



The industry of whitening in Lisbon: an ethnography of practices and products for skin bleaching and its risks to dermatological health

A indústria do branqueamento em Lisboa: uma etnografia das práticas e produtos para o branqueamento da pele e seus riscos para a saúde dermatológica

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Abstract

Through a walking ethnography exercise, we intend to present an ethnography of the cosmetic offer aimed at depigmenting the skin in the heart of Lisbon, focusing on a fragment of the city that brings together different proposals and aesthetic products: Chinese *spas*, beauty salons and African hairdressers, shops of the so-called “ethnic” trade linked to immigrants and Portuguese descendants of Asian or African populations. We defined this tour as a “whitening path” - ironically paraphrasing the title of one of Michael Jackson’s most famous books, *Paths towards a clearing* (1989). Considering the body as a project under construction, we intend to show that the imaginary and desires related to the consumption of these treatments, as well as the beauty standards conveyed by the marketing of skin whitening products, reflect and reproduce social variables of gender, class and race. We also want to highlight how most whitening products, sold in the city center, are prohibited by European cosmetics regulation legislation due to the high concentrations of toxic substances. These substances - which circulate freely in the networks of informal commerce - can be very harmful to the consumers’ health, carrying severe dermatological risks.

Keywords: Walking Ethnography; Skin Whitening; Immigration; Body; Ethnic Aesthetics.

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Resumo

Por meio de um exercício de *walking ethnography*, pretendemos apresentar uma etnografia da oferta cosmética destinada à despigmentação da pele no coração de Lisboa, focando num fragmento da cidade que junta diferentes propostas e produtos estéticos: *spas* chineses, salões de beleza e cabeleireiros africanos, lojas do comércio dito “étnico” ligado a imigrantes e portugueses descendentes de populações asiáticas ou africanas. Definimos esse passeio como “caminho do branqueamento” - parafraseando ironicamente o título de um dos mais famosos livros de Michael Jackson, *Paths towards a clearing* (1989). Considerando o corpo como um projeto em construção, pretendemos mostrar que os imaginários e os desejos ligados ao consumo desses tratamentos, assim como os padrões de beleza veiculados pelo marketing dos produtos de clareamento da pele, refletem e reproduzem variáveis sociais de gênero, classe e raça. Queremos também evidenciar como a maior parte dos produtos branqueadores, vendidos no centro da cidade, são proibidos pela legislação europeia de regulamentação de cosméticos, devido às altas concentrações de substâncias tóxicas. Essas substâncias, que circulam livremente nas redes do comércio informal, podem ser muito prejudiciais para a saúde dos consumidores, comportando severos riscos dermatológicos.

Palavras-chave: *Walking Ethnography*; Branqueamento da Pele; Imigração; Corpo; Estética Étnica.

Whitening and racial hyperpigmentation

The cosmetic use of skin whitening substances is an extremely common practice in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Many works have been produced in the last ten years (Blay, 2009, 2011; Cheong; Kaur, 2019; Glenn, 2008; Harris, 2014; Hope, 2011; Hunter, 2011; Lewis et al., 2011; Li et al., 2008; Maycock, 2017; Rondilla, 2009; Saraswati, 2010; Tate, 2016; Venkataswamy, 2013) dedicated to the impact of these treatments on the public health of the population of these countries. These practices, many of which started in the countries of origin, are gaining increasing importance among immigrants and the addictive dimension¹ of voluntary skin whitening has already been highlighted. However, there are few ethnographic studies that analyze the demand, consumption and risks of these treatments. In Europe, this practice mainly affects women and children, being extremely harmful to the health of both. The existence of these products in the Portuguese context and their impact on health are completely ignored: consumers hardly admit the use of these substances and health professionals² are unaware of the practice. Without any kind of pharmacovigilance, authorization or monitoring from the point of view of component safety, products mainly from India, China or West Africa can be easily purchased at any store in downtown Lisbon.

In this article, we intend to present a street ethnography, or rather, a few streets in the “foreign” heart of Lisbon’s city center.³ In recent years, Portugal has witnessed the emergence of a new market for aesthetic and surgical products and practices defined as “ethnic.” The aesthetic medicine professionals interviewed define as “ethnic” any

1 One of the main risk factors associated with the use of these products is the need for continuous use, since their interruption causes the pigment to reappear, often more intense than initially, leading to the practice not being suspended, but repeated in a chronic form.

