White skins, white surfaces
The politics of domesticity in South African homes from 1920-1950

Kathleen Connellan
University of South Australia

INTRODUCTION

The binaries of white and black, clean and unclean, order and chaos are part of the chilling simplicity that is at once a part of the purist modernist aesthetic in design and at the core of white racist ideology. The translation of whiteness in race to white in colour theory and also to domestic interior design may appear to be tenuous but the links are embedded in a common intent for spatial dominance. Christian ideologies of white as symbolic of illumination and epiphany connect with colonial and modernist views of white as clean and moral.

This chapter explores the relationships between the black domestic servant, the white madam, the white master and white goods in pre-Apartheid South Africa. It questions the place of modern design in this strangely pre-modern domestic environment. The white middle-class woman who is the pivotal point around which the ‘domestic appliance revolution’ revolved is both the victim of prejudice and the recipient of privilege in the modernist preoccupation with the clean white surface. White skin and white wall share the same surface paranoia and are equally fragile. In this way the super text of cleanliness establishes both a physical and social order.

The focus is upon cleanliness, race, gender and the domestic appliance in the context of a possible modernism. Such a modernism is closely aligned with the imported ideology of Western domesticity for the purposes of this chapter. The position of whiteness in both race and design in the domestic environment of pre-Apartheid South Africa is explored to ascertain possible strategic analogies. The methodology used will combine design history, political history and some aspects of whiteness theory.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The 1920s to the 1950s was the time of the Union of South Africa. This was pre-Apartheid but a nonetheless racially divided period. Examples of segregation include the Land Act, the Urban Areas Act and the Mines and Works Act, or the ‘Colour Bar Act’.

South Africa was comprised of few cities and it did not have a strong manufacturing base at this time. Apart from agriculture South Africa’s chief industrial focus was that of gold and diamond mining, with iron and steel, electricity and transport slowly gaining ground in the interwar years. The country relied upon the ‘cheap’ labour of its indigenous Africans to maintain continued economic growth.

CLEAN AND WHITE

To white Afrikaners, indigenous Africans represented an untamed, unclean Africa. In this sense darkness and blackness was considered not only unclean but also to represent heathen ignorance, sexuality and primal power. White translated into colour theory gains a ‘psychophysiological’ reality through comparison with other colours; it has the potential to reach out and overflow boundaries, unless the boundary is black (Itten 1973: 19). Conversely, black contracts within its boundaries, which are always lighter than itself. White is restricted and even curtailed by a black boundary. When the Newtonian view of white and black is adopted white is white light and black is the absence of light, as such darkness will encroach upon light unless the light has a sufficiently strong energy source to sustain it. Johannes Itten writes, ‘Black velvet is perhaps the blackest black, and baryta is the purest white. There is only one maximal black and one maximal white, but an indefinitely large number of light and dark grays, forming a continuous scale between white and black’ (1973: 48). Conversely, because of the power of black, in race the mystery of blackness and the lure of ‘black velvet’ represented the unknown, the feared and the desired. Ann McClintock’s discussion of Henry Rider Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines isolates the explicitly sexualised narrative of the male colonist’s journey into the female interior of dark Africa. In this sense, Haggard’s dark triangle of heather equates with Itten’s black velvet (1995: 3). As such blackness as an encroaching threat to the boundaries of whiteness is ironically positioned against the white colonial entry into the depth of blackness. In order to master blackness, it had to be whitened and cleansed.
Soap as a cleaning commodity accompanied the Bible as a civilising force in the context of missionary Africa. Ann McClintock quotes the caption that accompanied the Pear's Soap advertisement of 1899. The first step towards lightening THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. PEAR'S SOAP is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances... (1997: 280). McClintock also notes the direct connection between imperialism and domesticity, in this way the kraal and tribe are sites of conversion to the Western concept of home and family as an apparently civilising process.

The modern home cult of cleanliness was given a different shade of meaning when viewed against the unprecedented alarms resulting from the outbreak of the bubonic plague amongst dockworkers in Cape Town, in 1901. White propaganda immediately associated the plague with the black people. The epidemic fed white fears of contamination and blacks were expelled from residential areas close to the city. According to Nigel Worden, 'the sanitation syndrome' after the outbreak of the bubonic plague in South Africa in 1902, was one of the 'earliest examples of racial segregation...' at the beginning of the 20th century. White fears of being contaminated by black labourers grew worse after the First World War when '... the Spanish influenza epidemic ... gave rise to a renewed 'sanitation syndrome' alarm by white residents that infection was spread by black inhabitants...' (1994: 42). In this way cleanliness has been espoused as having both racial and moral connotations and it is significant that the word skoonheid in Afrikaans means both cleanliness and beauty.

