9. The Bronze Age Revisited:
The Aesthetics of Sun Tanning

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In an episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled "The Eye of the Beholder," a woman has plastic surgery to become "beautiful." Yet, when she is unwrapped, her classically symmetrical face appalls the other characters. This society believes that asymmetrical faces are beautiful. When asked which kind of face they prefer, the characters always select the lopsided; they even undergo surgery to achieve unevenness. The television audience finds this evaluation odd, at best. We want to know if there was some utilitarian, religious, or other nonaesthetic basis for these judgments, since the aesthetic preference for symmetry is universal, and is not in the eye of the beholder.

The preference for women with pale skin is also universal. Anthropologist Peter Frost surveyed over seventy cultures in his book *Fair Women, Dark Men: The Forgotten Roots of Color Prejudice*, and discovered that in every culture, in every era, in every ethnic group, women's beauty is linked with the lightest complexion found within the group. This is true except for one bizarre culture: European and American Caucasian culture of the past one hundred years, in which there has been a strong preference for women with tanned skin. This is just as unexpected a preference as one for crookedness, so why do these particular people prefer women with browner skin rather than coloring that occurs without sun exposure?

Other than symmetry and paleness of women, there are few other judgments of bodily beauty that are universal. Most beauty practices, e.g., tattooing, makeup, hair ornamentation, and clothing fashion, are notoriously variable, differing from one culture to another and sometimes changing quickly within a given culture. A preference for bellbottoms gives way to

one for skinny jeans, heavily made-up eyes yield to a natural look, pierced ears give way to pierced noses, perms lose ground to straightened hair—all such styles can change in a few years or even a few weeks in a commercially driven culture such as the United States. People may either resist or follow a fad for both political and aesthetic reasons; reasons for disparaging universal marks of beauty in favor of the opposite must be even more compelling than those for complying with fashion. In this essay I hope to answer several questions: Other things being equal, why are the lightest women considered the most beautiful? Why have Caucasian women preferred dark skin during the past century? What does tanning mean in the context of current beauty norms? I argue that sun tanning is deeply tied to questions of race, class, and gender in ways that make this behavior a reflection of women's struggle to define themselves in twentieth-century Euro-American culture.

The Universal Desire for Light

Marc Lappe is correct when he points out that "the adornment and beautification of the skin is a fundamental cultural need." Changing our skin color may be one of the earliest human decorative acts. Recently, scientists discovered that South African women altered their body color with makeup made from "reddish or pinkish-brown" crushed rock as early as 164,000 years ago. Whether through tattooing, piercing, dying, or applying makeup, humans have sought to beautify themselves by altering their skin, usually in ways that heighten their sexual attractiveness.

Furthermore, nearly all animals sunbathe. Although scientists are not sure why, William Hamilton notes, "one is tempted to conclude that the advantage [sunbathing] provides, whatever it may be, is available to all animal life." Scientists know that some humans desire to lie in the sun or in a tanning booth because they are getting high on the experience. In fact, researchers at Wake Forest University have shown that one can be addicted to the endorphin production that is triggered by exposure to UV light, explaining why tanners sometimes report, "It makes me feel alive," "It makes me feel like there's nothing that can go wrong," and "I always felt better about myself." Exposure to UV light, either from the sun or in a booth, also makes us feel sexier. These biochemical changes may also explain why humans in all cultures have consistently worshipped the sun.

However, despite these physical reasons for being attracted to being in the sun and a deeply ingrained desire to change skin color, humans have universally rejected the aesthetic of tanned women—in every ethnic
group, whether subjected to colonization or not. Ten thousand years ago, all humans were brown;\textsuperscript{12} then two separate mutations led to the development of lighter-colored peoples in Europe and Asia.\textsuperscript{13} Yet all ethnic groups around the globe prefer the palest females in the group, with the notable exception of Euro-Americans in the last century.

In addition to producing different skin tones among groups of people, evolution has resulted in fairer-skinned women than men in every ethnic group.\textsuperscript{14} This difference may be due to women's greater need for previtamin D3, which is required to support pregnancy and which is produced through exposure to sunlight. Furthermore, men's sexual arousal is, well, pretty obvious to anyone around, but women's is more subtle. Women demonstrate their sexual readiness through blushing and flushing—features that are more readily apparent in lighter women. One example is Karen Connelly, a Caucasian Canadian who, in a journal of her year in Thailand, writes about her crush on a Thai teacher: "because I'm so white, my blushing is even worse than a Thai girl's."\textsuperscript{15} In another example, various cultures, including Victorian England, have denigrated makeup for women because it hides this sexual signal—or proof of innocence, as they perceived it.

In addition, babies are the most fair skinned within each ethnic group. The instinct to protect the young is hard-wired in adults, so, by choosing to remain as pale as possible, women may be trying to signal the same need for protection (particularly in monogamous societies). And women's skin darkens during pregnancy and remains marginally darker after pregnancy, so the palest skin advertises nulligravidity.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, women are palest during the most fecund part of their cycle, signaling their sexual availability.\textsuperscript{17} For whatever evolutionary reason, sexual dimorphism of skin color is a fact. It appears with puberty and is heightened during ovulation. Biology in this case gives rise to or supports an aesthetic, since there is a universal preference for lighter-skinned women.\textsuperscript{18} (This sexual dimorphism has been recognized by every painting tradition in the history of the art.)