2 The practice of cosmetic skin whitening in the immigrant population in Europe (Mahé, 2014) is increasing exponentially. Many articles and forums on the Internet pointed to the lack of knowledge of this situation on the part of doctors and, on May 28, 2019, the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa* dedicated its central pages to the urgency of medical intervention for the issue of voluntary skin whitening (Simoncelli, 2019).

3 This article is part of the EXCEL project “*The pursuit of excellence: biotechnologies, enhancement and body capital in Portugal*” (PTDC/SOC-ANT/30572/2017), coordinated by Professor Chiara Pussetti, available from: <www.excelproject.eu>. In the last three years, a total of 54 interviews were conducted on practices, desires, imagination and beauty models: 12 with men and 42 with women.

aesthetic intervention aimed at altering “racial” traits considered socially undesirable according to Euro-centered beauty standards, to produce socially valued bodies for the ideals of beauty, modernity and contemporary success.⁴ The use of the term “ethnic” in the medical context to describe any aesthetic procedure aimed at “non-white people” raises interesting questions from an anthropological point of view.

The ethnic cosmetics market is linked to a millionaire industry in constant growth: international statistical data show the exponential increase, in the last 20 years, in the demand for surgical and dermatological products and practices designed to modify “racial” features. According to the International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery and the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (Asaps, 2015), the demand for “ethnic” aesthetic changes increased by 243% between 2005 and 2015 worldwide. The growth of this market is possibly due to rapid cultural changes and marketing on a global scale of hegemonic images of “Western beauty and lifestyle.” Likewise, the demographic growth of immigrant populations, the need for integration, the more positive perception of cosmetic surgery due to the exponential increase in television broadcasts that advertise “extreme makeovers” and the greater democratization of aesthetic procedures also make this increase feasible.

According to Glenn (2008) and Hunter (2011), the worldwide growth of this specific cosmetic market can be attributed to the constant mass marketing of positive images of “white beauty and lifestyle” that are based on colonial ideologies still current values that value European culture, lifestyle and aesthetics, as well as their moral foundations.

From the interpretation of colonial medicine of characteristics such as the tone and texture of black skin as evidence of evolutionary inferiority, racial degeneration, lack of bodily hygiene, deviations from the morphological

structure, pathological hyperpigmentation or hypermelanization, or moral vices, until birth and whitening industry’s blooming, white skin remains an exclusive key to access the elite’s cultural and economic privileges (Tate, 2016).

In the interviews, plastic surgeons and aesthetic dermatologists in the urban area of Lisbon used the terms “ethnic” or “racial” uncritically to refer to the physical characteristics they defined as “non-Caucasian.” The most sought-after interventions, according to the doctors interviewed, are aimed at changing the shape of the eyes and nose or clarifying the skin color. In particular, they report blepharoplasty or Asian eyelid surgery (double eyelid), which may be accompanied by epicanthoplasty (cut of the corners of the eyelids) and rhinoplasty, both in “black” and “Asian” patients, for greater thinning, projection and definition of the tip and reduction of the nasal wings. The first surgery, citing a professional from one of the best known private clinics in the city:

It serves to create a more open, lively, attractive, less tired look, and it allows to apply makeup more easily. Ethnic rhinoplasty improves the broad and flattened aspect of the nose, reducing the disharmony of an excessively wide nose, creating a more elegant and delicate aspect. (M., 43, dermatologist)

Regarding the skin, he says:

There are hyperpigmentation problems typical of black skin, which tends to have spots and irregularities in the skin tone, with excessive darkening. However, clients who ask to reduce dark spots or spots on the skin (dermatosis papulosa nigra) in general want them to give them a good “lightening.” The neck in particular... looks like something dirty, don’t you think? (M., 43, dermatologist)

In the speech of the doctors interviewed, the use of expressions such as: “black nose,”

4 For example, skin whitening; hair straightening; surgical westernization of eastern eyes, black nose and lips; and redefinition of body contours, among others.

