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Making *Güeras*: Selling white identities on late-night Mexican television

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Abstract *This article examines discourses of whiteness and color in Mexico through a discussion of White Secret, a widely available skin-lightening cosmetic product. In an analysis of a televised infomercial advertising the product, we examine contextualizations of whiteness in Mexico, as figured through the product's representations of light-skinned female bodies and advanced cosmetic technology. We consider the ways that White Secret can speak to broader conceptualizations of whiteness and identity and, furthermore, argue that such an engagement points to the need to interrogate the geographical and epistemological limits of current understandings of whiteness based in Anglo-American and Latin-American contexts.*

> 'la güera': fair-skinned. Born with the features of my Chicana mother, but the skin of my Anglo father, I had it made. No one ever quite told me this (that light was right), but I knew that being light was something valued in my family. (Moraga, 1981, p. 28)

These lines from Cherrie Moraga's 1979 essay, 'La Güera', succinctly describe the chromatic privilege into which she was born. With her mother's Chicana features but her father's white skin, Moraga, in her words, 'had it made'. The only *güera* in her family, she could escape the correlation between being Chicana and being 'less' (p. 28), a connection that haunted her mother and other family members. Although her essay goes on to chart her denial of 'the voice of [her] brown mother' (1981, p. 31) and her struggles to grasp the specificities of various forms of sexual and racial oppression, Moraga's initial discussion of an upbringing that 'attempted to bleach me of what color I did have' (1981, p. 28) captures several processes that we analyze in this article. As Moraga quipped, she was ' "anglicized" '; the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future' (ibid.).

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This article analyzes one contemporary path to that 'white world' as it operates within the context of Mexico. We examine discourses of whiteness and coloration through an analysis of 'White Secret', a cosmetic product marketed across Mexico that explicitly guarantees lighter skin and implicitly offers the lifestyle associated with such a chromatic change[1]. Historian Kathy Peiss (2002) has recently charted the ways that US cosmetics companies have relied upon and reinforced connections between healthy bodies, 'made-up' (female, white) faces and modernity, in efforts to market their products globally and create international mass markets. In this article, we trace similar links between bodies, race, cosmetic products and modernity, as we raise questions about whiteness and identity in Mexico, processes neatly packaged within a 30-minute, late-night infomercial peddling a skin-care solution that can produce in two weeks a white skin tone which previously required generations of racial miscegenation.

To think through how this skin-lightening product and its marketing strategies become legible and convincing within Mexico, we draw from a number of literatures that together help unpack the secrets of White Secret and the desire for white skin on which it depends. As Moraga's autobiographical reflections and Peiss's documenting of 'American cosmetics abroad' both make evident, in many contexts, 'light' was—and, we would add, still is—seen as 'right'. White Secret is located squarely within this framing, as it explicitly promises white(r) skin and implicitly offers the improved socio-economic position of white privilege. As we subsequently suggest, what remains 'secret' in White Secret is why Mexican women want to move away from that 'brown body' of which Moraga wrote—a desire for lighter skin that signals the traces of a colonial past and present in Mexico. Postcolonial studies, driven 'to invert, expose, transcend or deconstruct knowledges and practices associated with colonialism' (Sidaway, 2000, p. 592), provide one particularly useful means of prising open these silences around questions of bodies, race and desire, as White Secret, as both product and text, resonates with many practices linked to colonialism and its deployment of racialized discourses. Postcolonial studies, in conjunction with whiteness studies and examinations of race and ethnicity in Latin America, create a useful theoretical framework through which to engage White Secret. It is to this White Secret that we now turn.

Introducing Mexico's White Secret

As the nightly progression of television programs parades across the screen in households throughout Mexico[2], well-spoken news anchors give way to well-dressed *telenovela* characters, whose daily dramas entrance millions of viewers across Latin America and, increasingly, the world (Tufte, 2001; Mato, 2002). Long after the *telenovelas* run their closing credits, however, a different scene fills the screen. In the wee hours of the morning, Mexican television waves are devoted to infomercials styled after their US counterparts, with low-budget graphics, repetitive sales pitches and vivacious spokespeople promising unconditional satisfaction. On any given evening, these infomercials market educational CDs to enhance facility with computer software programs or English-language tapes to improve a person's marketability in service-sector employment[3].

At 11:00 almost every evening[4], an infomercial marketing a different type of enhancement commences with two images that recur throughout the program: the face and hands of a young light-skinned, dark-haired woman and

a computer-generated cross-section of human skin. In the first sequence, the young woman massages a white cream onto her cheek and hands. In the second scene, the same cream is applied to the surface of a skin cross-section; and viewers watch it penetrate the various dermal layers. As these images succeed one another, the infomercial segues to an image of the phrase 'White Secret', a title whose mystique is reinforced by a throaty female voice uttering the name in whispered English.

In the half-hour infomercial introduced through the preceding sequence, viewers discover that they will learn much about White Secret, a product whose formula represents the 'latest in cosmetic advances' (Fig. 1a)[5]. Although the infomercial follows the daily activities of several young women, one in particular acts as the expert narrator. Strolling around a bright stage lined with photographs of sun-bathing women and a large skin-color chart, she explains in detail the causes and inner workings of skin darkening. With her guidance, the audience comes to know how this darkening can be stopped and even reversed by White Secret—two creams designed to give and help maintain 'the skin tone you want' through 'advances that do more than cover the skin surface' (Fig. 1b). Following the daily lives and bathroom rituals of three *chilanga*[6] women, the audience discovers that one cream is *un aclaramiento*, a skin clarifier to be used on the face, hands or any body part exposed to the sun. The second cream, intended for evening application, is *un desmanchamiento*, a blemish remover designed to inhibit melanin production and skin darkening[7].

Throughout its duration, the infomercial frequently reiterates that White Secret is *una fórmula americana*. This point, which references many of the associations outlined by Peiss (2002) between US products, beauty and modernity, is reinforced

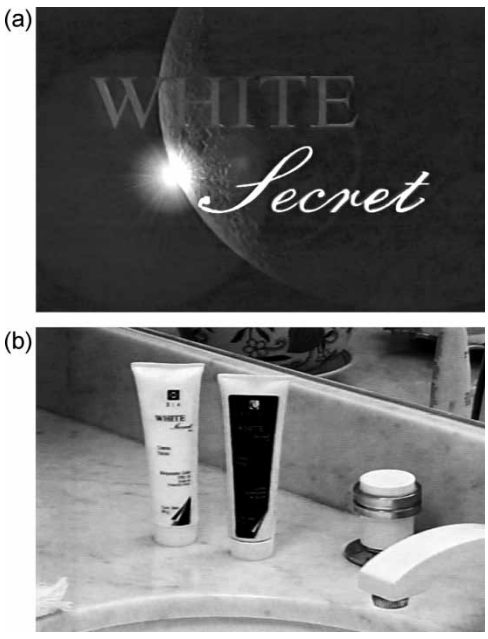

Figure 1. Introducing White Secret skin lightener. (a) The infomercial's signature shot shows the sun peeking behind the moon, serving perhaps as both a beacon and a warning of the dangers that await. (b) White Secret consists of two creams, one for protection during the day and another for reducing melanin production during the evening.