Just as the biological fact that men are hairier than women may be culturally enhanced by shaving, plucking, or waxing, so the biological differences in skin tone have been enhanced by makeup, sun avoidance, and other means of heightening the paleness of women's skin throughout human history. From ancient history until today, from Africa to Asia to Oceania, the vast majority of women in the world try to acquire as light a skin as they can, by avoiding sun exposure, by using parasols, long sleeves, gloves, and hats, or by using billions of dollars' worth of skin bleaching or lightening creams. There are even lotions to make nipples pinker, and underarm deodorants with skin whiteners! (Ironically, some of these are as harmful as sun tanning).\textsuperscript{19}

Although there may be biological foundations for a preference for paleness, there are cultural reasons for it as well. The preference for lighter skin is discussed and decried by African American and Asian American authors as well as by African, Latina, and Asian women. For example, in \textit{Is Lighter Better? Skin-Tone Discrimination among Asian Americans}, Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard write, "The worship of tanned bodies is a Euro-American fetish, not one honored by Asian American families and communities," in part because of the colorism in Asian and Asian American groups.\textsuperscript{20} Marita Golden, throughout her memoir \textit{Don't Play in the Sun}, chronicles her resistance to the preference for light skin within her African American community.\textsuperscript{21} And Margaret L. Hunter analyzes colorism among African Americans and Mexican Americans in \textit{Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone}.\textsuperscript{22} Light skin is seen as more beautiful and results in better pay and better marriage opportunities, among other social and economic consequences. Lawrence Otis Graham describes the ways that African American associate light skin with higher class status in \textit{Our Kind of People}.\textsuperscript{23} Others have argued that the association of pale skin with the need for protection has racial overtones in a multiracial society in which a white aesthetic "implicitly supported the defamation and sexual abuse of black women by white men."\textsuperscript{24} Finally, Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton have put together an anthology to discuss the economic, social, and political elements of skin tone in \textit{Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era}.\textsuperscript{25}

An ethnic group's preference for pale skin among its members has complex roots, including colonialism and favoritism shown to the lighter-skinned children of darker slaves and their lighter owners. It is a painful reminder of the racism that simmers in American culture and of the remnants of colonialism around the world. However, the desire for lighter-skinned women appears even in cultures that have never experienced either of these sad practices. The aesthetic preference that women's skin be as light as possible is not politically neutral, but it is (nearly) universal. Most Caucasian women in Europe, the United States, and Australia shared this aesthetic taste for paleness until the turn of the twentieth century. In all these cases, the desire for light skin is produced by a combination of evolutionary predispositions and cultural pressures.

I must leave a more complete discussion of the aesthetics of skin lightening to more capable hands, and turn to the other two questions of this paper:
what happened to change the desire for lightness in one group of people during one historical period, and what does this change mean?25

Social Class and Sun Tanning

The development of a cultural preference for tanned Caucasian women begins in the early twentieth century. The history of tanning reveals that this practice has several sources: medical prescriptions to tan as a means to cure tuberculosis, the invention of the vacation and the development of travel technology that allowed the middle classes to spend time on beaches, advertising that sold middle-class women a look that had originally been adopted by the upper class, and the industrial revolution that changed class perceptions, plus the added effects of youth culture, sports and beach culture, and consumer culture. As in a game of pick-up sticks, we need to carefully distinguish each part of this story—a story in which class plays an omnipresent role.

Fair skin had always been associated with the upper class, since peasants are the ones relegated to working in the sun, and this association continues to be the reason most cultures cite as a reason to prefer lighter skin. However, the industrial revolution meant the working classes began working in factories during daylight hours and hence were pallid, while the upper classes were free to enjoy leisure by playing tennis, riding horses, and yachting in the sun. The changed settings of work and play meant that the upper classes could redefine beauty as something other than fair skin.

In this same period there were advances in transportation, in particular the railroad, and increases in disposable income for the middle classes that allowed changes in their leisure activity as well, including more people flocking to warmer, sunnier climates, such as the south of France, for vacations. Even the concept of a “vacation” itself, for working people, was developed at this time.

The shift in aesthetic for the upper class is recorded in the bronzed skin of the characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night, which is set on the Riviera. The novel begins with a description of a hotel near Cannes in June 1925. This hotel had generally catered to northern Europeans during the winter, but had begun opening in the summer two years before. Rosemary, a teenage American film star, arrives at the hotel with “her pink palms and her cheeks lit to a lovely flame, like the thrilling flush of children after their cold baths in the evening. . . . the color of her cheeks was real,” but she immediately heads for the beach, where “a tanned woman

with very white teeth looked down at her” making her “suddenly conscious of the raw whiteness of her own body.” Rosemary wastes no time “broiling” her skin to the “ruddy, orange brown” color of Mrs. Diver’s, despite being warned by “the untanned people . . . about getting burned the first day, . . . because your skin is important.”27 When we compare these passages to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, written in 1857, the difference is astounding. Browning writes that “he, in his developed manhood, stood / A little sunburnt by the glare of life; / While I . . . it seemed no sun had shone on me.”28 Browning’s association of suntan with activity contrasts with Fitzgerald’s record of the birth of a new aesthetic among the upper classes in the 1920s.