“hyperpigmentation of the black race” or “excessive or exaggerated racial traits” in contrast to “classical European beauty” is frequent. The medical discourse and the aesthetic language of the cosmetic industry naturalize and reify the idea of “race,” displacing its implications from the historical, political and social processes that gave rise to it. Dialoguing with the literature developed around the notions of ethnicity and race in the production of medical and pharmacological knowledge, our approach in this article distances critically from the current trends of re-biologicalization of the concept of race in aesthetic clinical practice and in cosmetic industry.⁵

We will, first of all, outline the contours of this market, presenting the historical and socio-cultural conditions that justify the importance of skin whitening practices. Second, we will present the research methodology and the field: the old Arab ghetto in Lisbon, still today a multicultural space characterized by great commercial vivacity. Finally, we will briefly present the first results achieved, reporting the main public health concerns related to the use of these products.

The global skin whitening industry

The concern with skin coloration is something very old in the history of humanity - there are records of practices that aimed to achieve a whiter skin in Ancient Egypt, Medieval Europe and, especially, in colonial times in places like the Caribbean, North America or Africa (Hunter, 2011).

Currently, different manifestations of this phenomenon can be found throughout the entire length of the globe, from the Middle East (Hamed et al., 2010), Europe (Petit et al., 2006), Caribbean (Hope, 2011), North America (Charles, 2011), Africa (Blay, 2011) and Asia (Saraswati, 2010), not being limited to one group, but occurring in all racial and ethnic groups, regardless of social class, gender, educational level or profession.

Skin bleaching, skin whitening or skin lightening, often used as synonyms, are the terms used to

describe the act of removing melanin from the skin using cosmetic, dermatological or handcrafted products.

The reasons for skin whitening are many and depend essentially on the individual who practices it. Skin color is the most prominent of the phenotypic characteristics, which for centuries decreed “genetic superiority” (Blay, 2009), and is still used as a scale of social evolution, knowing that the closer to white, the greater the privileges reserved for them: education, employment, financial potential, location where they live and choice of affective partner (Hunter, 2002).

The beauty associated with white skin and its interconnected benefits spread by popular culture sells a lifestyle: white, modern, sophisticated, of beauty, health and power. Studies that correlate skin tone with socioeconomic status corroborate the previous statement (Keith; Herring, 1991).

According to the historical review of the literature carried out by Dyer (1997), the status of white skin in Asian countries, as well as in European ones, indicated belonging to high social classes, who had no need to work under the sun. During the 17th to 19th centuries, more fortunate aristocrats and bourgeoisies applied talcum powder to preserve their fair skin, and this phenomenon fell out of favor when, in the 20th century, a new ideal of beauty emerged in Europe that links the tan tone to healthy life outdoors and the economic possibility of vacationing in exotic locations (Feartherstone, 1982).

If darker skins have been associated with poverty and rural work for centuries (Li et al., 2008), however, the issue of skin tone is not only related to social class, but also to “ethnic markers,” social status and racial discrimination, as in slavery (Tate, 2016) or in the caste system in India (Venkataswamy, 2013).

Lewis et al. (2011) assume that the greatest motivation for skin whitening is related not only to the idea of beauty, but to the approach to a European ideal, whose remains of slavery,

⁵ For reflections on the reintroduction of race as a biological entity in clinical practice and in the cosmetic industry, see, among others, Roberts (2011).

colonization and recent globalization are still present. Harris (2014) points out that low self-esteem, self-hate and identity crisis during colonial rule are responsible for the Eurocentric idea of beauty. However, this idea has been systematically refuted by many authors (among others, Tate, 2016), who propose that analyses should be more diversified and in-depth, valuing different histories, cultures and social practices, as well as political positions, cultural styles (Ferguson, 1999) and individual experiences.

If the ideal of whiteness and the consequent trend of using whitening products is more marked in countries that had a colonial presence, however, its growth in use in other countries is not negligible. Glenn (2008) suggests that the increased use of skin lighteners can be attributed to constant and global marketing, which disseminates images of beauty associated with whiteness, in which the representations of whiteness are hegemonic and disseminated by social institutions as diverse as the average mass, popular culture and religious or educational institutions.

However, the literature (Li et al., 2008) indicates that European colonial domination in Asian countries was not directly linked to the valorization of whiteness as an ideal of beauty. Likewise, the influence that India has throughout Southwest Asia is very relevant: in its myths and stories, the whiteness of skin is associated with an unpolluted state of mind and the clear complexion symbolizes the youth and the “high quality” of women, which would grant them a high social status marriage (Saraswati, 2010). Baumann (2008) points out that skin color is also related to expected sexual behavior. Thus, the white skin in a woman becomes a connotation of “virtuosity,” “purity,” “modesty” and “innocence,” contrasting with the darker skin - preferably associated with men -, which incorporates “vitality, exposure, sexuality and experience” (Baumann, 2008, p. 18-19). In the ancient Hindu religious texts, the clear complexion was synonymous with virtue - reserved for superior individuals - as opposed to dark-skinned demons.