Western attitudes towards dirt found their way to South Africa via missionaries, domestic science manuals and home-style magazines. According to Leonare Davidoff, The servant (and servant class as a whole) absorbed the dirt and lowliness into their own bodies' (1995: 5). Such an embodiment of dirt was taken further in the South African situation where both gender and race were subsumed into a symbolic recipient of domestic detritus.

That white is the name given to the skin colour attributed to most people of northern European origin is more than a linguistic coincidence. Richard Dyer contends, 'Racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world' (2000: 539). In this way the pervasive whiteness that exists in the skin of the 'madam' in South African homes, the sheen of the white ducoed appliances, the brightness of the white walls, the bleach of the linen, all signify the sterility of a world primarily concerned with surfaces.

SURFACES, SMILES AND SILENCES
Whiteness as race is still largely unracialised and therefore unacknowledged (Dyer 1997: 2). Whiteness in modernist design was also never really acknowledged in the canon of the times. Mark Wigley refers to this silence as 'strategic blindness' (1995: 4). Translating design whiteness into racial politics within South African domesticity, it is significant that the white populace's strategic blindness of black people (but not of their race) enabled an all white hegemonic system to install itself prior to Apartheid. In the South African home the white madam's authority discounted the human limitations of the black maid in a manner that assumed a mechanised modernity of clean white surfaces.

Advertisements for cleaning products, electrical cooking and appliances in the South African press during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s visually ignore the ubiquity of the African domestic maid. References to who actually did the work only occurred occasionally in the copy text. An example is the advertisement for the cleaning agent Rinso in the Afrikaans home-style magazine Die Huisgenoot (see image opposite). Here mention is made of a servant but only in terms of the time saved (5 January 1940: 26). Therefore although the image acknowledges the work, it ignores the worker and reduces her to a time factor.

The bright smiling faces of the white middle-class South African housewives are similar to the stereotypes that appeared in domestic appliance advertisements in the British and American press at the same time. These are illustrated images of middle-class South African women who almost without exception would have employed at least one domestic servant in the period of this study. Therefore, even though illustrative conventions were used in the figurative images in the advertisements, the South African smiles were not the smiles of happy housework but of white affluence and privilege.

WHITEGOODS?
Illiteracy and perceptions of black African ignorance endorsed the notion of white superiority. African adult women and men were frequently referred to as 'girls' or 'boys'. African male domestic servants or 'houseboys' were given names such as Matches, Saucepan and Sixpence, therefore not only were they regarded as children but also as commodities through such nomenclature (van Onselen 1982: 39). African women domestic servants were given names such as Constance, Patience and Beauty. Although some of these names resulted from a clumsy translation from their indigenous names, the white paternalistic support of such practices served to endorse perceptions of black domestic servants'
servants to do the work that the appliances were now supposed to do. The appliance was aimed at a white and literate market and the black servant remains visually invisible in advertisements of domestic appliances. White madams were reticent in the purchase and use of electrical cleaning devices, as they did not wish to operate the machines themselves and neither did they trust their black servants with the appliances. A selection of elderly ladies at an old-age home in Cape Town looked back on their days as white madams in the 1920s and 1930s and commented that there was no need for temperamental cleaning devices when 'Annie' was there to sweep up the dust quite adequately with damp tea leaves and washing machines were not even considered.

Of all the domestic appliances that made an entry into South Africa, the refrigerator is the most important and the most complex. My survey of advertisements in The Cape Argus newspaper from 1920 to 1940 revealed a greater number of refrigerator advertisements than any other domestic appliance. The refrigerator did not rely upon electricity and many gas models remained in use late into the 20th century. The refrigerator is the nexus for development in the suburbs because it held the most precious of all commodities in Africa: food. Therefore, owning a refrigerator was more than a status symbol of modernity; it was an icon that established the authority of the emergent white class. Here in one place, neatly arranged in a white box, was the source of nourishment and pleasure for the family. Sandy Isenstadt draws our attention to the refrigerator as a 'vision of plenty' in America in the 1950s (1998: 331). She refers to the refrigerator's central position in the home and aligning it to the woman, and she emphasises the refrigerator as satisfying desires and maintaining the health of the family. In South Africa this container displaced the black domestic servant to a certain extent because it precluded long hours of drying, bottling and preserving perishable food.

