery of Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Fashion," interest in Japanese design—and the kimono in particular—influenced Western designers. By the end of nineteenth century, wealthy women wore kimono-style garments as housedresses in the home (Fukai 2016, p. 171). In contrast to prominent Western women's dress, which emphasized the waist, the support for a kimono comes from the shoulders, creating an abstract form that does not cling to the body (Fukai 2016, p. 175). While by the 1920s, rectangular silhouettes with a boxy style achieved mainstream popularity, during the previous decade wearing kimono-style silhouettes outside of the home marked one as a radical feminist (Rabinovitch-Fox 2015, p. 28).

First, let us consider the Callot Soeurs gown (Figure 1). For twenty-first century viewers, the Egyptian aspects of the gown may be somewhat challenging to detect at first glance, while the silk pajamas are rather straightforward (the Pharaoh's distinctive crown is easily recognizable). The French luxury designers the Callot Soeurs were well known for incorporating "oriental" motifs in their designs (Lee 2016, p. 52). As Caroline Rennolds Milbank notes, in *Couture: The Great Designers*, the designers' use of intricate embroidery techniques, tunic forms and choice of colors—from "kingfisher blue and black" to "Nile green satin"—all contributed to a popular orientalist aesthetic (Milbank 1985, p. 63). Founded by four sisters in 1895 in France, by the 1920s the fashion house had expanded and opened branches in Nice, Buenos Aires and London, attracting a following by elite society ladies (Dirix 2016, p. 68). By the mid-1920s, all major New York City department stores sold Callot Soeurs designs including Bonwit Teller and Co., B. Altman & Co. and Saks Fifth Avenue (Weinberg 2015, p. 15).

A three-page spread in Harper's Bazaar from 1920 describes the popularity of "Oriental" and specifically Egyptian motifs in fashion as that season's trend:

It is Egypt perhaps that pleases us most. For, from under the mystery of the temple and tomb, of pylon and palace, there have been unearthed silhouettes, designs and ornaments which delightfully recall Isis, the goddess, and Cleopatra, the enchantress. (A Long Fifth Avenue 1920)

As with this garment, increasingly shorter hemlines and boxier-cut garments allowed for a freedom of movement among modern American woman (Patterson 2008, p. 4). The changing sartorial style reflects the increased freedom of movement physically within the garment, as well as within the urban environment. One can imagine a flapper-type woman wearing this dress dancing in a dimly lit (interracial) jazz club, the golden thread and beaded details catching the light as she sways. The cultural figure of the American new woman—variously described at the time as “a suffragist, progressive reformer, prohibitionist, or flapper”—signaled a reassessment of women’s roles in the early twentieth century (Patterson 2008, p. 1). A departure from the prevailing nineteenth century “cult of domesticity” view that placed women as the heart of the home and guardians of the family’s moral status, with increased urbanization, the new woman embraced modernity by taking a larger role in public life with increased personal freedom.

The new woman, presumed to be white, is often framed as vivacious and carefree, as can be seen in literary critic H.L. Mencken’s 1915 article “The Flapper”: “Her skirts have just reached her very trim and pretty ankles; her hair, newly coiled upon her skull, has just exposed the ravishing whiteness of her neck. A charming creature!” (Mencken 2008, p. 85). Although modest to most twenty-first-century viewers, the knee-length hemline on this green dress, and the corresponding revelation of (“ravishing”) white limbs, which would have been covered just a decade earlier, produced a titillating spectacle. This spectacle is furthered by the presence of white women at jazz clubs, a morally questionable area for conservative critics of the time who were anxious about interracial mixing. One such critic from 1922 condemned the racial mixing and coed fraternization at jazz clubs stating:

Dancing intimately in the dark, carrying a hip flask, going ‘bumming’ in the motor, unchaperoned, scorning the conventions in every way, vulgarizing the emotions that should be kept most sacred, eating, drinking, camel-walking, livening in the material and sensual and forgetting the spiritual . . . it’s a retrogression. (Lee 2008, p. 229)

Beyond the potential exotic aura of a jazz club, the dress itself contains ancient Egyptian elements that were legible to contemporary viewers. In a technical costume history published in 1920, entitled *Ancient Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian Costumes and Decorations*, the authors describe the great interest in ancient dress in recent years: “The growing appreciation of the beauty and value of the earlier and more primitive styles of cutting shown in modern dress designing for the last decade . . . will make the present volume a convenient form of inspiration for designers” (Houston and Hornblower 1920, p. vi).

According to this 1920 costume history, Egyptian dress often followed the classic “tunic” form, and incorporated decorative beading or embroidery along the neckline (Houston and Hornblower 1920, pp. 10, 12). As mentioned, the form of this green dress, with curved neckline, lack of sleeves, and straight vertical form, follows a tunic style. The elaborate beading along the neckline is filled with detailed flower motifs. The beading continues in a strip down the front of the dress, emphasizing verticality. Just below the horizontal drop waist of the garment, defined by horizontal beading and a shift from dark green to light green fabric, a loose panel of beaded fabric further emphasizes this verticality. Attached at the drop waist and hanging freely, this panel of fabric visually gestures to “characteristic” ancient Egyptian “belts with appendages,” as can be seen in “Figure 21” in the costume history (Figure 3) (Houston and Hornblower 1920, pp. 38–39). Further, the vertical emphasis in the dress—through its boxy tunic cut and decorative beadwork—is reminiscent of ancient Egyptian columns, such as those of the hypostyle hall in the temple of Amun at Karnak, that feature decorative carvings.