by the product's English-language name, a common marketing practice that endows White Secret with 'cosmopolitan cachet' (Kondo, 1997, p. 164) and 'first-worldliness' (Grimes, 1998, p. 73). Moreover, as Peiss (2002) argues, '(f)or women in many countries, American-style beauty culture has become tied very directly to economic opportunity and modernization' (p. 108). This idea of an 'American-style beauty culture' is also, at root, a question of race, a point Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999) illustrates in her analysis of beauty pageants, national identity, and race (see also Seager, 1997). As we subsequently discuss, White Secret's marketing fingers these connections between US aesthetics, white skin, and economic prosperity, through both its name and its product claims[8]. In response to the discourses of whiteness and color operationalized to market White Secret in Mexico, we ask the following questions: What cultural discontinuities are embedded within a skin-lightening regime that is touted as an 'American formula', demonstrated through the daily lives of young, successful Mexico-City women, and advertised on late-night television in Mexican states with low average incomes and large indigenous populations? And how are understandings of whiteness and white privilege, themselves culturally discontinuous between Anglo- and Latin-American contexts (Bonnett, 2000), capable of addressing the mobilizations of race and class embedded within White Secret's marketing within Mexico? This article responds to these two questions by analyzing the infomercial's actual workings and its wider implications for conceptions of whiteness, chromatism, and identity in Mexico.

As we discuss below, White Secret, as infomercial and product, is both of a piece and at odds with existing theorizations of whiteness and whitening practices. That it tells an 'ancient' Latin-American story of a desire to whiten is undoubtedly true (Harris, 1970; Knight, 1990; Lancaster, 1992). This old tale, however, is not being told in the same way, even if the desired endpoint of white(r) skin may look very familiar. We suggest that White Secret resituates well-known stories of whitening efforts in Latin America and can be understood as part of a collection of practices that include racial miscegenation designed to produce a 'cosmic race' in Mexico, government-sponsored immigration policies focused on 'European stock' across South America, and white social positions obtained through class ascendancy in many Latin-American countries. At the same time, however, White Secret tells this story of whitening through a language of science and cosmetics grounded explicitly in US technologies and, we suggest, requires a different theorization of whitening as a practice and process.

We move toward this theorization by locating White Secret within a constellation of race, class, color, gender and space. Analyzing it as a product contextualized within wider conversations of color in Mexico, we move through two themes found throughout the infomercial in an effort to understand how the program tells its story of the desire for white skin. We end this article with speculations on what lies, in both senses of the verb, within White Secret and how it speaks to broader conceptualizations of whiteness, identity and space.

Situating Mexico's White Secret

Although little consensus exists on how mass media products actually affect consumers, advertising, as an integral part of mass media, has an undeniable impact on the patterns and practices of individual and group consumption (Mahan, 1995; Gonzales, 1996). In countries such as Mexico with lower levels of

literacy, electronic media such as cinema, radio and television are particularly important means through which concepts such as national and regional identities are configured (Gonzales, 1996)[9]. In an age of increasing globalization and transnational movements of people, ideas and capital, television and film become avenues through which viewers in various national contexts become part of a global audience for movies, television programs and advertised products.

In the context of US–Latin American relations, for example, much has been written concerning the transnational migrations of music and television programs and their reconfigurations as they cross national borders (Mahan, 1995; Gonzales, 1996; Simpson, 1998)[10]. Elizabeth Mahan (1995), in her study of US–Latin American culture industries after NAFTA, documents how *tejano* music that developed in the US borderlands is transformed—and renamed to remove its US association—when it enters Mexican airwaves, where its popularity has increased dramatically in recent years. The same transnational movements of programming between the United States and Latin America are also evident in television programs. Even in very rural areas of Mexico with low daily wages and limited access to urban centers, the advent of satellite and cable television brings US-based Spanish-language programming into Mexican homes on a daily basis, thus mixing news and programs designed for nationally distinct but linguistically similar audiences and drawing into question attempts to make clear distinctions between Latino and Latin-American audiences and even consumers (Gonzales, 1996).

At root, these examinations of the interplay between Latino audiences in the United States and Latin-American audiences across Mexico, Central America and South America revolve around the growing economic and political interdependence of US Latinos and Latin Americans. Manuel Pastor Jr (1998) suggests that studies of Latinos and Latin Americans are converging, as economic globalization—and, we would add, the increasing rates of internal and international migration associated with this process—has allowed 'external' events to have 'a deep impact on domestic policy choices' in each locale. This convergence has had an equally strong impact on cultural practices and formations that arise in both contexts, an interaction evident in White Secret's marketing as an 'American formula' that is part of the broader trajectory of cultural and material products and ideologies flowing between the United States and Latin America (Mahan, 1995).

Through the infomercial's introduction and the condensed sales pitch embedded within it, viewers are told that White Secret is sold in Suburbia, a large Mexican department store owned by Wal-Mart, and smaller *farmacias* across Mexico—another connection that reveals the 'deep impact' of US marketing techniques and companies[11]. Although this strategy of pairing of infomercials with specific stores has become an increasingly common marketing strategy in the last decade, infomercials have received little critical attention as a sub-genre of either television programming specifically or filmic media more generally. This absence is all the more glaring because, in addition to being ubiquitous in numerous national contexts, infomercials such as White Secret draw heavily on the intertextuality between television and film that scholars such as Graeme Turner (2001) have noted in analyses of television.

White Secret, for instance, taps several non-advertising genres throughout its duration. The infomercial chronicles a 'day-in-the-life' of two young *chilanga* women to show how its product works. As viewers are treated to a literal inside

Figure 2. Selling White Secret. (a) The product is sold in pharmacies and in the stores of Suburbia, a megastore located in most major cities (the price shown is in pesos—the average laborer in Mexico might expect to make 35 pesos/day). (b) The infomercial's young female narrator is often positioned in front of a color chart; the expected degree of lightening—from initial tone to two weeks—can be read vertically in the chart's circles.

view of these women through computer-generated cross-sections of their skin and images of their bodies, the program is punctuated by its own commercial in miniature, an embedded sales pitch that details where and for what price White Secret can be purchased (Fig. 2a)[12]. In this way the infomercial appears only to inform, as sale efforts and details about price and availability are confined to the commercial within the infomercial. Thematically, the infomercial establishes its narrators as knowledgeable experts, builds its own temporal duration through the daily life paths of two women, and produces its audience as bodies that fit somewhere on the ever-present skin-color chart in front of which the infomercial's host walks and speaks (Fig. 2b).