The ideal of white beauty is not new in China. Individuals from high social classes had a whiter complexion and Chinese women already practiced “more traditional” whitening techniques, such as ingesting pearl powder or applying chalk on the skin, to obtain the so-called *milk-white* skin (Li et al., 2008).

Although there are also attempts to lighten skin in men, this practice has greater expression in women. The big exception is in India (Venkataswamy, 2013), but also recently in Malaysia (Cheong; Kaur, 2019) and Nepal (Maycock, 2017).

Blay (2009, p. 55) analyzes the influence of colorism in social and professional mobility, as well as in the matrimonial market, and states that there was a historical association of fair skin with the ideal of female beauty, and dark skin, with the characteristics of male strength and virility. Lighter-skinned black women have better jobs and higher wages that translate into better educational possibilities for themselves and their families when compared to women whose skin is darker. The same study reveals that in the male case there is no such direct relationship between skin color and these social variables.

Achieving the ideal of beauty for women is not just for aesthetic reasons, but rather a very significant factor in improving their hopes for social and professional mobility. Whitening products promise exactly that: by changing appearance, a woman’s socioeconomic status can be changed .

Thus, if for a woman “beauty is power, for a black woman, fair skin is more than beauty, it is power” (Blay, 2009, p. 52). Therefore, beauty is not only corporal capital, but social capital above all: a “form of prestige that is related to status, reputation and social network, which are convertible into economic capital” (Hunter, 2002, p. 177) in which a woman’s power is closely related to her beauty and femininity, which must be evaluated and approved by the society in which she lives.

Since cosmetic products are not essential goods, but are considered a luxury, and the fact

that an individual can buy them demonstrates their economic potential (Rondilla, 2009): the ability to purchase beauty articles is a symbol of power and gives women a sense of privilege and empowerment (Tate, 2016).

More than that, it means that women have the economic possibility to choose the color of their skin and, consequently, to determine the impact that their appearance will have in the social context and, eventually, to increase their possibilities of mobility and professional success. As such, a dark skin that is not worked on not only does not fit with the propagated feminine aesthetic, but also represents a failure - a lack of control over their body and social status .

It is indisputable that television, advertising and the Internet promote “bleached” beauty ideals. The entertainment industry projects more women with fair skin than darker skin. A notable example comes from Bollywood, where almost all stars have not only fair skin but also advertise the use of lightening creams.

The production, marketing and consumption of products that lead to a “brighter, whiter” skin has become an industry that includes a transnational circuit of capital, people and goods. On the one hand, multinational companies have become key links in these global chains; on the other hand, players from informal and illegal economies - which include smuggling, illegal businesses and transnational migrants - build good business opportunities.

The advertisements for skin lighteners are an apologia for happiness. Ahmed (2007, p. 127) makes it very clear that “some objects embody the promise of happiness.” But what are the hopes and ambitions of those who buy and use substances to lighten their skin today in Lisbon? Who are the consumers of these products? Where are they sold? Where do they come from? Why is this practice so widespread and continues to increase worldwide?

According to the literature consulted (among others, Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2011), there are multiple reasons why so many people in the world lighten their skin. Some authors see these

procedures as steps towards equal opportunities (Baumann, 2008; Charles, 2011), others emphasize that black skin is historically marked by a negative rhetoric of colonial hierarchy and slavery (Blay, 2011; Hunter, 2002; Keith; Herring, 1991; Lewis et al., 2011). Others suggest that lightening the skin is an aesthetic practice like any other, such as tanning or straightening hair: a matter of style that has nothing to do with “race” (Tate, 2016).