As the century progresses, the look, like most fashion trends, gets sold to the middle and lower classes. Since tanning could be done on weekends in the backyard or up on the roof, it was equivalent to a free makeover. As the middle classes earned more money after World War II, they could even take up beach culture. The bourgeois girls beat a path to the beach along with the boys.

Countless sources credit the legendary French fashion designer Coco Chanel with originating the fashion for deliberate “sun tanning.” According to various versions of the story, in the 1920s Chanel was sailing with the Duke of Westminster and (supposedly accidentally) exposed her face to the sun. Making lemonade out of lemons, she reportedly cultivated the fashion of the suntan, by using “bronzed models” as mannequins for her clothing designs.29 In his study of sun tanning, Kerry Segrave debunks this myth, since he can find no facts to support the claim, and credits the myth to an article in Mademoiselle magazine.30 But Chanel clearly exhibited a feeling of freedom and advocated an abandonment of fashion rules that had corseted women’s lives and kept them shrouded in cloth while in the sun. Chanel was a fashion icon, which meant she both reflected upper-middle-class cultural values and helped solidify them.

The other fashion guru of 1920s Paris was singer Josephine Baker, whose golden body suggests the possibility of a fashion preference for hybridity and the exotic, an issue that is discussed below.

Gender and Sun Tanning

Among several factors leading to the practice of intentionally exposing one’s self to the sun for the purpose of changing the color of one’s skin, otherwise known as “sun tanning,” is a medical prescription. For centuries the
sun has been worshipped for power but, as Segrave argues in *Suntanning in 20th-Century America*, “the single most important reason for the change (in attitude towards sun tanning) started around 1890 with the first medical reports that promoted the scientific view that the sun is a healer, with respect to tuberculosis, initially, and later rickets and various other ailments.” The 1903 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was given for the invention of the sun lamp. Tuberculosis and syphilis both involve skin eruptions, and so the earliest dermatologists were also syphilologists. Tanning, prescribed for these and other skin diseases, came to be recommended more widely to help with the ultimate horror for women: zits.

In a book called *The Body Project*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg discusses the history of acne. Her thesis is that the Victorians stressed the “beauty” of good works over physical beauty for young girls, but that this began to change with the 1920s and Coco Chanel's emphasis on makeup, eyelash curlers, etc., including the compact mirror, “which allowed women to scrutinize and ‘reconstruct’ the face almost anywhere at a moment’s notice.” In an era that introduced beauty pageants, women started becoming obsessed with pimples. Acne became medicalized and more or less cured by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Brumberg points out that “skin care was the first of many different body investments made by middle-class parents. Orthodontia, weight-loss camps, contact lenses, and plastic surgery all followed, revealing how parental resources have been harnessed in the twentieth century to a new ideal of physical perfection.”

Scientists now know that it is a very specific two-color combination of light waves that kills bacteria and helps heal acne. The full spectrum that would give you a tan is not required, although tanning involves exposure to these two helpful kinds of rays. Tanning serves as both a kind of makeup to hide zits and a cure for the disease that might make you ugly. So an obsession with acne intertwines with an obsession with tanning.

The concern with acne combined with changes that took place in white, middle-class women’s lives, as they were no longer secluded and protected but became part of the outside (and inside) work world and needed clothing that allowed such activity, and that therefore showed more skin. In addition, a new interest in sports, including swimming by both men and women, meant that uniforms and “costumes” were required that exposed more of the body. Every woman alive knows the agony of trying on a bathing suit. As we show more skin, the need for more self-discipline is required. As Brumberg notes,

This new freedom to display the body was accompanied, however, by demanding beauty and dietary regimens that involved money as well as self-discipline. Beginning in the 1920s, women’s legs and underarms had to be smooth and free of body hair; the torso had to be flat; and the breasts were supposed to be small and firm. What American women did not realize at the time was that their stunning new freedom actually implied the need for greater internal control of the body, an imperative that would intensify and become even more powerful by the end of the twentieth century.

The seeds of this cultural and psychological change from external to internal control of the body lie in vast societal transformations that characterized the move from agrarian to industrial society, and from a religious to a secular world.

Fashion, including the fashion for sun tanning, reflected both the desire to be active and to be free of Victorian constraints, and the need for a new body discipline.

**The Meaning of Tanning**

What do tanned women mean? What political signal is being sent by their tan? Why would anyone choose to practice tanning, especially since it opposes the universal aesthetic preference? To answer these questions, I begin with the more fundamental question: What is it like to be a creature with skin?

A phenomenology of living within a skin is complex. The French performance artist ORLAN and transsexuals have taught us that the connection between our skin’s shape and our identity is fluid. Those at the edges—women and ethnic and sexual minorities—are often uncomfortable in their skin, the organ that both conceals and reveals us, that both holds us up for visual scrutiny and offers us a means of contact with others. Skin records time’s passage yet sometimes allows time to reverse itself; we marvel as our wounds heal, sometimes without a trace. Skin allows us to receive and explore others. It protects and imprisons us.