If White Secret's existence as an infomercial seems relatively straightforward in relation to existing analyses of television and filmic programs, its message about whiteness, whitening and bodies is somewhat more difficult to situate. To contextualize White Secret, we draw from texts that have been formative in conceptualizations of race and identity within Mexico and studies of whiteness more broadly. Admittedly, we draw selectively from studies of race and identity in Mexico. While these works collectively make important contributions to analyses of race and ethnicity across Latin America (e.g. Stephen, 1996; Varese, 1996; Wade, 1997), they typically mention only briefly the whitening practices associated with national immigration policies, miscegenation or economic ascendancy. We also are aware that we draw from studies of whiteness more generally in a limited manner. While these texts have interrogated the historical development and contemporary resonances of whiteness and its associated privileges, they do so almost exclusively within an Anglo context and do not necessarily speak to the

transnational maneuvers of a product such as White Secret. For these reasons, we view White Secret as both of a piece and at odds with these existing literatures.

Within studies of race in Mexico, two works in particular are frequently foregrounded: Allan Knight's essay on racism, revolution and *indigenismo* (1990) and Nancy Leys Stepan's book on Latin-American eugenics (1991). Although both pieces focus on the early twentieth century, they have been formative in enumerating the connections among Mexican philosophy, social life and race (Vargas, 2000). Knight (1990), in his brief discussion of whitening, characterizes it as an 'ancient practice… reinforced by [current] film, television, and advertising stereotypes' (p. 100). In so doing, he locates a contemporary obsession with light skin found across *telenovelas*, movies and sales pitches within a much longer history of whiteness and desire that emerge, in large part, through Mexico's experiences of European conquest and colonization.

Stepan (1991), in her analysis of eugenics in Latin America, suggests that historically, a whitening thesis in Mexico focused on a *mestizo* (mixed 'blood') 'cosmic race' rather than a 'pure' white race. This 'cosmic race', made famous by Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos, was composed, at least in theory, of a racial configuration whose racial and ethnic mix surpassed all initial ingredients. The path by which Mexico could reach this 'cosmic race', however, led through eugenics to a set of practices that in Latin America constituted 'above all an aesthetic-biological movement concerned with beauty and ugliness, purity and contamination, as represented in race' (Stepan, 1991, p. 135). At the pinnacle of this movement was lighter skin, a location at which beauty and purity were concentrated and from which the 'brown body' denied by Moraga was successively removed over time.

Across Mexico's ancient practice of whitening, Latin America's eugenics of the early 1900s and a White Secret of the twenty-first century, then, the aesthetic and the biological are imbricated in a chromatic system that revolves around purity and contamination, beauty and ugliness. In all three instances that span Mexico's post-conquest history, the chromatic system in operation is also a hierarchy of lightness for which, as Moraga noted, light is right. In this system where darker pigments signify what Ann Laura Stoler (1995) calls the 'enemy within' (p. 52), being Moraga's 'brown' and 'less' remains the unspoken.

Matthew Gutmann (1996), in ethnographic research in Mexico City, found that this 'unspoken', in many cases, was openly 'spoken', when darker-skinned family members were ridiculed and 'portrayed as Indian hayseeds in mestizo [read, lighter skin] disguise' (p. 40). In this characterization, an indigenous/*mestizo* and a rural/urban distinction are read and mapped through skin color, whose shades become metonyms for class, ancestral heritage and urbanity (Torres, 1998). Rubén Martínez (2001), in his work with transnational Mexican families in Michoacán and the United States, found this 'hierarchy of color' to be 'omnipresent in Mexico' and 'almost as powerful a dynamic as in the States' (p. 64), another echo of the transnational movements that bring US and Mexican systems of racialization into conversation. Paralleling Moraga's writings about being Chicana in the United States, Martínez (2001) writes, 'The types are clear: the bluest eyes and the fairest skin are money in the bank, whether you're rich or poor' (ibid.).

Although this 'divide of color and class' may exist across Latin America (Martínez, 2001, p. 65), Sarah Radcliffe's recent research in Ecuador points to some of its complexities, particularly around questions of whiteness (1999a, 1999b).

Her study of domestic workers in Quito shows how whiteness is gendered as female, spatialized as urban and historicized along a continuum of indigenous-*mestizo*-white. She found, moreover, that domestic servants appropriate whiteness through their employment status with wealthy Ecuadorian families, even more so when they leave their employers. For many rural women, Radcliffe (1999b) writes, domestic service and the spatial and class shifts it entails, becomes 'a route into a "whitened" urban identity' (p. 84). Urban employment and residence function as a path to a white identity for women considered indigenous in their rural homes[13].

That women accessed this route to whiteness more frequently than men is not incidental, as Radcliffe (1999a) suggests in another essay on Ecuadorian whiteness. She found that white identities were claimed almost exclusively by women, while men identified as *mestizo*. Connecting this gendering of whiteness to both its 'embodied value' for workers desiring better positions and its opposition to an indigenous female subject lacking 'the right to formalized sexual relations' with *mestizo* men (p. 223), Radcliffe (1999a) again demonstrates that in Ecuador a relational discourse of race involves 'performance and representation, where the superficial appearance of mobility masks the enduring reality of racism' (p. 217).

As we suggest in this article, White Secret can be inserted into these discussions of whitening, re-classing and de-indigenizing Latin-American bodies. White Secret, however, follows a different trajectory from dark(er) to light(er) bodies. While the *outcome* of lighter skin may be the same across these practices, the means by which that *effect* is produced is different for White Secret. Requiring neither generations of selected pairings nor a geographical shift to an urban area, White Secret offers the same results through a different route that, as we discuss below, weaves its way through a language of science, technology and bodies.

Before turning to that different route, we draw a few points of connection from literatures on whiteness and white identities. Although using US-based analyses to discuss Mexican systems of racialization and chromatism is a potentially colonizing maneuver in which 'other' contexts and 'their' practices become simply a way to improve 'our' understandings (what David Slater (1994, p. 20) calls the 'double bind of ethnocentric universalism'), the connection seems appropriate, as these systems are already interacting through historic and contemporary border crossings of people, capital and ideas between the United States and Mexico.

Such crossings have brought United States and Mexican conceptions of race and color into dialogue. These border dialogues are evident in the works of Chicano/a authors, such as Cherrie Moraga, with whom we began this article. Richard Rodriguez (1990), for instance, has written of a hierarchy of lightness for people of Mexican descent in his discussion of childhood in California in the 1950s and 1960s. Recalling his mother's concern over his own dark skin and the ever-present connections between darkness and poverty, Rodriguez chronicles his negotiation of such a chromatic hierarchy and eventual coming to grips with it.