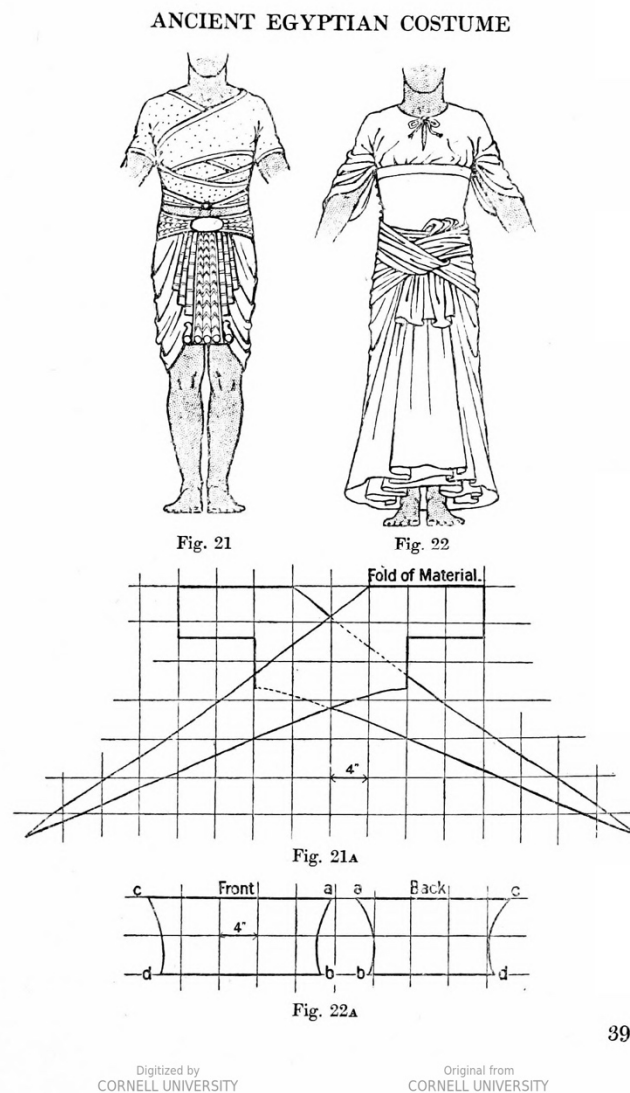


Figure 3. Technical costume manual depicting ancient Egyptian belts with appendages. From (Houston and Hornblower 1920, p. 39). (Courtesy of HathiTrust).

The silk pajamas (Figure 2) also evoke exoticism through their form. Pajamas, which typically consist of a matching coat or blouse and trousers, originated from ankle-length trousers worn in India and Persia (Picken 1999, pp. 240–41). Following World War I, pajamas for women became increasingly popular, often mimicking men’s striped styles (Newman and Bressler 1998, p. 110). By the 1930s, tailored pajamas for women were quite popular, not only for sleeping but for loungewear and for hosting guests (Hill 2014, p. 86). This pair of black silk pajamas is somewhat unique in that it also features an elastic waist, a new technology in the 1920s (Hill 2011, pp. 148–49). While the looser cut of the pajamas has a masculine quality, the Egyptian motifs add a feminizing quality.

3. Cleopatra, the Modern Beauty

For millennia, Cleopatra has remained an object of curiosity and intrigue. As Mary Hamer argues in *Signs of Cleopatra*, Cleopatra is linked to originary tales of the West and repeatedly appears as a cultural metaphor for the place of women in a society’s social order (Hamer 2008b, p. 15). Cleopatra was the third child of Ptolemy XII, a descendant of the Macedonian general who ruled Egypt following the death of Alexander the Great. Although her mother is unknown to the historical record, given that the Ptolemaic rulers

adopted the Pharaonic practice of brother–sister marriage, some argue that Cleopatra was largely of Greek descent (Hughes-Hallett 1990, p. 15). Similarly, there is a lack of consensus on what Cleopatra realistically looked like. Drawing from numismatics, some scholars argue that she had a large hooked nose, which is rarely expressed in popular depictions of her over the centuries (Goudchaux 2001, pp. 210–14). Due to Cleopatra’s uncertain ancestry, within American culture, Cleopatra has been represented as racially black or white for varying political purposes. The greatness of Egypt as an ancient civilization, an *African* civilization, led American abolitionists in the nineteenth century to represent Cleopatra as black (Nelson 2007, p. 113). Similarly, in the early twentieth century, African American civil rights workers claimed ancient Egypt as a distinctly African civilization, once again linking Cleopatra to blackness (Siddons 2013, pp. 451–52).

By the 1920s and into the 1930s, Cleopatra’s aspirational visage sold a variety of products to American women consumers. From a Homeric Cruise through the Mediterranean, to stylish Gage Brothers hats, skin care regimens, cosmetics, or hair dye, Cleopatra circulates as one of discerning taste and quality.⁹ Across such depictions Cleopatra becomes an icon for the ideal modern woman—a smart consumer with good taste. Further, her image links modernity, femininity, luxury and beauty through whiteness.

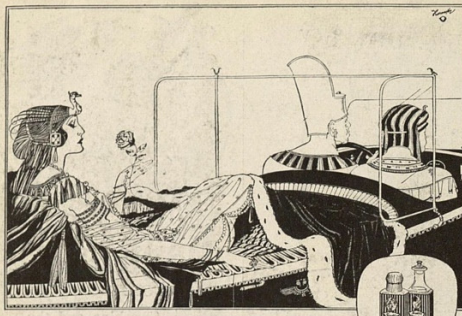
Significantly, Cleopatra is presented by advertisers as white, more often than not. Golden Glint Shampoo, for instance, presents Cleopatra alongside Helen of Troy and Sappho, all of whom were “extolled for the loveliness of their tresses” which “had reddish tints imprisoned within [them]” (Advertisement: Golden Glint T. W. Kobi Co. (1927)).