Our skin is more than a wrapper containing our inners; it is the biggest organ we have and the one that we spend the most time considering. Entire days go by without my thinking about my heart or liver, but most people, especially most women, think about their skin several times a day. And we pay for our skin with our money as well as our time. In fact, “depending on our age and social class, Americans spend 6–10 percent of their expendable income on cosmetic products.”
The hide that we hide in is also our vehicle of touch. We reach out to the world with our skin, and touch conveys a sense of reality unparalleled by our other senses. Pygmalion’s Galatea gains her senses one by one, but it is only when she gains touch that she becomes real. More than “life’s traveling bag,” skin allows us to fold in the world and unfold toward it— it is our “worldliness of being,” according to Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey.

Morris Berman points to the creation of the “I” when a child shifts from a kinesthetic to a visual way of being in the world. In our culture, fetuses move from the symbiotic “cosmic anonymity” to a childhood in which they are not in constant skin-to-skin contact with parents. We expect babies to sleep separately and to eat on a schedule that is convenient for others, and so we nurture a self/other divide that gives rise to a recognition that I am here and that is there.

According to Berman, this shift to a visual sense of self results in what John Fowles calls a “nemo,” an emptiness at the core, a void that demands to be filled. Because no one wants to be a nobody, we fretfully avoid being silent or alone, for fear that we might have to confront our emptiness. So we experiment with religion, ambition, or consumerism, or we fill our days with television, text messaging, or telephoning. We no longer trust our “lower” senses, the senses of touch, smell, and taste, but see ourselves through mirrors, literal and metaphorical, as others see us, not as we live in our bodies. For example, we determine that we are overweight not from feelings of sluggishness, but by the mirror of mannequins at the mall. We have become schizoid, according to Rollo May, anesthetized, incapable of feeling from the inside. I am simultaneously alienated from and reduced to the visual body. As long as a judgment of beauty is merely a visual judgment of a body, we will continue to feel alienated from our bodies. Instead of feeling the joy of melding with another, I am an other for other others, and I know my body will never measure up as a visual object.

**Visual Meaning**

Let’s explore the visual self. I look at my face in a mirror and see acne or wrinkles, and I make a judgment that the self is stressed or over the hill. Peiss joins Berman in claiming that the visual body has become a central paradigm for the self in the twentieth century. Beauty questionnaires ask women to rate “the real you—not as you think you are—but as others see you.” These questionnaires simply reflect the cultural emphasis on the visual as opposed to the kinesthetic. If we are visual selves, we can turn that vision into power. Leon Wurmser coins the term “delophilia” for “the desire to express oneself and to fascinate others by one’s self-exposure, to show and to impress.” The phenomena of beauty pageants, strip clubs, the red-light district of Amsterdam, and porn booths that display women behind glass (as in the film Paris, Texas) are part of a culture that demands to see women without touching them, and in which women can gain some amount of power through visual display. By putting on an ity-bitsy, teeny-weenie yellow polka-dot bikini and getting a great tan, a woman can create a visual surface that may yield power.

That is, as long as the woman is young. The problem is that the visual surface starts to fall apart and reveal the real when she ages. Time materializes on the body. The body is an archive. It records a person’s experiences of the world both permanently, through plastic surgery, tooth straightening, scars, piercings, tattoos, wrinkles, and sags, and temporarily through our decisions to dye our hair, wear contact lenses, bleach our teeth, apply makeup, or tan our skin. People offer their bodies to the world as a souvenir of their journey through life and the decisions they have made about what to do, what they care about, and how they see themselves. No desperate applications of Botox will prevent the accumulation of marks on the visual archive known as skin. Although skin has a remarkable ability to reverse time by darkening and then fading, or being scratched and then healing, ultimately time is unidirectional. The sags, wrinkles, and lines will become visible. Delophilia is a young person’s game.

**The Visual Goal Is Glow**

Women who tan report that they desire to be a very specific color: not orange, nor brown per se, but golden, bronze, always glowing. The desire for radiance and luminescence reflects (pun intended) a spiritual connection that is worth exploring. Both Umberto Eco and Richard Dyer have recently highlighted the connection between beauty and light. Eco notes, “In the late Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas said... that beauty requires three things: proportion, integrity, and claritas—in other words clarity and luminosity.” At this period of European history, light was associated with God, so beauty shared this characteristic of God. Light was also associated with the rich, whose jewels and clothes shimmered among the drab poor. According to Isidore of Seville’s Etymologies, the word for physical beauty, formosus, is related to the word formus, denoting the heat that moves the blood and results in a beautiful complexion that is “not pale, but healthily pink.”
Here we get an explicit statement of and justification for the beauty of pink skin and perhaps the beginning of the association of light with what would later be called “white” identity. Light is an aspect of the soul—a colorless, luminous being—whereas color is merely light reflected by the opaque body. Sweat shines and light is reflected off a body, whereas glow is part of the inner radiance that signifies the soul. Today’s Caucasians’ dread of shine and their hunger for glow mirrors this medieval aesthetic.52