White Secret is but one moment in this long history of trans-border influences; but its 'American formula' and mimicry of US-style infomercials[14] suggest that attention be given to the emplacement of Anglo-American whiteness discourses into the homes of millions of Mexican families. Although this transfer has been neither complete nor wholly successful, it has been undoubtedly powerful. As Slater (1998b) argues, analyses of the hybridization of US and Latin-American processes of racialization cannot proceed without an interrogation of 'the multiple

forms of power and resistance' wrapped up in such an imbrication (p. 397)[15]. Here, we suggest that much of the power behind White Secret comes from its connections, both explicit and implicit, to US images and ideologies; thus, examinations of whiteness in an Anglo context become another way to unpack White Secret's secret.

In the last fifteen years, and especially after Richard Dyer's influential article (1988), whiteness studies have generated a flurry of research across numerous disciplines, including geography (Jackson, 1998; Bonnett, 2000; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Dwyer & Jones, 2001; Winders, 2003). While a detailed review of a literature on whiteness is beyond this article's scope, these works collectively acknowledge that whiteness, like all categories, is an invention. Never a stable sign, it is contingently filled with social meanings and deployed in the service of social power. As numerous scholars have noted, whiteness, in many contexts, is signed by discourses of normalcy, cleanliness, freedom, purity and morality, discourses that are always already classed and gendered (McClintock, 1995). Such discourses are seen to adhere to socially and superficially white bodies, assigning them both privileges of political, economic and spatial access *and* the psychic certainty of occupying the center of a racially marked system of social stratification (Fanon, 1967).

An important contribution from this literature on whiteness and white identities is the understanding that whiteness is always produced in relation to class, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. David Roediger (1991), for example, has compellingly argued that across US history, 'working class formation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand for the US white working class' (p. 8) (see also Roediger, 1994). In this way, white working-class men (and women, although less so in Roediger's analysis) gained the ability to preserve at least some form of racial privilege in the face of a class position shared with black workers. Other scholars, such as Ruth Frankenberg (1993, 1994), have analyzed whiteness as a gendered category that is inflected by discourses of nation and culture and have shown the ways that white women in particular have at times been complicit with colonial and imperial practices across the globe (Ware, 1992; Blunt & Rose, 1994; McEwan, 1996). Recent works in social and labor history have strengthened analyses of whiteness as a dynamic social production, as they have demonstrated how whiteness as a category morphed over time to include and exclude various populations (Ignatiev, 1995; Foley, 1997). In geography, scholars have increasingly shown the ways that space and whiteness are imbricated in the production of racialized landscapes and social terrains and have collectively argued for critical attention to the spatialities of white identities and their textures across places (Bonnett, 2000; Dwyer & Jones, 2000; Hoelscher, 2003; Winders, 2003).

These works on whiteness, although applicable to a skin-care product that markets itself as a solution to dark(ened) skin, must be qualified, in the sense of being made competent for the task at hand and yet limited. First, as already discussed, much research on whiteness has centered on US contexts, in which whiteness is positioned on one side of a binary system that rigidly and rigorously polices racial boundaries. In Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, racial formations, it is argued, are pulled through a sliding matrix based in *relational* notions of color and lightness (Lancaster, 1992). Even if a 'white norm dominates the relatively fluid system of racialization in Latin America' (Bonnett, 2000, p. 53), that the two practices of racialization do not map neatly onto each other is

undeniable (Waters, 1999). Despite its seemingly wide-ranging purchase, whiteness cannot be theorized as a universal category that works the same across various contexts. It must be situated within the geographic and social systems of racialization within which it operates and through which it is produced (Jackson, 1998; Bonnett, 2000).

This need to situate conceptions of whiteness spatially can be seen in Amelia Simpson's (1998) rich analysis of the immensely popular Xuxa television show that ran in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s (see also Bonnett, 2000). Xuxa—the tall, blonde, blue-eyed former model who hosted the children's variety show that spread across Latin America in the early 1990s—presented a 'white ideal of beauty in a country with the second largest population of African descent on earth' (Simpson, 1998, p. 221). Through a detailed examination of Xuxa's television programs and public presence, Simpson suggests that the white privilege and racial difference Xuxa embodied carried a particularly strong currency in Brazil and fed into broader narratives of racialized and sexualized desire legible across Latin America. When Xuxa's show was marketed in the United States, however, that legibility was markedly different, as the racial difference on which her identity was built did not register as it did in Brazil. As Simpson (1998) argues, 'the representation of racial difference, which is a crucial feature of the star's success in Latin America, is equally decisive in determining her inability to cross over into the mainstream' in the United States (p. 220). In the United States, Xuxa's 'Latinness' was unclear, as her blonde hair and white skin did not resonate with images of well-known South American stars such as Brazilian Carmen Miranda.

As an additional qualification, many whiteness studies speak only indirectly to our analysis of White Secret because they analyze representations, productions and performances of white identities across genres, but not the actual *creation* of white skin through chemical and physical procedures[16]. Although interrogations of how bodies identified as white perform and perpetuate such an ascription can tease out how whiteness is reiterated and presumably stabilized as a category, an analysis of a product such as White Secret, which claims to create white(r) skin, must proceed somewhat differently. Below, we offer an analysis of this product and attempt to make clear how its claim to produce whiteness can be situated both within and against these existing studies.

Analyzing Mexico's White Secret

To return to White Secret's opening scene, the two images presented—a young woman's face and hands and a skin cross-section—also signal two themes worked throughout the infomercial. First, youthful female bodies dominate White Secret's visual representations. As the audience is treated to an inside view of various women and their daily practices, the ways in which solar rays, pollution, bacterial contaminants and other forces impact these women's bodies become powerful visual testimonies to White Secret's defensive strength. Second the infomercial draws heavily from a broadly defined and publicly familiar discourse of science, technology and genetics. That an opening shot is a skin cross-section in which viewers watch the science behind the secret is not incidental, as recourse to science is as powerful a strategy as the visual testimonials that course through the program. In the next section of this article, we move through these themes in greater depth.

The Female Body

Across numerous disciplines, in the words of Kathy Davis (1997), 'the body has clearly captured the imagination of contemporary scholars' (p. 1). Whether positioned in a modernist framing as a 'secure ground for claims of morality, knowledge or truth' or from a postmodernist perspective as 'undeniable proof for the validity of radical constructionism' (Davis, 1997, p. 4), the body, especially for feminist scholars, is, and has consistently been, central to understandings of 'cultural and historical constructions … in the various contexts of social life' (p. 7)[17]. Not surprisingly, the late-night *güera* maker that is White Secret draws heavily upon imagery and discourses of white female bodies associated with health, cleanliness and purity, a colonial trope found in numerous contexts (Sibley, 1995) and one that permeates contemporary representations as well (Radner, 1995). At many junctures are seen almost-identical young women in their daily bathroom rituals of washing their bodies and applying and removing White Secret (Fig. 3a, b). Domestic interior spaces are clean, well-lighted and organized, looking very much the part of housing for the highly successful, single women who dominate the infomercial. These interior spaces are repeatedly contrasted with exterior spaces rife with contaminants most frequently represented as superimposed sunbeams that endanger the women's *güera*-hood in the city streets and public places (Sibley, 1995). In these outside locations, the women's bodies without White Secret's protection are literally pierced by incoming contaminants.