Similarly, a Mineralava beauty clay advertisement implies Cleopatra’s whiteness through her flawless complexion, while also presenting her as a modern woman (Figure 4). Asserting that Cleopatra, “the beautiful, the magnificent,” would ride in a car today if given the chance, the advertisement concludes that modern Cleopatra would also give up her “ancient soaps, creams, and lotions for the complexion” and adopt Mineralava’s scientifically proven formula. Employing visceral language, the product description emphasizes bodily purification: “You *feel* it withdraw all foreign matter . . . You *feel* the cleansing purifying blood tingle through each tiny vein . . . Immediately, a blooming youthfulness glows and radiates from the cheeks” (Advertisement: Mineralava Mrs. M. G. Scott, Scott’s Preparations, Inc. (1921)). A “necessary skin food and tonic,” as well as “a mild bleach,” Mineralava reflects the larger cultural trend at the time that white unblemished skin was ideal, and uses the figure of Cleopatra to do so. In so doing, this language also evokes a latent ideology of racial purity in the era, particularly as one considers the popularity of eugenics in the early twentieth century, as well as anxieties over immigration in the United States.

As both Lucy Hughes-Hallett and Charmaine Nelson discuss in *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* and *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-century America*, respectively, Cleopatra broadly embodies the “other” to Western conceptions of subjectivity by being both a woman and non-Western or “Oriental” (Hughes-Hallett 1990, p. 4; Nelson 2007, p. 150). Nelson, in her discussion of William Wetmore Story’s 1862 sculpture *Cleopatra*, draws on Story’s use of physiognomic racial stereotypes to depict Cleopatra as an African queen, and utilizes primary sources that reflect how critics at the time further racialized the statue through their descriptions. In particular, Nelson notes how Cleopatra’s nature is presented as “excessive and feral” in these descriptions, and that these attributes purportedly derived from her (suspected African) maternal lineage. According to Nelson, Cleopatra’s perceived “passionate temper” was understood as “something that is in her blood” (Nelson 2007, p. 150).

⁹ For advertisements featuring Cleopatra, see (Advertisement: Homeric Cruise 1930; Advertisement: Gage Brothers & Co. (Advertisement: Gage Brothers & Co. 1921)).

104



Mineralava frees the clogged pores that stifle a beautiful complexion.

CLEOPATRA WOULD RIDE IN A CAR TODAY

By VERNON RADCLIFFE

CLEOPATRA, the beautiful, the magnificent, would never be satisfied with ancient Egyptian methods of conveyance, were she privileged to live today. In place of her chariot, she would speed in a car. In place of her famous barge, she would own a yacht. And is there any reason to suppose that she would continue the use of ancient soaps, creams and lotions for the complexion, when modern life offers something so much better?

The care of the complexion has become increasingly necessary increasingly hard. Today the trains roar back and forth. The streets throb with the exhausts of motor cars. The factories seep down clouds of sooty vapor. Beauty has been fading earlier and earlier.

Yet, despite the dust and impurities that modern life forces deep down into the skin, we still further impose soaps, creams, lotions and cosmetics. Can tired Nature expel the added burden in the pores?

Impurities *must* come out. Nothing put on the face can possibly be of benefit if the pores beneath are clogged, and today they are clogged as they never were before.

Women have turned in desperation to massage, the vigorous action of human hands. Unscientific face massage has made more old women than age. To parboil your skin with half scalding water, and knead and maul the muscles of your face is bound to be injurious. Massaging does not even remove dirt, foreign substances and impurities from the place where they do the real damage—down below the surface of the skin. Your Beauty Specialist will tell you so.

Mineralava is the *one* way to a good complexion—the *only* way—so startling, so revolutionary in idea, so different from any treatment that you have known, that you cannot afford not to know it—to try it.

Instead of being just one more thing to put on the face, to rub in the pores, Mineralava takes out. It cleanses the clogged pores—washes off—and is gone, all in twelve minutes. Daintily applied with a brush—


Mineralava, Nature's Beauty Clay, originated by Mrs. M. G. Scott and perfected by her through 23 years of scientific research and experiment, accomplishes two important results—it withdraws impurities from the pores and it tightens sagging muscles.

As it dries it contracts. You *feel* its medicinal ingredients penetrate the depths of the pores. You *feel* it withdraw all foreign matter.

You *feel* the wrinkles smooth out. You *feel* the flabby skin made tight. You *feel* the cleansing purifying blood tingle through each tiny vein.

Immediately, a blooming youthfulness glows and radiates from the cheeks. Mineralava Face Finish is a necessary skin food and tonic, acts as a mild bleach and forms a perfect base for your face powder. You apply it at the proper time, *after the pores are cleansed*. Procure Mineralava at druggist or department store *today*—or try it, by mailing coupon with 25c.

MANUFACTURER'S NOTE: Mineralava contains absolutely nothing which can harm the most delicate skin. We guarantee it, and will refund your money if you are not satisfied after one treatment. Scott's Preparations, Inc., 6 East 37th St., New York City.



Mineralava

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.
PARIS VIVAUDOU NEW YORK
Distributor

—INTRODUCTORY OFFER— (N)

Mrs. M. G. Scott, Scott's Preparations, Inc., 6 East 37th St., New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find 25c (stamp coin) for which please send demonstration tube of Mineralava sufficient for two full treatments.