F., an Afro-European woman of Angolan origin, says:

I started it to remove some skin blemishes and acne marks. Then you start to get clearer and in the photos on Facebook I didn't need to retouch that much. Many people use it, many people sell it, you can find it in any store in the city center, in Martim Moniz, in Almirante Reis... (F., 34 years old)

C., another Afro-descendant woman, of Portuguese nationality, who works in a design store confirms these words:

I was born in Portugal, but as I am black, people always ask me: where are you from? And I answer: from Oeiras. And they immediately ask: ok, but where are you from “really”... I never set foot in Africa, I really am from Oeiras! But of course, I understand... In school books, cartoons, toy stores, everything here is designed for white girls. The “skin color” pencil is pink, the “natural color” socks are beige, as well as the “nude.” So I changed, I worked on my appearance, yes, I also brightened my skin a lot, but not out of shame. And because everything is simpler this way... (C., 28 years old)

C. is not the only woman to emphasize the benefits of a type of appearance more suited to European tastes, even if it means: “suffering a little and using products to lighten your skin and straighten your hair.” “Beauty is kind of rich,” says R., a young Mozambican:

if I hadn't changed my appearance a little I wouldn't have worked for companies like Sephora or Perfumes & Companhia. Europeans like thin women, with skin not so dark. Black women who do not adapt to European tastes are frying hamburgers at McDonald's, but not serving, even in the back, in the kitchen, where people cannot see you. (R., 26 years old)

L., a woman of Angolan origin, who due to the choice of haute couture clothes, reveals a high economic status, says:

When I was a child, besides my mother - who I loved because she was more beautiful, whiter than me - all the other positive models of femininity I aspired to were nothing like me. They all toned the skin, for sure, like my mom did. (L., 39 years old)

Many of the interviewees talk about skin toning instead of whitening, thus revealing a distance from the white/black dichotomy, just as they prefer to talk about style choices and not about issues that have to do with "race" (Pussetti, 2019). Most of the interviewees say that they were introduced to the practice by their mothers, close family members or a restricted group of friends. They grew up watching women take care of their bodies, repeating certain gestures, with similar products, the same praise for those who achieved a more uniform and luminous skin.

I used these creams for the first time through a friend who lives here, but is from Dakar. She said it served to improve the appearance of acne scars. My face started to change color. I thought: I'm turning white! [laugh]. I stopped for a while and soon started to regain color. And so I put it back on, so as not to spoil the results. (D., 44 years old)

"Into the white": the paths towards whitening in the heart of Lisbon

Where there is supply it is because there is demand. They may even tell you that they don't use these creams, or that only their friend or their friend's friend use it. But if all the stores have it and in large

quantities, it means that someone buys it. Or there are others that will tell you that they use it only here or there for some spots. Believe me, this is addictive. You start with a spot and suddenly it's all over your face, around your neck... (S., 38 years old)

The statement is from S., a woman from Praia (Cape Verde), owner of a beauty salon, with whom we spoke at Mouraria.

Mouraria, which is located right in the historic city center, is the neighborhood with the highest concentration of foreigners in Lisbon and owes its name to the fact that, after the Christian reconquest, the first king of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques (12th century) have confined Muslims in that part of the city. In this limited space, which constitutes one of the first ghettos in European history, there is a tangle of streets, alleys, lanes and alleys. Today, Mouraria is a neighborhood representative of a popular, traditional and multicultural Lisbon, which experiences an urban condition crossed by numerous setbacks and heterogeneities: aging of the population along with the renovation brought with immigrants, precarious living conditions, formal and informal commerce, drug trafficking and consumption, prostitution, and is also an expressive neighborhood of contemporary polyphony. With the arrival of the great avalanche of immigration - Chinese, Indians, Brazilians, Pakistanis, Bengali, Nepalese, Africans - Mouraria hosts the largest resident population and multiethnic commercial network in the city.

Even if the whitening practices within the population that lives and frequents Mouraria are not very popular, or that there is a certain shame or fear in confessing the use of these cosmetics, skin lightening products are extremely common, cheap and easily accessible in all the *hotspots* in the city center.