David Harvey (2000) argues that the human body is a 'battleground within which and around which conflicting socio-ecological forces of valuation and representation are perpetually at play' (p. 116). In this infomercial the body is also a battlefield; but the conflicting forces are darkening contaminants ranging from

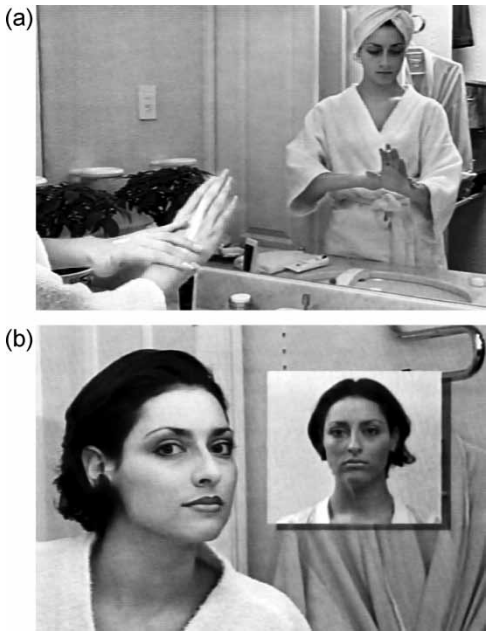

Figure 3. The bathroom ritual. (a) Scenes of the morning and evening application are repeated several times during the infomercial. (b) Viewers expect to find a mirror in the background of this bathroom scene, but the shot instead proves to presage several before-and-after images (see Fig. 4).

sunshine to, of all things, bacteria lurking on telephones. Although the infomercial links whiteness to health and cleanliness and, thus, taps well-known colonial and imperial tropes that are explicitly and implicitly gendered and classed (McClintock, 1995), that purity, and the white skin it both represents and embodies, is extremely vulnerable to darkening forces, another echo of colonial framings of light female bodies. White Secret, however, provides a 24-hour barrier between the clean, purified female body and external factors that darken it and, thus, allows its users to venture safely outside their apartments and into the streets. If the women are fully covered by White Secret's invisible layer, the sun's rays, although primed to attack their bodies, are deflected and rendered impotent. Without White Secret, as the infomercial demonstrates over and over, the women's exposed skin is open to attack in Mexico City's public spaces[18]. To make this distinction between protected and unprotected skin especially clear, the infomercial parallels the lives of two very similar women. Although both are tall and attractive brunettes[19], live in plush apartments and have jobs which allow them leisurely afternoon *siestas*, one woman is protected by White Secret while the other is exposed to darkening forces throughout the day. Viewers come to recognize the women by both their slightly different apparel and the large blemish on the unprotected woman's cheek, a visible mark of her vulnerability which the infomercial chronicles.

One of the most striking operationalizations of White Secret's magic involves 'before-and-after' shots. Twice toward the program's end, viewers are treated to computer-enhanced whitenings of an older woman's age-spotted hands and to a procession of before-and-after facial shots of young women and, in two instances, young men. The repetition of these scenes speaks to their power, as they provide evidence of White Secret's potency. These comparative scenes enable whiteness—or, better put, whitening—to be *seen*, in the same manner that the skin-color chart in front of which the narrator strolls reveals what whiteness, or a whiter state of being, actually looks like (Fig. 4a, b).

What remains largely unspoken in these scenes of before and after, and in the infomercial itself, is the means by which hands and faces are darkened in the first place. Through the large photographs of sunbathing women that form the backdrop of the infomercial's stage and even in the street scenes in which the women are bombarded by sunrays, the correlation between color and poverty of which so many have written is glaringly absent (Fig. 5a, b). Moreover, the darkened hands that are repeatedly whitened throughout the program are discussed solely in reference to aging. Darkened, spotted hands, however, can also be a nuance of class identity. Griselda Pollock (1995), for instance, in her analysis of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergère*, provides a detailed reading of a barmaid's body and the contradictory class signs within which her figure operates. In contrast to the 'cosmetically induced pallor of her face and chest', the barmaid's hands are undeniably '(t)inged with colour' (Pollock, 1995, p. 30). '(T)hese errant signs of the labouring class' signify work and, thus, complicate the woman's class passing and any straightforward positioning of her within the painting (ibid.).

A similar argument can be raised in relation to the infomercial. While lying in the sun may be one way that skin is darkened and certainly is one of the primary darkening processes that the infomercial conjures for its audience, hands 'tinged with colour' are also 'tinged with class', evidence of that dark(er) body in a context where 'light is right' and 'darker' is inevitably 'poorer'. White Secret discursively erases this class tingeing as smoothly as its computer graphics erase age spots.

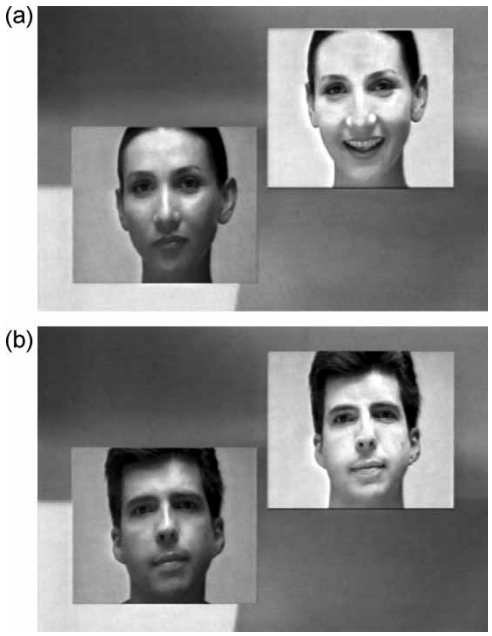

Figure 4. Before-and-after shots. (a) Note that not only has White Secret lightened this woman's face, it has also brightened the background and brought a smile to her face. (b) Caveat emptor: the enhancement effect in this sequence may be computer generated, as both shots of the young man appear to be from the same photograph.

Figure 5. Warning. (a) Sunbathing—a rare or unknown leisure activity for the majority of Mexicans—is one of the many dangers described by the infomercial. (b) In this shot, simulated sunrays are reflected off the protected woman.