Richard Dyer suggests that at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the development of artificial light and photography, Anglo-European culture had begun to equate knowledge and power with seeing.53 In this century, light is not God’s knowledge but human’s. This technological development has not been blind to skin color. According to Dyer, “the photographic media and, a fortiori, movie lighting assume privilege and construct whiteness.”54 Film stock has and continues to be chosen specifically according to how well it records beige skin. From Hollywood to school pictures, to see is to see images of lighter people in a good light (literally) and darker people in a bad light. Photography and film also use light itself. In a slide show or movie theater we are seeing colored light on a white screen. In this medium, white subjects appear “illuminated and enlightened” and “without substance.”55

In particular, “white” women were expected to glow, not shine. Dyer argues convincingly that “idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on to them from above. In short, they glow.”56 Cosmetics aim to avoid shine while increasing radiance and luminescence. Glow is enhanced by blond hair and white clothing, as is especially seen in wedding attire—weddings are the ultimate photo op, in which the already discussed technical bias toward pale skin is enhanced with backlighting, soft focus, and gauzes to flatter the shimmering bride. Dyer offers examples of film stars, ballerinas (and their light-diffusing tutus), even photos of Diana, Princess of Wales, as examples of this ongoing desire to infuse white women with light.57 I might add that the current obsession with sparkling white teeth is another way of accentuating “glow.” All this adds up to the claim that women’s desire to be radiant is concocted by a culture that has constructed whiteness as a dematerialized, virginal light that is best exemplified as a glowing woman. So, oddly, women might tan—if the result is that their blond hair, the whites of their eyes, their white teeth, and their white clothing increase their inner glimmer. They don’t want to be brown; rather, they want to be luminescent, thus accentuating their visual whiteness.

The Visual Goal Is Hybridity

Or is tanning the opposite? Is tanning about women’s rejection of the pale angel in the house? In short, is tanning about hybridity, about what Nalini Bhushan called “shrugging off race”?58 Is there a conscious or unconscious urge to attain a universally recognized skin color, like the one depicted on a 1993 Time cover as “the new face of America”—a computer-generated combination of racial characteristics?59 Dyer argues that hybridity is not a likely goal, since “the point about tanning is that the white person never becomes black. A tanned white person is just that—a white person who has acquired a darker skin. There is no loss of prestige in this. ... it also displays white people’s right to be various.”60 Or, as Marita Golden writes in Don’t Play in the Sun,

I had seen the famous Coppertone ads for suntan lotion. I knew that White people worshipped the same sun that my mother warned me against. But I also knew that Whites’ desire to possess a glance of color in the summer did not mean they wanted to be Black. I knew that Whites could despise blackness and yearn for some measure of it at the same time.61

Compare the eagerness to darken pink skin to the ridicule heaped on darker-skinned people who lighten theirs—think of Michael Jackson, for example. Whites assume skin lightening is for the purpose of “passing,” but tanning is not thought of as an attempt to pass for black. Tanned Caucasian women never dye their hair black, perm it into an “afro” hairstyle, and wear dark brown contact lenses in order to adopt a “black” aesthetic (although many blacks and whites mock those whites who wear dreadlocks or who aspire to become rappers).

Yet tanning allows white women to flirt with hybridity. After Coco Chanel, the second most influential woman of the 1920s in France was Josephine Baker, the African American jazz singer whose lightly bronzed skin was admired for its beauty. Just as many Caucasian women today cite Halle Berry as possessing the ideal skin color, so Baker became the hallmark of beautiful skin. The taste for the exoticism of tanned skin might be traced back to Flaubert’s and Hugo’s fascination with les orientales in the first half of the nineteenth century, accompanied by the golden figures in Delacroix’s painting “Women of Algiers (in Their Apartment)” and other coffee-colored visions that contrasted sharply with the pale women of more conventional paintings from the period.62 Here the aesthetic taste in literature and painting may have filtered into the real-world preferences for Josephine Baker and Coco Chanel.

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fashion half a century later. Then Baker and Chanel spark the aesthetic choice of Caucasian women for nearly the next hundred years. The yearning for the exotic either in literature, painting, or the real-life choices of fashion are not merely to be scorned. Brown women had something more than a look to offer pale women.

White women might use tanning to paint on some substance, to go beyond the emptiness of their lives. Toni Morrison writes, "Whiteness alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen...senseless, implacable." Dyer comments, "Through the figure of the non-white person, whites can feel what being, physicality, presence, might be like, while also dissociating themselves from the non-whiteness of such things." Tanned women often highlight or bleach their hair, and the most beautiful also have blue eyes. They may be searching for just enough symbolic skin color to feel "alive," as the angels in the house are not, while never giving up the privileges of being labeled as white. If the purity of whiteness may simply be the absence of being," then tanning may be an attempt to add some substance to this lack, to add some kinesthetic being by darkening their visual surface.63

The Visual Goal Is Resisting Patriarchy

Rose Weitz discusses how visual choices like hairstyles might be a way that women "seek power through resistance and accommodation," to paraphrase the subtitle of her essay. Weitz defines resistance as "actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination." Makeup styles, tattooing, piercing, and other visual signals protest the system that imposes disciplinary practices, according to Weitz. "Like slaves' rebellious songs, women's rebellious hairstyles can allow them to distance themselves from the system that would subordinate them, to express their dissatisfaction, to identify like-minded others, and to challenge others to think about their own actions and beliefs."64 Recall the earlier discussion of Rosemary's rejection of "the untanned people" at Cannes in 1925 in favor of the more risqué copper-colored crowd in Tender Is the Night.