Name.....

Street.....

Town.....

The druggist nearest me is.....

Figure 4. Mineralava Advertisement, *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1921, p. 104. (Image published with permission of ProQuest LLC. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission. Image produced by ProQuest LLC as part of Harper's Bazaar Archive. proquest.com).

Although Mineralava produced this advertisement almost six decades after Story's sculpture, the use of language that suggests bodily purification gestures metaphorically to something deeper than oily skin. Here, Cleopatra's potential racial otherness is washed away as "purifying blood tingle[s] through each tiny vein" and as "foreign matter" is withdrawn (Advertisement: Mineralava (Mrs. M.G. Scott's Preparations, Inc.) 1921). A mild bleach, Mineralava serves as the ideal vehicle to catalyze whiteness as Cleopatra's beauty is linked to her whiteness and flawless complexion.

Like Mineralava, Palmolive also adopted Cleopatra as a modern white beauty symbol in its advertising. In a 1922 advertisement, Cleopatra, identified through the ad's text, is presented as a mix between a modern flapper and an "Oriental" harem type, pouring a mysterious liquid into a golden bowl (Figure 5). With a fashionable bobbed haircut, rouge and lipstick, and unblemished white skin, Cleopatra looks like the ideal new woman, and in fact mirrors the woman at the top center of the ad, who could be her twin. Her bold red bra, with concentric circles outlined with pearls, visually accentuates imagined areolas.¹⁰ Although revealing a lot of skin, and being overtly erotic through emphasis on the breasts and areolas, the figure of Cleopatra still maintains respectability through her status as queen and her use of luxury materials; markers of queenly status and wealth contain the sexual overtones from moving into pornographic impropriety. The fact that Cleopatra is white further underscores the acceptability of this eroticism.

Depicted as a Near Eastern harem type, the figure of Cleopatra also wears arm bangles. As sleeves shortened and disappeared from eveningwear following the 1910s, the arm bangle was increasingly popular (Siddons 2013, p. 446). As Louise Siddons notes, arm bangles signified as both reminders of the history of enslavement, as well as a mark of modern glamour and beauty during this period (Siddons 2013, pp. 444, 446). Significantly, arm bangles were often referred to as "slave bangles" during the 1920s and 1930s, a slang phrase deriving from the historic use of identification bracelets for enslaved people (Siddons 2013, p. 444). In addition, Nelson describes the primary use of the female black body during slavery, which was as a breeder to produce more enslaved people and ensure the continuation of slavery (Nelson 2007, p. 117). Siddons' and Nelson's scholarship together suggest that the arm band signaled an erotic undertone for the modern new woman.

This imagery also reflects a shift in acceptability of midriff exposure in dress. At the turn of the twentieth century, exotic dance, ballet, theatre, and silent movies all presented exotic ensembles like the bejeweled bra we see here. As Amy Scarborough and Patricia Hunt-Hurst note in "The Making of an Erogenous Zone: The Role of Exoticism, Dance, and the Movies in Midriff Exposure, 1900–1946", drawing from the realm of dance and theatre, print advertisements and fashion magazines began increasingly to depict women in outfits exposing the midriff during this moment to sell products ranging from perfume to toiletries to cigarettes.

Further, upper-class society women participated in exotic themed costume balls, using them as an opportunity to push the boundaries of sensual acceptability. Often, these costumes emphasized the midriff through the design lines of the garment, or incorporated sheer fabrics over the midriff (Scarborough and Hunt-Hurst 2014, pp. 49–54). If you look closely at Cleopatra's abdomen in this ad, you'll notice sheer fabric with gold embroidery on it, echoing high-fashion designs. In addition, a 1930 newspaper article describes such a costume ball—themed "the era of Cleopatra"—and includes a grainy photograph of two women in Cleopatra costumes: one with her midriff revealed, the other covered, illustrating the varying degrees of comfort of revealing one's flesh (Jaklon 1930). Overall, it seems clear that being in character, allowed for more boundary pushing.

A more covered (white) Cleopatra appears in a 1920 Palmolive soap advertisement, which links her to a subtle eroticism and marks her as visually distinct from her darker-skinned servants (Figure 6). The text claims (according to "hieroglyphic records") that the "beauty-loving queen" enhanced her beauty with rouge, yet a "radiant cleanliness was always the foundation" (*The Cosmetics of Cleopatra Palmolive Co. (1920)*). Echoing Mineralava's rhetoric of foreignness and purity, with the "scientific" Palmolive formula, "no foreign substances are left to poison the skin with disfiguring blotches and imperfections" (*The Cosmetics of Cleopatra Palmolive Co. (1920)*).

¹⁰ For a strikingly similar high fashion design featured in *L'Art et la Mode* from 1921, see (Olian 1990, p. 30).



The Happiest Time of Her Life

Admiration, attention—groups of eager young men awaiting her appearance, and more partners than she can dance with—this makes girlhood days the happiest time of a woman's life.

To miss this popularity is a tragedy. Yet many girls are socially unsuccessful because of some lack in charm.

What constitutes this charm is hard to define—but one thing is certain. The popular girl, the successful girl, the gay, happy, all-admired girl is always distinguished by a fresh, radiant skin.

What spoils complexions

Every day your skin accumulates a coating of dust, dirt and general soil. Every day you apply powder, and every day most women use a little or much cold cream.

This dirt, powder and cold cream penetrates the tiny skin pores and fills them. Perspiration completes the clogging. You can judge for yourself what happens if you fail to wash these accumulations away.