What bodies are allowed to 'materialize', then, within the program and how that materialization proceeds speaks strongly to what bodies are privileged within the infomercial (Butler, 1993)[20]. Almost every aspect of the women's lives, from the color of their skin and hair to the interior spaces of their plush apartments, signals a *chilanga* lifestyle which sits sharply at odds with the realities of daily life in many Mexican states, such as Oaxaca (Higgins and Coen, 2000), where we were introduced to this infomercial. Different shades of skin may line up neatly along the color chart in front of which the narrator ambles (Fig. 2b), but neither the class nor chromatic diversity of even Mexico City is apparent in the infomercial.

Although the program is silent in relation to bodily inscriptions of class or indigeneity[21], this silence is 'less the absolute limit of discourse. . ., than an element that functions alongside the thing said' (Foucault, 1978, p. 27). Functioning 'alongside the thing said' for White Secret, we suggest, is a hierarchy of lightness that is also a hierarchy of class and indigeneity. At least part of White Secret's own secret is its ability to sidestep the questions of why sun exposure is such a big factor for some bodies and why a beach umbrella will not abate their solar vulnerability. An equally powerful silence in White Secret revolves around bodies themselves. As Homi Bhabha (1994) argues, 'the otherness of the Self [is] inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity' (p. 44). In White Secret's infomercial, the 'other' whose traces (Natter and Jones, 1997) remain just beneath the skin of White Secret's users is a dark-skinned, impoverished indigenous body that threatens to surface in bodies not protected by White Secret's invisible barrier. These bodies behind the bodies leave 'a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 49). White Secret may promise to erase the often violent sexual history of European conquest and colonialism that produced *güeras* in the first place, but it cannot remove the trace of these dark bodies and the fear of their emergence once more.

Technology, Genetics and Science

Gillian Rose (2001), in her discussion of discourse analysis, notes that a 'specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable. . ., and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision' (p. 137). Throughout White Secret's infomercial, the women's encounters with threats to their complexion are translated into computer images which magnify and render *visible* the events actually transpiring on and within their skin (Fig. 6a, b). For the two women whom viewers follow in the program, each vignette, from their morning bath to their evening facial regimen, is followed by a computer-generated image of a generic face or skin cross-section which explains the processes enacted upon the women's skin. In these computer sequences, White Secret is represented as a literal white barrier that slides down the skin surface to become an invisible shield that stays with the women all day and deflects sun rays and other contaminants from the depths of the protected woman's skin (Fig. 7a, b). For the unprotected woman, computer images show solar penetration into her skin and the subsequent formation of darkened spots and accelerated production of melanin.

Although this theme of shielding vulnerable female bodies from contaminants runs through the infomercial, White Secret, it is claimed, does more than protect, as even those bodies already darkened can be lightened. Through its dual-cream 'American formula', the product purports to reverse the effects of cumulative

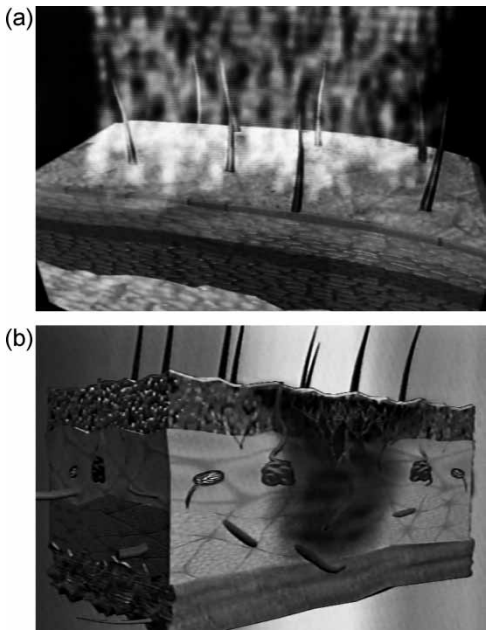

Figure 6. Epidermal attack. (a) Here layers of skin are subjected to the sun's rays. (b) Another skin cross-section shows the darkening effect of the sun.

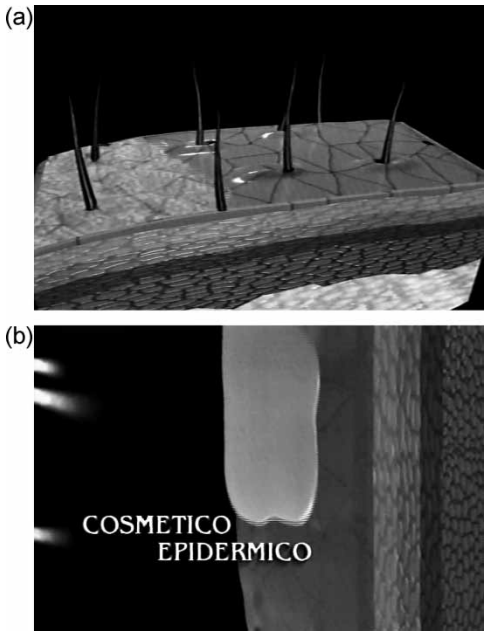

Figure 7. Cosmetic advances trump genetics. (a) The glossy right hand side of the skin is the layer protected by White Secret. (b) This skin cross-section shows the formula's application as a layer of white cream, administered just-in-time for the sun's rays.

darkening from years of sun exposure. In fact, as the infomercial states repeatedly, White Secret can 'clarify' the skin 'beyond one's natural genetic characteristics' and, thus, erase not only exposure to the sun but also exposure to dark(er) bodies. Able to lighten skin up to three tones, White Secret lifts 'the genetic burden' placed on the shoulders, and seen in the faces, of many Mexicans. Applying the creams twice a day progressively clarifies and lightens the skin to surpass the body's natural genetic tones.

A language of 'beyond', of surpassing one's natural genetic characteristics, is a crucial theme within the infomercial. Claiming to go beyond make-up's simple act of covering the skin surface, White Secret also claims to go beyond a person's natural genetic skin tone. In this way, White Secret is not merely protecting the body from darkening factors but is actually producing a white(r) body surface. Not just deflecting or simply eliminating the impacts of sun exposure, White Secret lifts and places to the side the genetic burden that has impeded efforts at whiteness for generations, what Frantz Fanon (1967) called the 'burden of that corporeal malediction' (p. 111). If whitening once required sexual reproduction to produce progressively lighter bodies through 'constructive miscegenation', White Secret condenses that procedure into a two-week process that needs only one body to work its wonders.