The early-twentieth-century women's movement that gained American women the right to vote resulted in rebellion in the fashion world as well as the political arena. Porcelain beauties were read as vulnerable, weak, and refusing to be exposed, while tanned women were and are seen as physically fit, sexually powerful, and strong—in fact, these women have chosen to become closer in color to the average man, as I discussed earlier. As one ad claims (fig. 9.1), tanning is a way of literally getting even. Physiologically, that is correct.
A tanned body is a kind of costume that a woman can temporarily adopt that says, “I don’t need protection.” A tan is a superwoman suit. A bronzed woman is powerful. As a fair woman, I can’t help but exhibit my sexual feelings, thus giving up my power to the observer, while a bronzed woman is more in control of her sexual display. The woman decides when to have sex. Naomi Wolf goes so far as to characterize the contemporary warnings against skin cancer as a kind of fear-mongering intended to drive women back inside.69 Women who tan seem to be making a conscious choice about their identity, choosing to control their image in a kind of living self-portrait.

The Visual Goal Is Accommodating Patriarchy

On the other hand, playing along with the visual game will also yield power through accommodation. Blondes do get the guy, pretty girls do get the job, skinny women do get promoted, and tanned females are seen as more alluring. This kind of accommodation is nevertheless “circumscribed, fragile, bittersweet, and limiting,”66 and this becomes clear as we think further about tanning.

The late-nineteenth-century death of God leads to materialism and obsession with the body as opposed to the soul. Beauty is found only in the body. Forget “inner beauty.” Women exchanged the outward control of their bodies by men—first father, then husband—for the inner self-control necessary to sculpt the body that they display to gain men’s approval. Instead of an arranged marriage, the culture has created a meat market of women searing, steaming, sweating, suctioning, injecting, starving, and otherwise mutilating their bodies to attract men and keep them. Foucault’s disciplinary practices, a hardship many women see as inevitable, lead to self-surveillance and self-conscious performances; they believe that control comes from changing their bodies for men’s pleasure.67 Tanning is simply one of the ways that this narcissism displays itself, and it happens in conjunction with a whole host of other disciplines of the body: makeup, revealing clothing, skin care, shaving, hair care, high-heeled shoes, stockings, contact lenses, plastic surgery, orthodontia, etc.

Margaret Hunter, in Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone, notes, “Beauty as an ideology also serves the interests of men because it maintains patriarchy as it divides women through competition and reduces their power.”68 Women who tan are always holding their arms next to each other to compare their tans or judging the progression of their tan by checking their tan lines, which serve as a meat thermometer for the skin. There is clearly a competition to achieve the perfect tan. A young male student of mine noted that when his peers hang out together they make comments like “She’s a 6 [out of 10], but she’d be an 8 if she had a tan.” Clearly men are aware that women compete for their attention, and women are aware of this competition as well—and skin color is an important determinant of desirability.

The visual meaning of tanning is confusing. A tan may suggest both a glow that highlights the special qualities of a white woman and, on the other hand, the desire for hybridity. Tanning both accommodates and resists patriarchal desire for women to look a particular way. When we turn to the kinesthetic meaning of tanning, is the message clearer?

Kinesthetic Meaning

The split between the visual self and the kinesthetic is one that begins in childhood and, according to Berman, results in everything from religious fundamentalism to a makeup industry whose profits could feed the world. The hunger for something more than the visual might paradoxically be the desire to tan the visual. But the kinesthetic can be cultivated. We can learn to live through our skin even as we tan.

Our body surface is what allows us to feel the other, whether it is sand, wind, sun, lotion, or the touch of another. We yearn to be marked by the environment. Lady Chatterley’s lover isn’t the only admirer of the smell of grass or the feel of rain or the hug of a friend. We want to have our borders crossed, to be touched, to be marked invisibly on the memory skin.69 Those beauty practices designed only to prepare a visual surface are often painful, e.g., eyebrow plucking, bikini waxing, sleeping in hair rollers (am I dating myself?), eyelash curling, orthodontia. But there are beauty practices that feel good, e.g., having massages, applying moisturizers, and tanning while sitting at the edge of an ocean.

When people live in their skin and through their skin, they are deeply embodied, not existing merely as a thin surface. Beauty arises as an epiphenomenon of wholeness. And a person overcomes many paradoxes. She is deeply animalistic and spiritual simultaneously. When people do tai chi or yoga, they are a breathing body living that body fully, and yet they find spiritual understanding and peace. Meditation and sensuality, mind and body, are commingled. At the moment that people are most in their bodies, they are closest to sleeping, dreaming, and imagining.

This meditative sensuality can occur while tanning. The historical connection to sun worship is not to be overlooked. Lying in the sun on the grass
in a park, or on a beach with the breeze on one’s skin, feels good. Wiping on a tan would be like drinking nonalcoholic beer—what’s the point? (And yet we do it.) Both tanning and drinking are supposed to be slightly intoxicating.