A., another woman from Praia (Cape Verde), client of the same salon, intervenes in our conversation:

In Indian stores there are good products, better than in African salons. Indians have good pharmaceuticals and know how to advise what to use. I put the cream two, three times a day on my

face. It brightens well, but can irritate and makes the skin very sensitive to the sun... After a few months you should stop. But not much, otherwise the skin will darken again. If you want the skin that you see in the advertising photos, you should never stop using it. (A., 31 years old)

Marketing is based on images that promote standards of “European” beauty – white, tall, thin women with long straight hair, big eyes, small nose, sophisticated, with a cosmopolitan touch. In none of the stores there is any type of warning or awareness regarding the possible risks related to whitening cosmetic products for health. The effervescence of Martim Moniz’s trade is the ideal theater for a parallel market of illegally imported goods and it is, therefore, in this area that we conduct our field research, using the methodology of *walking ethnography*, choosing to describe the tour of a specific day as representative of what can be found in relation to the research. The act of walking was only recently debated as a research method in the scope of anthropology (Ingold; Vergunst, 2008), despite being a practice already in use in contemporary art, in urban studies and in the phenomenological approaches and experiences of *embodiment* anthropology. Walking not only means walking through the city, but also includes processes such as casual interaction and participant observation.

In this way, selecting the main crossings that make up the area of Martim Moniz and, trying to register everything that our senses allowed, we visited some stores of commerce called “ethnic” that appear in the area. Walking along the main avenue Almirante Reis at random, we make the words of Marlucci Menezes (2004, p. 1) our own “the most visible side of Mouraria seems to be reflected in a kind of mirror game that reproduces images that pass between the idea of the typical, traditional, popular, multicultural, multiethnic, like a new Casal Ventoso, Texas or even the Bronx.”

Near souvenir shops that multiply daily in order to attract foreign tourists, there is a whole trade that is dedicated to serving those who actually live in the area. It was precisely these stores, which do not

attract tourist eyes, that caught our attention: the supermarket of Nepalese immigrants, the spice shop of the Indians at the exit of the subway, the African hairdresser or the Guinean mask store next door. We have not neglected the Mouraria Shopping Center, that urban monolith that enchants the charms of any anthropologist or curious: however, it no longer hides mysteries and only one store – of African clothing – was valuable for the purpose of our research.

African trade shops featured some famous cosmetics in the *bleaching* world, but with few packaging available (packs of Caro Light, ClairMen, BeautiOn, Rapid’Clair etc.). However, it was in the Guinean mask store, a labyrinthine quiver on a side street of Almirante Reis, that we found a whole collection worthy of catalog: Caro White, CaroLight, Black/White Bleaching Cream, Supreme White Intense, Beneks’ Fashion Fair, Crusader Medicated Soap or the best-selling Whitenicious (produced and promoted by Cameroonian model and entrepreneur Dencia, famous for the advertising slogan “white means puré”), Vit-Fée, ClairMen, BeautiOn, Rapid’Clair, Chon, Skin-Light, Bel Dam, among others – brightly colored packages with African phenotypic faces and whitish skins with tempting smiles –, which shared space inside the store with relaxers for African hair, curl activator, fake hair, wooden Guinea-Bissau masks, instruments musical from Mali or bags of many kilograms of manioc flour.

The situation was repeated in the Indian mini-market. The famous Fair & Lovely – prudently located behind the cash register – coexists with different incense, hair oils and different spices. Her pink and white image, with a DNA chain surrounding a dark and sad female face, and in a chromatic *decalage*, a smiling and confident woman with light skin superimposes, here is the only example to appear.

On the other hand, in the Nepalese supermarket, a few streets further and with a larger dimension, the cosmetic and hygiene products available are also in high numbers: Himalaya soaps, Babaria sunscreens, Nivea Soft jars, aloe vera gel, Vatika oils, in a mix of products that compete with the imagery of East-West consumption. Here, not

only Fair & Lovely is available, but also its male counterpart, Fair & Handsome. Surprisingly, not only in higher quantities but also in the miniature version of moisturizing cream, but also the cleansing gel for the face - specifically targeted at male consumers.

A strong pink packaging catches our attention. In the form of a cardboard package, similar to a pharmacy ointment, a Western female face appears in the left corner. The name is not revealing (Scar-Lite, Clear & Clean Cream), but we know it is "Everyone's 1st Choice." We do not need to look for the ingredients on the package insert or on the back of the card: the writing announces that it has "hydroquinone, tretinoine & mometasone furoate cream." It is a skin whitening cream with ingredients that are not allowed in Europe, also assuming that it is not subject to any type of pharmacovigilance by Infarmed.