Once a day your skin needs careful, thorough cleansing to remove these clogging deposits. Otherwise you will soon be afflicted with coarseness, blackheads and blotches.

How soap beautifies

Mild, pure, soothing soap, such as Palmolive, is a simple yet certain beautifier. Its profuse, creamy lather penetrates the network of skin pores and dissolves all dangerous deposits. Gentle rinsing carries them away.

The lotion-like qualities of the Palmolive lather keeps your complexion delightfully soft, fresh and smooth.

Cleopatra's way

With all classic peoples, bathing was a daily rite never neglected. The ruins of Cleopatra's sumptuous marble bath are ample proof of her faith in this ancient beauty secret.

Palm and olive oils were the cleansers used—the same bland oriental oils we blend scientifically in Palmolive.

A 10-cent luxury

The vast volume in which we produce Palmolive to supply the world-wide demand naturally lowers cost.

If made in small quantities the price would be at least 25 cents. Manufacturing economy permits us to offer this finest facial soap for only 10 cents, a price within the reach of all.

Use Palmolive for bathing and let it do for your body what it does for your face.

THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY, Milwaukee, U. S. A.
THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY OF CANADA, Limited
TORONTO, ONT.

Also makers of a complete line of toilet articles

Volume and efficiency produce
25-cent quality for only
10c



Copyright 1922—The Palmolive Co. 1405

Figure 5. Palmolive Advertisement, *Photoplay Magazine*, March 1922, vol. 21, no. 4., p. 75.

The accompanying image, a horizontal scene in Cleopatra's palace laid out above the text, contains erotic undertones. Centrally positioned and elevated on a red cushioned throne, Cleopatra radiates normative beauty with her alabaster skin, subtle rouge, and red lips. Demurely sitting with her ankles crossed, she provocatively pours a mysterious translucent liquid. Skillfully holding the phallic jar, the liquid pours into a round bowl nestled gently between her knees as she softly caresses the rim of the bowl with her fingers. Behind her an alert leopard, a historical allusion to eroticism in the Western tradition, stands in profile with an erect tail.

The sexual eroticism of Cleopatra pales in comparison to the servant girls flanking her, which fall into more overt stereotypes of the primitive and sexually available other. Although gesturing to modernity with stylish bobbed hairstyles, the suggestive nudity and adornments signal tropes of primitive exoticism. The semi-circle murals painted on the walls directly behind the figures' heads, decorated with an art deco pattern of primary colored triangles, function as a type of feathered halo headdress for the figures. The two

women stand almost naked, wearing only the classic Egyptian belts with appendages. They strategically hold amphora style vases to cover their breasts. The shape of these vases mimics their curved hips and is mirrored by a pair of open vessels beside them, symmetrically completing the composition. Positioned next to elegant Cleopatra, with her white skin and crossed ankles, the primitivizing elements of the feathered headdress and loin-cloth visually submit contrasting sexual availability of the figures—a controlled respectable eroticism from Cleopatra, and a base eroticism from the dark-skinned, Nubian slave-type figures.

The Cosmetics of Cleopatra

HOW did Cleopatra wash her face? What cleansers did she use? Did she enhance her beauty with cosmetics?

Hieroglyphic records prove that while the finish of the royal toilet may have been roughing with carmine or vermilion, thorough, radiant cleanliness was always the foundation.

And the cleansers?—Palm and Olive oils—the same rare oils which produce a famous toilet soap today. Remember that rouge and powder are harmless enough when applied to a clean skin and profit by the beauty secret of Cleopatra.

Wash your face with the same bland, beneficial cleansers the beauty-loving queen employed—scientifically combined in mild, soothing Palmolive.

Wash away imperfections

Work up a profuse thick lather from this gentlest of all soaps. Massage it thoroughly into every pore. Don't be afraid of irritation—Palmolive is mild as cream. Rub gently, of course, for you must not roughen the delicate texture of the skin. Then rinse carefully in pleasantly warm water and end with a dash in cold.

This simple beauty treatment washes away imperfections. The Palmolive lather carries off dirt, excessive oil secretions, dead skin and the traces of rouge and powder which otherwise clog up the pores. No foreign substances are left to poison the skin with disfiguring blotches and imperfections.

If your skin is inclined to dryness apply Palmolive Cold Cream before you begin washing. This supplements the natural oil that keeps it smooth and supple.

If we made Palmolive in small quantities—

It would necessarily be a very expensive soap. Palm and Olive oils are costly and come from overseas.

But we import them in enormous volume and the Palmolive factories work day and night.

This gigantic production reduces cost and the price of Palmolive is no more than ordinary soaps. It is within the reach of all for every toilet purpose, the greatest of modern luxuries.

Palmolive is sold by dealers everywhere. It is made by

THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY, Milwaukee, U. S. A.
The Palmolive Company of Canada, Limited, Toronto, Ontario

PALMOLIVE

PALMOLIVE

Why men have the best skins

Not from care, you may be sure. Men are thorough when they have used plenty of soap and water. Yet most men have finer and firmer skin than the average woman. And they usually look younger.

Soap and water is the answer—soap for thorough cleansing, water to harden and invigorate. Fine soap, of course, soap that cleanses without harshness. Preferably soap that is made from Palm and Olive oil—mild, soothing Palmolive.

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Figure 6. Palmolive Advertisement, *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1920, vol. 55, no. 11, p. 112a. (Image published with permission of ProQuest LLC. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission. Image produced by ProQuest LLC as part of Harper's Bazaar Archive. proquest.com).