One other element of the erotic quality of tans is that whether in or out of the sun, becoming tanned almost inevitably involves touching others or ourselves. We massage oil, potions, lotions, sprays, and ointments into our own and each other’s skin in order to tan and to maintain the color afterward. Seeing a tanned body—and of course smelling suntan lotion—brings to mind the sensuality of that contact just as Proust’s madeleine does. Mattel sells a Cali Barbie that smells like the suntan lotion which she holds in her hand, but sun worshippers know that just a whiff of their favorite suntan oil suggests memories as pleasant and vivid as Proust’s. In a visual age such as ours, any connection to human touch and smell is a welcome relief from the sterility of sight. The visual tan may be seen as beautiful merely because it offers a means of recalling the sensuality of attaining the tan—the kinesthetic beauty of tanning as a verb. We might not see our own tan or others’ as beautiful if tans no longer pointed to the experience of tanning—if, for instance, we could take a pill to attain an instant tan, thus erasing the connection between tan and touch.70

Humans often are just “here and now” when they lie or sit in the sun. They stop fussing about their ambitions, worrying about their finances, or even considering how good their hair looks. Everyone feels beautiful as they are massaged or lie in the sun or practice tai chi. These practices are about not creating a vision for others, but realizing the body/mind connection, i.e., making it real. People feel wholly present. They stop resisting and judging others. They are open to the world as they care for—even mother—themselves. In a recent survey of American women carried out by Dove as part of the company’s Campaign for Real Beauty, those who responded claimed that helping others made them feel beautiful.71 They understood beauty not merely as a judgment of an object, but as a way of being in the world. Beauty stopped being an adjective describing a noun—whether face, body, or hair—and became an adverb modifying a verb—a way of living, moving, being. Seeing one’s skin as an organ of sense rather than only a visible surface has moral implications. People who understand skin this way must touch others and ask to be touched, sensitively and respectfully. Beauty is a judgment of a life, not a visual surface.

The Contradictory Meaning of Tanning

Lying on the beach slathered in SPF 50 suntan lotion to prevent tanning will offer only sensual joys, while a trip to a salon for a spray-on tan will result only in visual accommodation. Usually those in Euro-American culture are caught between these symbolic acts. Women taking off most of their clothes in public and jogging down the beach might be protesting the patriarchal preference for the Victorian pale flower in the house, yet they might also be competing with other women for men’s attention. Tanners thumb a bronzed nose at capitalism’s pursuit of the almighty dollar by celebrating a free beauty enhancement and cure for acne, but feed capitalism by buying billions of dollars’ worth of lotions, tanning beds, and bikinis. A tanned woman denies men the ability to read her sexual excitement and demands the right to display her body and to play with sexuality, even touch herself erotically in public, yet must discipline her body into anorexia to look acceptable in a swimming suit as she plays the pinup. Tan skin says “I’m not a child” and reflects the play of time (forward and backward) on our skin, allowing a woman to reclaim the endorphin rush that attaining this color involved, while it also indicates a willingness to risk skin cancer.

In Accommodating Protest, Arlene Macleod relies on Foucault’s analysis to understand why the contradictory emerges in the struggle to confront modern power. She asks the question that all women today face: “How can we deal with the somewhat disturbing realization that women are active, yet ambivalent, actors who wish to accommodate as well as resist?”72

This ambivalence is particularly apparent in beauty practices: we function between the “poles of victimization and self-invention, prison of beauty and play of makeup,” as Peiss puts it in Hope in a Jar.73 Thus, many women would agree with Susan Douglas, who says in Where the Girls Are, “I want to look beautiful” while simultaneously noting, “I think wanting to look beautiful is about the most dumb-ass goal you could have.” Douglas argues that this ambiguity is the result of a generation’s growing up in the age of mass media.

American women today are a bundle of contradictions because much of the media imagery we grew up with was itself filled with mixed messages about what women should and should not do, what women could and could not be. ... The media, of course, urged us to bepliant, cute, sexually available, thin, blond, poreless, wrinkle-free, and deferential to men. But it is easy to forget that the media also suggested we could be rebellious, tough, enterprising, and shrewd. And much of what we watched was porous, allowing us to accept and rebel against what we saw and how it was presented.
This double message was particularly true in the commercial response to the women's movement after the 1960s.

The appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric by Revlon, Lancôme, and other major corporations was nothing short of spectacular. Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires. . . . Get truly liberated: put yourself first.24

This narcissism leads to working on your tan rather than finishing your philosophy paper or volunteering for a domestic violence shelter.

Commercialization also plays a role in whether a practice is resistant or accommodative. “One of capitalism’s great strengths—perhaps its greatest—is its ability to co-opt and domesticate opposition, to transsubstantiate criticism into a host of new, marketable products.”25 It did this with fitness as well as tanning. Even if a fashion was initially intended to challenge, the more widely it is adopted, the more it loses power as a protest. Spiked green hair, pierced lips, and masculine clothing (like Annie Hall’s) cease to indicate a refusal to play the standard visual game and become just another fashion sold to the masses and diluted in the process.