We did not speak to the sellers, potential buyers or visitors in any of the places: our primary objective on that day of ethnographic exercise was only to register that it is possible to serenely buy any product that has the purpose of lightening the skin in "ethnic" stores - focused on the migrant or descendant populations from countries outside Europe. From the most harmless Fair & Lovely (and by harmless we mean the characteristics of its active ingredients, not its purpose) to products with harmful characteristics for the skin and general health, everything can be purchased in easily accessible places, at anyone's reach, at affordable prices to various types of budgets (maximum five euros per product).

Anthropological curiosity took us back to the small store, the last African stronghold of a shopping center that has been a portrait of the constant transformation that the city has been operating for itself.

If before we observed, as if lost in the midst of multicolored cloths, few bleaching products, the situation that we face in the past few months was revealing of the importance of the issue that we raised. At this moment, the central figure in the retail store is the high number of cosmetics that rival in color with the exposed fabrics: Epiderm Lotion,

Diproson, Betasol Lotion, Fair & White, Rapid'Clair, BeautiOn, Clairmen, Miki Clair, Neoprosone-Gel Forte, White Express, Labigjan, Charms, among others, accompany the already known Caro Light and Bel Dam.

Packages with images of phenotypically African individuals exhibit lighter skin. The printed texts are also unambiguous: Lightening and Nourishing are represented as objectives to be fulfilled. Repeatedly, cream after cream, we find that none has texts in Portuguese, but French is an absolute presence. In fact, many of them, linked to the Senegalese trade, are only described in French: Crème de Beauté Éclaircissante, Une Merveilleuse Beauté, Super Éclaircissant, Soyez Belle au Quotidien. The ingredients do not vary and, although prohibited, are highlighted as a way of attracting customers who know what effectively works: hydroquinone, allantoin, betamethasone, clobetasol... We cannot help but question this increase in supply. Is it an expanding market in Lisbon?

Final considerations

In this article we propose some reflections on the whitening practices and the commercialization of the main products for this purpose in the center of Lisbon, based on a *corpus* of interviews carried out within the scope of a broader anthropological research on aesthetic practices, carried out in the last three years. Although many things are still open to debate, however, we can say that - as much as the motivations, stories and experiences may be different - it is certain that in societies marked by rigid hierarchies and class distinctions (even the example of castes in India), or still due to European colonization, the condition of being white implies multiple structural privileges, such as easier access to a series of social, economic and status advantages.

Obviously, there are several nuances of "whiteness" and, when talking about "white skin," we are indicating a condition that assumes several values depending on other variables such as status, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, origin and nationality. When we try to understand whitening practices, we have to do an exercise of

contextualizing these choices in very specific spaces, times, situations and life stories. In conclusion, in addition to underlining the importance of this social practice, we also want to highlight the health risks associated with it in order to sensitize consumers and alert health professionals.

Besides the creams, which dominate the market, oral pills and injections are also used for skin whitening, along with products made from more or less professional homemade solutions and which include highly harmful ingredients, but are easily accessible, such as bleaches, toothpaste, lead-acid battery or cleaning detergents for a faster solution. Other “more sophisticated” whitening cosmetic products (pharmacy creams, perfumery, etc.) are idealized as less aggressive than market products, and this judgment is quite debatable. These products, however, usually contain varying concentrations of hydroquinone, corticosteroids, mercury and other agents, such as salicylic acid, hypochlorite or detergents, these compounds being toxic to both the skin and the body in general. In the case of hydroquinone, it can cause hyperpigmentation, burns, severe acne, lesions or loss of elasticity in the skin - lax skin (Dadzie; Petit, 2009).

Corticosteroids, on the other hand, since they are rapidly absorbed, can lead to skin infections caused by fungi or bacteria, glaucoma, cataracts, hypertension, diabetes or infertility. The prolonged use of mercury is known for its toxicity, causing kidney, liver, and neurological problems and, in more extreme cases, death (Dadzie; Petit, 2009). It should be noted, at this point, that whitening does not only occur in relation to the face, but also to other more exposed areas - hands, arms, neck and legs - as well as to areas such as skin folds and depressions, armpits, groins and genital region, which included anus and vulva in women and scrotum in men. Finally, the use of these products in pregnant women is highly harmful to the fetus development and, when used in children, dramatically increases the risks of truly harmful side effects, including skin irritations, diabetes, hypertension, renal failure and skin carcinomas. (Dadzie; Petit, 2009).

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Authors' contribution

Pussetti designed the study. Pussetti and Pires collected and analyzed the data and both authors wrote the article.

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