Cleopatra's (literally) elevated status is further highlighted by a motif of bondage beneath her footstool and carved into the plinth upon which her throne rests. Looking closely at the plinth, one notices a repeated pattern of figures with arms and legs tied behind their backs, tied to a post. The depiction of submissive prisoners historically served

as an icon of kingship in ancient Egyptian art.¹¹ Here, these motifs function as signifiers of the depiction of an “authentic” ancient Egypt, attesting to Cleopatra’s perceived power as a ruler. Yet, given the sexual tone of the advertisement overall, one cannot help but see a connection to sadomasochistic eroticism. As these prisoner motifs do not feature overt violence (like many of their ancient art historical precedents), their submissiveness holds a titillating quality: positioned at Cleopatra’s feet, the bound figures await her action. Within an American context, one can also draw parallels to the history of slavery and bondage in the United States. There’s a way in which white femininity quotes from enslavement through decorative slave bangle arm bands and Cleopatra’s image here.

Finally, a 1922 Palmolive advertisement transfers Cleopatra’s eroticism to a contemporary woman in her bed (Figure 7). Pictured in the bottom right corner, Cleopatra kneels while holding a shallow golden bowl of incense, from which a wisp of smoke emanates. With pure white skin, rouged cheeks and red lips, and wearing a golden crown and golden snake armband, she emanates royal beauty. Above her, text reveals Cleopatra’s ancient beauty secret: the use of palm and olive oils ([Pretty When She Wakes Up Palmolive Co. \(1922\)](#)). The contemporary woman is the focus of the advertisement, centrally positioned above the text. Lounging in her bed, propped up by pillows, she looks toward the viewer with slightly open lips and open arms. Far from a disheveled bedhead, with text that reads “pretty when she wakes up” below the image, this woman has neatly combed hair framing her face and wears rouge and red lipstick. A muted prurience emotes from her position in the bed and her silk nightgown. White with thin straps, the nightgown features two pink bows at the top of her shoulders, suggestively waiting to be untied; her left strap is already slightly out of place.

Her lounging position, paired with Cleopatra’s “Oriental” presence, as well as the presence of a black cat at her feet, gesture toward Western art historical paintings of odalisques, and even of Manet’s well-known 1863 painting *Olympia*—although here we have a warm open body, with soft glowing skin, rather than Olympia’s cold external shell. Further, there’s a way in which one’s cosmopolitanism and ability to recognize art historical references increases the underlying sexual tension within the advertisements. Unlike *Olympia*, the negative reception of which, T.J. Clark famously argued, demonstrated nineteenth-century French bourgeois anxieties around the illegibility of prostitutes due to rapid urbanization, the Palmolive figure soothes any cultural anxieties regarding women’s unbridled sexuality. This smiling playful woman will not disrupt the patriarchal order; in fact, she helps uphold it by promoting products that make women more beautiful and appealing to male love interests. Ultimately, we see a presentation of acceptable feminine sexuality—contained, subtle, demure, and underscored by a white femininity.¹²

Overall, we see that, through this imagery, Cleopatra embodies a white beauty ideal imbued with modernity and feminine power. The question of Cleopatra’s race is what allowed Orientalist depictions of her to be appropriated into whiteness; in an American context, an “Oriental” queen translated into a white aspirational figure of modernity.¹³ In other words, depictions of Cleopatra transformed racial otherness into white feminine power. For new women, Cleopatra’s independence and power (linked with her beauty) underscored her desirability. Further, her deployment by soap advertisers also suggests a material enactment by white women to maintain their whiteness through the daily ritual of cleansing to restore purity.

¹¹ See ([Robins 2008](#)). Precedents include the base of the statue of King Khasekhem (Robbins’ Figure 34), which features naked bound prisoners, as well as the Narmer Palette (Robbins’ Figure 25), which features naked beheaded captives in addition to a prisoner being struck by the Pharaoh’s mace.

¹² Women’s sexuality was becoming more acceptable than in the Victorian era. For instance, a 1918 advertisement from *Photoplay Magazine* features an illustrated book entitled *Sexual Knowledge*. With the headline “sex facts made plain,” it provides “what every young man and every young woman should know,” targeting young unmarried people. See ([Advertising Section 1918](#)).

¹³ Those familiar with Orientalist painting will note the visual similarities between these twentieth century popular advertisements (in particular Figures 5 and 7) and nineteenth century depictions of white-appearing Odalisques and concubines. However, in contrast to depictions by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and others, in which the woman serves as an object of erotic desire and sympathy, here Cleopatra emotes personal agency because of her power as queen. For recent studies on the intersections between whiteness, femininity, sexuality, and exoticism under imperialism, in the eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries respectively, see ([Rausser 2020](#); [Bagneris 2020](#)).

Pretty when she wakes up

This is the real test. The girl who wakes fresh and radiant, with a clear, smooth skin which has no defects to conceal, need not worry about her looks. She possesses the greatest of all attractions—the one which outshines all others.

This need not discourage the girl whose complexion is not so good. Proper care will soon transform a bad skin into one admired for its perfection.

Get rid of the clogging accumulations which cause coarseness and disfiguring defects and you will soon be complimented on your fresh, blooming complexion.

The secret is simple and about 3,000 years old. It was discovered in ancient Egypt and practiced by Cleopatra.

Simple—Beautifying

The remedy for a coarse skin, for one disfigured with blackheads or ugly blotches, is daily cleansing with a lather blended from palm and olive oils.