In some ways, the disjuncture White Secret creates between a whitened skin surface and a person's 'natural' genetic skin color is of a piece with broader practices in the cosmetic industry. Peiss (1996) suggests that in the early twentieth-century United States, 'the cosmetic industry blurred the distinction between the made-up face as *revealing* a woman's inner self and the made-up face *constituting* that self' (p. 323). As the infomercial's narrator tells viewers at the program's commencement, however, White Secret is different from make-up, which only covers the skin, and is transformative in a different register. White Secret does not reveal a person's inner self, as its recurring recourse to 'beyond' reminds the viewer. Instead, it renders that genetic self chromatically irrelevant, as White Secret produces a lightened subject no longer beneath the thumb of '*la carga genética*' (the genetic burden). If a white 'you' is not already there needing only to be accessed by the creams that eliminate 'unnatural' darkening, White Secret will create such a white identity, leaving only the user in the know.

As an added layer of credibility, White Secret's claims are drawn through a discourse of science, a particularly powerful 'language for representing races' (Stepan, 1991, p. 136). Although the White Secret infomercial speaks of race only in a brief explanation of its inability to lighten '*la raza negra*' ('the black race', a small but increasingly visible component of Mexico's population), the program's message is grounded in a language of science in which bodies can surpass their natural genetic state and circumvent the boundaries of Latin America's chromatic groups. As discussions of external contaminants, melanin production, genetic compositions and anatomy lessons bleed into one another, the slipperiness of an argument based both within and beyond a biological understanding of color is solidified in a scientific trope that juxtaposes the daily practices of women and the actual events transpiring across and within their skin. If the images of computer-lightened skin and refracted sunbeams are not convincing, there is always the science behind the secret.

This recourse to science and genetics fits squarely within Donna Haraway's characterization of the contemporary 'genome' era. In her typology of bioscientific thinking, Haraway (1995) classifies the current period as a genome configuration

in which events, such as the Human Genome Project, genetic databases and biotechnology, are ubiquitous and race is radically reconfigured in medical discourse and cultural and political struggles. White Secret's recourse to science as both predictor of and explanation for chromatic tones, however, also places it in tandem with colonial racial ideologies 'intensified by... incorporation into the discourse of science' (Loomba, 1998; p. 115). As Keenan Malik (1996) notes in his examination of race in Western society, race and racial theories became much more powerful when they 'put on the mask of science' (p. 84). For White Secret, that mask of science helps the product create a 'superficial appearance of mobility' through white(r) skin that masks 'the enduring reality of racism', to borrow from Radcliffe's analysis. For White Secret, that masking does not require a move to the city, as in Quito; instead, users simply need access to the miracle in the tube.

In White Secret, then, the ancient and contemporary practices of whitening in Latin America are pulled through the colonial and current typologies of race and color (Stoler, 1995). In a 30-minute infomercial that peddles two small tubes of facial cream, the cutting edge of 'cosmetic advances' slices into a long-enduring colonial legacy of racial difference as biologically based. In the process, temporally separate systems of racialization become uncannily similar, as contemporary technologies and colonial typologies mix and the desire for white(r) skin remains undeniable and unaddressed.

Implicating White Secret

To conclude, we want to *implicate* White Secret. In doing so, we mean to implicate White Secret's complicity with an unproblematic celebration of 'light is right' and, thus, make clear the connections between the product and its marketing and broader processes of racialization and racial formations. We also, however, want to *implicate* White Secret through an older form of the verb—to interweave, entangle or entwine. Discourse analysis, at its best, entangles a text within a framework that makes manifest 'the action of exposed scarcity, with a fundamental power of affirmation' (Foucault, 1984, p. 133). Such an analysis operates to entwine a discursive formation within a constellation of other processes always at work and always reworked in relation to it. It is in both spirits of the word that we implicate White Secret.

To return to a question which began this analysis, we can trace at least one cultural discontinuity along White Secret's chain of representation, a discontinuity ensnared in theorizations of race, color and whiteness. As we asked in this article's introduction, what are some of the deeper resonances that produce whiteness as the end point of a cream boasting an 'American formula' and peddling an urban *chilanga* lifestyle across Mexican states, such as Oaxaca, where the daily average income is less than $5.00 (US$) and more than half the population is indigenous? Although Carlos Monsiváis (1997) has noted 'the oppressive fact that... North American society—as a whole, profoundly racist and classist—sets the pattern for new racist and classist attitudes in Latin America' (p. 119), a reading of White Secret's marketing as an instance of the imposition of US understandings of race onto a Mexican context is too simplistic.

Instead, we suggest, one way to approach this question of resonances across White Secret and the spatial shifts it implies is to consider connections between the product and its historical antecedents. If a Latin-American whitening thesis was historically grounded in scientific discourses and practices of blood and biology,

White Secret claims that for those who can afford it, science can bring out—and, in some cases, bring about—a 'whiter you'. This time, however, it is cosmetic technologies, set within genetic limits, which lighten skin tones, a temporal 'fix' that outpaces intergenerational change[22]. Although with White Secret, neither lighter relatives nor large amounts of money are necessary to lighten oneself, the implicit desire for such light skin and, presumably, the 'rewards' for obtaining it remain as strong as ever.

White Secret's success, furthermore, depends on the same constellation of blood, skin and even language that Walter D. Mignolo (2003) has recently identified as a key trope through which "race" as a fundamental marker of the colonial difference in the history of the modern/colonial world system' has been maintained (p. 89). As Fanon (1967) famously remarked in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, within the colonial framework he analyzed and thoroughly critiqued, '(f)or the black man [*sic*] there is only one destiny. And it is white' (p. 12). Through the adoption of the colonizing country's cultural standards, Fanon (1967) argued, the colonized 'becomes white as he [*sic*] renounces his blackness' (p. 18). In White Secret and its marketing, that same desire to renounce dark(er) skin that Fanon sought to interrogate and undermine is at work, albeit through a different process.

Our analysis of White Secret has interrogated this difference in the process by which white skin is obtained and has prised apart how the White Secret infomercial constructs its products, audience and mechanisms for producing white(r) bodies. What remains a sticking point in this analysis, however, is the underlying *desire* for lighter skin in Mexico in the first place, a topic with which postcolonial writers have grappled for some time. White Secret, as both a text and a product, simply assumes that people, particularly women, in Mexico want to be white(r). What remains 'secret' in its operations are the social, economic, and political processes that continue to produce a white(r) racial identity as a desirable social location, a process of elision and erasure that Fanon (1967) went to great lengths to expose in his writings to effect social change and refute that 'destiny' found only in whiteness.

Exposing those social structures and beginning to address the 'why' of the desire to be white in Mexico requires a set of analytical tools which, to date, have been calibrated primarily in a US context. We suggest that this situation points to the need to expand current interrogations of whiteness and whitening into social and geographical contexts that heretofore have received little critical attention. Through 'a far greater hybridization of the sources of our critical thinking' and sharp attention to the potential pitfalls of this combination, Slater (1999, p. 79) argues that analyses and interpretations of imperial maneuvers and interventions can be greatly enhanced. Here, we are making a similar argument for studies of whiteness.