When Euro-American women first tanned in the 1920s, the fashion was part of women’s choosing to bare their legs, cut their hair, wear makeup, and vote. It was a declaration of independence, of the right of every woman to be mobile and public. But by the time tan lines became a feature of Playboy centerfolds in the 1960s, a tan was just another beauty discipline of the ideal body: anorexic, smooth-skinned, blonde, with long straight hair and tan skin. Caucasian women had to “work” on our tans just as we had to worry about our zits and wash out the orange juice cans with which to roll our hair—and just as African, African American, Asian, and Asian American women had to work to stay out of the sun. “Turning on its head the feminist argument that the emphasis on beauty undermines women’s ability to be taken seriously and to gain control over their lives, advertisers now assured women that control comes from cosmetics”—including tanning beds, bronzers, self-tanners, spray-on tans, and tanning pills.

So why have Caucasian women preferred to have tanned skin during the past century? Originally these women were loudly and visibly protesting an identity foisted on them—an identity that is still urged on women around the globe where the biology of sexual dimorphism is insisted upon in an aesthetic prescription for paleness. Those who tanned were defining a new woman who was visually different and who reflected the unity of mind and body, of kinesthetic sensuality and meditative quality. They discovered a competing biology to which to attach this new aesthetic, the endorphin surge provided by UV light. Yet this original impulse to resist the Victorian patriarchal aesthetic was dulled as tanning became absorbed in the commercial world, and women ended up accommodating a visual game not of their own making.

What does tanning symbolize? What it symbolizes depends on the era and the woman. It usually points toward resistance as well as accommodation of patriarchal values. It signifies Caucasian women’s insecurity as well as their desire to be autonomous; they hide behind a coat of copper so that they have some ability to paint their own self-portrait. It may signal a desire for hybridity or an assertion of their white luminescence. The aesthetics of tanning is as complex as women themselves.

The Future of Tanning

What is the future of tanning? In United States publications, particularly at the high end of the product and brand spectrum, extremely white (“glowingly white”) models have recently begun appearing (fig. 9.2). Does this signal a change in the standards and ideology of beauty? Is it a backlash of “whiteness,” with class and racial significance? Recent advertisements for Evian water ("Return to Purity") featuring a very white woman lying in snow, Burberry advertisements with collections of very pale men and women, and shots from the latest Vogue may indicate that tanning is only a hundred-year blip in Euro-American aesthetics.26 Perhaps, if Susan Faludi is correct, the aftermath of 9/11 involves a return to Victorian values, including—although Faludi does not mention this—pale women.27 Perhaps the vicissitudes of the global economy may be driving advertisers to embrace the more widely accepted aesthetic of light skin for women. With these images surrounding them, will Europeans and Americans abandon the bronze age? Or will Asians join the fad for tanning? Both Chinese and Japanese women have recently shown interest in tanning. Or maybe the giant Revlon makeup corporation’s choice of Halle Berry and Julianne Moore as representatives points toward more tolerance of differences.

But the future isn’t just in the hands of the advertisers; it is in women’s hands as well. MacLeod asks, “How can alternatives not only emerge, but gain the power to engage belief and encourage action?” Her answer: in order to change the world, people need alternative views of how humans
experience of the world needs nourishing. The media focus on the visual can be overwhelming. The danger is that humans will accommodate patriarchy without any protest.

Kineshethic beauty is a kind of wabi aesthetic. It acknowledges the passage of time and the ongoing changes that result from the materialization of time in objects and in people. Visual perfection is not the goal. In fact, perfection is boring, even ugly. The tan lines that allow a person to remember activity in the sunlight and allow others to imagine that past activity are visual reminders of an endorphin rush. These visual imperfections will fade and be replaced by other marks, scars, lines, and creases, each of which enhance the patina of my life in skin—no matter what color my skin is “naturally.”

NOTES

1. This example and many of the ideas in this paper were suggested by Constance Kirker. We collaborated on a presentation on this topic for the International Aesthetics Conference in Turkey, July 2007. Although the writing in this paper is mine, a great deal of fruitful discussion preceded it. This paper would not exist without Constance’s input.

2. Preference for symmetry is not merely cultural; it can be found, for example, among the hunter-gatherer Hadza people as well as those from the United Kingdom (Anthony C. Little, Coren L. Apicella, and Frank W. Marlowe, “Preferences for Symmetry in Human Faces in Two Cultures: Data from the UK and the Hadza, an Isolated Group of Hunter-Gatherers,” Proceedings of the Royal Society B 274, no. 1629 [December 22, 2007]: 3113–17).

3. Peter Frost, Fair Women, Dark Men: The Forgotten Roots of Color Prejudice (Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions, 2005), vii. Frost notes only three exceptions: preference for dark women because they are seen as harder workers, bias against albinos, and the sun tanning cultures I discuss.

4. Other universally approved features might include smoothness of skin, skin luminosity, and ratio of distance between the eyes to distance from eyes to mouth.

5. I will focus in this section only on those who wish to darken their skin through tanning. Usually these are European or Euro-American Caucasians—but not exclusively, since Jennifer Lopez, Selma Hayek, and Halle Berry, for example, all tan.