Volume and efficiency produce 25-cent quality for only 10c

PALMOLIVE

Such a cleanser is so mild and soothing that it softens the skin and keeps it smooth. But it removes the accumulation of dirt, oil and perspiration which are responsible for most bad complexions.

You can't neglect your skin and expect to keep it blooming and alluring. The powder and rouge you use to conceal defects deceive no one.

The soothing cleanser

Palmolive is the modern combination of the same beautifying cosmetic oils Cleopatra used in the days of ancient Egypt. It is just as valuable today as a safe, soothing cleanser.

Massage its smooth, creamy lather softly into the network of tiny pores which compose the surface of your skin. It will remove the clogging deposits which enlarge these pores, cause blackheads and invite blotches.

Dry skins are benefited by cold cream after cleansing. If unusual dryness is your trouble, apply a little cream before as well as after washing.

Popularity—Low price

Judge Palmolive by other soaps and you will expect to pay at least 25 cents a cake. But the popularity which keeps the Palmolive factories working day and night naturally reduces cost. Quantity production is always economical.

Thus this finest facial soap is offered at 10 cents a cake—a price all can afford. You can economically use Palmolive for every toilet purpose, for it costs no more than ordinary soap.

Cleopatra's way

With a world of ancient beauty arts at her command, she depended on cleansing with palm and olive oils to protect, improve and preserve the freshness and smoothness of her skin.

This beautifying was not confined to face alone. The bath was a daily ceremonial with all ancient peoples, palm and olive oils the cleansers used.

Bathe with Palmolive and keep your skin smooth and white. It is a luxury all can afford.

THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY, Milwaukee, U. S. A.
THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY OF CANADA, Limited
TORONTO, ONT.

Also makers of a complete line of toilet articles

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Figure 7. Palmolive Advertisement, *Vogue*, April 1922, vol. 59, no. 7–12, p. 81. (Courtesy of HathiTrust).

4. Performatives of Whiteness

The wearing of luxury garments with Egyptian-inspired designs (and their inherent associations with Cleopatra in particular), continually reaffirmed the whiteness, modernity, and class of its wearer.¹⁴ Scholarship by Alys Eve Weinbaum and Judith Butler provide useful methods to understand the role of material objects in racial embodiment (Weinbaum 2008; Butler 1988). In the essay “Racial Masquerade: Consumption and Contestation of American Modernity,” Weinbaum argues that through the ability to consume cosmetics, fashion and adornments, (white) American women marked their modernity in the 1920s and 1930s (Weinbaum 2008). She refers to this consumptive process, that involved “purchasing and putting on” racial masks, as well as their removal, as the racial masquerade—drawing from the prominent motif of masks in advertisements of the period (Weinbaum 2008, p. 121). Further, she identifies three key layers of this racial masquerade: the visual, the material, and the performance. The first refers to the superficial transformation of the body, the second refers to the practice of the commodity consumption of cosmetics, adornments, and fashion, and the third refers to the way in which race became less focused on biology during this period and more-so understood as a “performance, posture, gesture, [or] façade.”¹⁵ For Weinbaum, the racial masquerade illustrates the power of white women

¹⁴ As Butler has noted, one needs authority for a performative act to be socially accepted. I suggest that white women, because of their skin color and class, had the authority to deploy these performances, which continually reaffirmed their whiteness. The relationship between black women and these same garments would be different, because they hold a different social relation to power and authority during this period of American history. What that relationship is calls for future investigation.

¹⁵ (Weinbaum 2008, p. 131). For Weinbaum, modernity is linked to consumption. Rita Felski also discusses the relationship between femininity, modernity and consumption. See (Felski 1995).

to engage in consumption of the “other” by trying on various “exotic” masks through cosmetics and fashion and easily shed them, ultimately demonstrating their possession of American modernity (Weinbaum 2008, p. 131).

Focusing more closely on the material objects themselves that function in this process of racial embodiment, I suggest that the concept of racial masquerade can be pushed further into a theory on the performativity of whiteness—through which we can read the wearing of fashion garments as performatives of whiteness.¹⁶ Adopting the linguist J.L. Austin’s concept of the performative—describing an utterance that not only means something, but *does* something—¹⁷feminist theorist Judith Butler forwards the theory of the performativity of gender. As Butler asserts in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” gender is an ongoing project; one becomes one’s gender through the continued deployment of gendered signs: “In this sense gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 1988, p. 519). Similarly, we might also consider how racial identity might be constituted through a stylized repetition of acts.

Along this vein, I argue that American women in the 1920s–1930s, specifically became white through the repeated use of exotic signs. While according to Weinbaum the wearer’s whiteness is reinforced by her distance from the “other,” which is visually legible, I submit that beyond the distance that Weinbaum notes, the continued deployment of these exotic signs, ironically, further instantiates the wearer’s whiteness: the more exotic motifs one wears, the more “white” one becomes. It’s not that a woman is performing another race through exotic dress, rather, it is that the dress becomes a performative, pronouncing to others her whiteness, her modernity, and her status. In physically wearing these garments, white women became whiter. The form and materiality of the garments—the loose-fitting styles and Egyptian motifs within the popular context of Cleopatra as a white beauty symbol—manifest the whiteness of the wearer. Indeed, material and visual culture in tandem are important catalysts of identity formation.