Alastair Bonnett's recent assessment of whiteness's 'impacts outside the West' (2000, p. 2), of a ' "white modernity" in non-Western societies in the twentieth century' (p. 5), is a step in this direction. As he notes, the development of white identities in Latin America cannot be conceptualized as 'simply reflecting the imposition of "Western values" on "non-Western societies" ' (2000, p. 51). Although 'whiteness has been sustained from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego as a key to, and symbol of, social and economic ascendancy' (ibid.), the systems of racialization through which these understandings and operationalizations of whiteness have been produced are spatially, nationally and temporally specific.

When scholars begin to interrogate how a desire for whiteness is mobilized and maneuvered through a framework that incorporates the interplay between different conceptualizations of whiteness and different processes of racialization, White Secret's own secret may begin to crack; and analyses, such as this one, will certainly be enhanced.

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Notes

1. White Secret is also marketed in the Philippines, but in this article we focus exclusively on its sale in Mexico.
2. Matthew Gutmann (1996) cites a study which found that perhaps 95% of homes in Mexico City have at least one television (p. 134). In the small Mexican state of Quintana Roo, Henry Geddes Gonzales (1996) noted an equally strong media presence, as radio and television were common in four of the five rural communities he studied.
3. For those interested in other types of enhancement, one infomercial sold the Post-t-Vac, a long plastic tube accompanied by either a manual or battery-operated pump. This program tapped a reservoir of scientific versus lay knowledge, as it juxtaposed caring and confident doctors in white coats with middle-aged couples, the women talking at length about their satisfaction with the penis enlarger and the men nodding sheepishly in agreement.
4. All three authors lived in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca in 2001, when this article was conceived, and intermittently while it was written and revised.
5. All translations are the authors' own.
6. *Chilango/a* refers to a resident of Mexico City. While the infomercial never explicitly locates itself in Mexico City, the connection is unmistakable in both the program's street scenes and the women's urbane lifestyles.
7. As one reviewer noted, White Secret is, on one level, a blemish remover that focuses on age spots and other signs of dermal wear and tear. This aspect of the product, however, occupies a small portion of the overall televisual marketing strategy and is overshadowed by the program's much stronger emphasis on the product's whitening ability. While Mexican women may purchase the cream to remove age spots, that motivation is not the one driven home in the product's marketing.
8. As Daniel Mato (2002) has recently argued, success in US marketing outlets helps legitimate *telenovelas* in the Latin-American context, a situation akin to that which we are suggesting in relation to White Secret's infomercial.
9. In Mexican mass media, advertising constitutes a significant portion of programming. Gonzales (1996) notes that for radio broadcasting in Mexico, one third of air time is devoted to advertising, and television alone accounts for 60% of total advertising spending in the country.
10. Much of this work comes from Latin-American cultural studies. As Ana del Sarto (2000) has recently noted, this line of cultural studies, although sharing with British cultural studies a theoretical and multidisciplinary approach and focus on 'dis-articulating hegemonic formations

of power' (p. 241), was 'already established in Latin America well before the emergence of British Cultural Studies' and 'intricately woven within a specific Latin-American critical tradition that can be traced back even to the beginning of the nineteenth century' (p. 236). See also Sarlo (2002).

11. There are numerous Suburbia stores in Mexico. Many are located adjacent to a Wal-Mart or Sam's Club, especially in the country's larger cities. The neocolonial implications of Wal-Mart's insertion into Mexican consumerism certainly merit future analysis, and we thank Serin Houston and Richard Wright for reminding us of this point.
12. White Secret can be purchased at Suburbia for 299 pesos (roughly $30 USD) and has been available since 2000.
13. Susan Paulson and Pamela Calla (2000), in research in Bolivia, have written of equally fluid processes of racial/ethnic identification for rural women. In their work, however, a rural woman accentuated her indigeneity when marketing her wares in an urban setting. This she did to bolster the white 'superiority' of her customers, particularly men, in an effort to sell her products.
14. The modern infomercial was developed in the United States in 1984, when then-President Ronald Reagan deregulated television advertising.
15. See also Slater (1998a).
16. A clear exception to the claim that existing studies have not engaged the chemical and physical creation of white bodies is the academic, fictional and auto/biographical literature on racial passing. See, for instance, Ginsberg (1996), Rooks (1996) and Sanchez and Schlossberg (2001). Although these works collectively provide critical insight into processes of identity formation and ascription in relation to whiteness and detailed analyses of practices such as skin lightening and hair straightening, they focus primarily on a US context and its black/white racial binary.
17. As Davis (1997) notes, wrapped up within these feminist analyses of the body is a 'marked ambivalence' over framings of the body as material and as metaphor (p. 15).
18. Undoubtedly, a subtext to this contrasting of domestic and public spaces as 'safe' and 'vulnerable' sites for women is the broader gendering of urban spaces, particularly around public spaces and female bodies. For discussions of gender and public space, see Ruddick (1996), Bondi and Domosh (1998) and Grosz (1998).
19. That these women are brunettes is not incidental. The infomercial does not rely on images of skin-kissed blondes or freckled redheads. Instead, all people shown in the program have dark hair, dark eyes and particularly light skin.
20. Felicity Callard (1998) makes a similar critique of theorizations of the body itself, when she notes that although the body is 'often presented as queer, hybrid, and cyborg, it is rarely caught up with understanding the abject, abjected, labouring body' (p. 399).
21. Despite White Secret's erasure of indigenous identities, across Latin America, ethnicity and indigeneity are being revalorized. See Nagengast and Kearney (1990), Varese (1996) and Paulson and Calla (2000).
22. Another concept at work in many Latin-American contexts is the claim that 'money whitens'. Although the connections this phrase traces between socioeconomic transitions and racial identity frame whiteness in a different way, in it, as in White Secret's marketing, 'the corollary… is that poverty darkens' (Bonnett, 2000, p. 55).

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

Creando güeras: La venta de identidades blancas en la televisión Mexicana de media noche

RESUMEN En este artículo, hacemos un análisis sobre los discursos de 'blancura' y de color con respecto a la población en México a través de una discusión sobre '*White Secret*', un producto cosmético para aclarar la piel que es muy disponible en México. Por un análisis de un 'info-nuncio' que sale por la televisión anunciando el producto '*White Secret*', exploramos los entretejemientos de la construcción de blancura en México y como este 'info-nuncio' manipula imágenes de los cuerpos de güeras (mujeres de piel clara) y tecnología cosmética avanzada. Reflexionamos acerca de las maneras que el producto '*White Secret*' pueda hablar a concepciones más amplias sobre la construcción de identidad y blancura y además, discutimos que tal exploración indica la necesidad de interrogar los limites epistemológicos y geográficos de la comprensión actual de la construcción de blancura basados en los contextos Latino Americanos y Anglo Americanos.