Returning to the green dress, as a performative of whiteness, the garment brings several aspects of one’s identity to the forefront. First, through the use of luxurious materials such as gold thread, satin, and beaded detailing, the dress emotes a high class status, and veers into the realm of royal elegance. The belt-with-appendage feature functions as an “oriental” motif, placing the wearer among Isis the goddess and Cleopatra the enchantress, as evidenced through contemporary visual culture of fashion magazines and advertising. These motifs also function to purport a cosmopolitan air for the wearer, as one who appreciates ancient culture as well as French design. Ultimately, the wearer exudes sensuousness and power through these visual allusions to Cleopatra and exoticism. All of these elements buttress the wearer’s performative claim to whiteness: the power to purchase and wear the garment, the power to wear it in a racially mixed jazz club, the power to exude sexuality in an acceptable way through both her high class status and the cultural appropriation of Cleopatra into whiteness. As such, the wearer continually becomes white through the repeated wearing of this dress in public.

Similarly, the black silk pajamas reflect and manifest modern ideas on femininity, palatable sexuality and whiteness. Although the Egyptian motif does not directly picture Cleopatra, her prominence in the visual culture of this time, and associations with romance and eroticism, add an alluring quality to the garments. As a performative of whiteness, the pajamas would have affirmed many attributes. We can imagine a woman from the 1920s wearing this chic silk ensemble in her home while lounging with close friends or an intimate partner. The dark material would make a striking contrast against her white skin. The smooth silk would evoke luxury and call to be softly touched. The elegant silk signals her classed status and good taste; the Egyptian motifs mark her as cosmopolitan

¹⁶ Weinbaum’s primary evidence is period advertisements and literature, not material culture.

¹⁷ For instance, a minister’s statement, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” literally marks a couple’s new legal status. The phrase is imbued with power to change one’s status in the world.

and cultured for her appreciation of ancient culture. Her modernity is also affirmed by her own contrast against the Egyptian figures: “civilized”—white and dressed in silk—against “primitive”—semi-nude crudely abstracted dark-skinned figures.¹⁸ Additionally, while primitive associations can fall into a loss of moral status, this contrast bolsters her (assumed) superiority. Overall, these signs—of being modern, civilized, cosmopolitan, and of high taste—all uphold and allow the garments to generate whiteness.

5. Conclusions

One final example demonstrates the continued popularity of Cleopatra as a cultural figure for modern women and how the question of her race remained potent. Roughly twenty minutes into Cecil B. DeMille’s 1934 film *Cleopatra*, a scene unfolds that raises the specter of Cleopatra’s ancestry and may raise the eyebrows of twenty-first century viewers.¹⁹ After panning across a lively party in Rome, the camera pauses to focus on a conversation among five wealthy Romans seated playing a game. The discussion turns to Julius Caesar’s long absence from Rome and rumors that a love affair with Cleopatra keeps him in Egypt.

Lady Leda, the youngest woman in the group, asks, “Is it true that Caesar really is in love . . . ?” Lady Flora, the oldest woman of the group, rushes to hush Leda: “Shh! Child, child!” Lady Leda pushes forward, unaware that she’s touching on a taboo topic for the group: “But he doesn’t come back to Rome, does he?” The other young woman of the group, Octavia, aims to change the subject: “Well, he’s missing a lovely party today.” With a hint of patronizing condescension, Lady Flora matter-of-factly says, “He does not miss very much any day. The Queen of Egypt gives parties, too.” Lady Leda enthusiastically jumps on this opening, “You mean Cleopatra?” she proclaims.

At this point, the silent oldest man of the group, Fidius, chimes in with surprise: “Woah! What?” he exclaims. “Have you heard of Cleopatra?” he asks the young blond Lady Leda. “Of course. All kinds of things.” She replies. Then, without hesitation, a question bursts from her lips and lingers in the air for just a moment: “*Is she black?*” The whole group explodes with laughter while Lady Leda looks puzzled.

The laughter suddenly stops as Octavia warns of an approaching guest: “Shh! Calpurnia.” Following an exchange of pleasantries with the party’s hostess, after Calpurnia leaves the group, Lady Flora shakes her head: “The wife is always the last one to know.”

The scene’s joke, *is Cleopatra black?*, hinges on Cleopatra’s unclear lineage, which allows her to serve as a canvas for fantasy. Representations of her, like DeMille’s, often conflate a Near-Eastern Orientalism with the specter of primitive African blackness. Other scenes in the film play up these tropes: the opening title card features a nude back-lit Cleopatra, arms chained together as she lifts incense; early on she is abducted into the desert bound and gagged; she is mistaken as a courtesan as she unrolls from a rug to meet Caesar. Most significant in these scenes is how white femininity transforms racialized otherness into power.

Through visual culture of the time, Cleopatra, to many Americans of the 1920s and 1930s, figured as the ideal of white womanhood. Her whiteness was not only because of her assumed skin color, but also because her appealing attributes—royal status, confidence, seduction, wit, etc.—were all signifiers of ideal white womanhood. Although she was exotic, her exoticism was not primitive, it was civilized and cultured. Therefore, when we consider the performative work garments with Egyptian motifs and allusions to Cleopatra did for American women during this period, we can recognize that all of these aspects of new womanhood are underpinned by whiteness, which is continually reaffirmed by

¹⁸ Although the figures allude to ancient Egyptian culture, perceived as civilized, the style of these figures follows the modernist trend of primitivism, with abstracted simplified shapes and bright colors. In this way, I suggest, they read as “primitive” in contrast to the imagined white wearer of the garment.

¹⁹ Numerous products were released in conjunction with the film: exclusive Cleopatra gowns in Cinema Shops, tie-ups with major department stores, Cleopatra bangs and even cigarettes. See (Hamer 2008a, pp. 122–23).

the wearing of these garments by those who have the authority and privilege to purchase, consume, and dispose of them for the next style.

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