SEX AND GENDER

Whilst housework is largely documented as being women's work, Johannesburg had a predominance of African male domestic servants prior to the mid 1920s. Young African men were required as cheap labour on the mines but domestic service became a useful alternative source of employment. Employers generally preferred male to female domestic servants on the Wittwatersrand because they were stronger and were not seen to pose a sexual temptation to the white mistress's husband (van Onselen 1982: 29). The white 'master' was more often than not the 'head of the home' even if he worked outside of it and
men had with their white mistress: Trusted “houseboys” served early morning coffee in the bedroom, sometimes assisted the mistress with the more difficult items of clothing while dressing, [and] drew her bath…” (1982: 31).

As the ‘Black Peril’ took hold on most of the South African white middle-class, indigenous African women had replaced the male domestic in Johannesburg by the 1930s as the women migrated to the cities against their elders’ wishes. This was not a smooth transition or an immediate replacement of men and as a result South Africa experienced its own kind of domestic labour shortage or ‘servant problem’. In the meantime rural poverty and family fragmentation drove indigenous African women to the cities where they were less confined by the pass laws that restricted the movement of indigenous African men.

As domestics, these women were denied some of the most basic human rights by the white master and madam, such as sufficient sleep and sometimes even food (Barrett 1985: 41). She was not permitted to go to her own home if this took time away from her work. If she was lucky she could have two weeks unpaid leave to travel to her family every year. Wages were low; there was no job security and no benefits. The African maid was trapped into a situation that also made her a victim to the sexual predatory of her white master, “While black women may have subtly resisted the mistress in the kitchen, to resist the master in the bedroom was a different matter” (Schmidt 1992: 235). Sex and power were inextricably linked and although the way in which this dominance was negotiated may have gone beyond the servant wanting to keep her job, she was often the only wage earner in an extended family of small children, grandparents and unemployed brothers and sisters. She often had to live separately from her husband and her own children in a tiny room on the premises. She wore a (usually white) uniform, was given a white name and was expected to speak in one of the white languages. She had to work long hours (anything from 6am to 10pm) with very few breaks. She was regarded as dispensable because she was perceived to be cheap and nameless. Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s work in the context of Australia provides examples of how Aboriginal women were similarly ill-treated and subjected to violence as domestic servants. This often also entailed the denial of the right to be mothers to their children (2000: 21-3). The parallels between South African and white Australian attitudes towards black servility and white race privilege thus have certain similarities in this respect. However, the outnumbering of black Africans to white South Africans presented a different force to be reckoned with.
POOR WHITE?

When viewed against a nascent age of modernity and the progress that such a life entailed, poverty was deemed as regressive. The Dutch Reformed Church and other associated bodies supported a commission of enquiry into the 'poor white question' in South Africa in 1927 as a result of miscegenation concerns for a large sector of the Afrikaners rural poor. In other words, the poor whites needed to 'rescue' before they 'became black'. The Poor White Commission into the 'poor-white problem' comprised a special investigation into home conditions conducted by the organising secretary of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrou Vereniging (ACCV) - The South African Christian Women's Association. In the initial section of the 1932 report M.E. Rothman's tone is disparaging and she seems to be looking at the homes through the lens of cleanliness. She reveals her concerns for the close proximity of neighbouring blacks to the poor whites and the resultant influence. The following excerpts are from a few different pages in Rothman's report:

The family live in two dirty little rooms ... [and later she refers to a girl with] ... an untidy mop of hair that would have been beautiful had it been clean ... [And then of the girl and her sister] ... The two evidently spent their time doing nothing. They did not even wash themselves, still less their dirty clothes. [And in another section] ... Everything was dirty, the women's clothes were dirty and ragged, and her face and body were grimy; she would not have been unprepossessing if she had been clean. [1932: 152-55]

One solution was to teach the girls and women to clean and also to clean for others. However not many poor white girls would go into domestic service because they had been brought up to understand housework as beneath their race. Interestingly, some of the extremely poor families and homes that Rothman describes in her report still had an Afrikaner servant. Referring to the house of the two sisters mentioned in the above excerpts, Rothman writes: 'In the little lean-to [of a two-roomed house] a Kaffir boy - their kitchen boy - was busy' (1932: 155). This is also borne out in a photograph of a coloured nanny included with a poor white family illustrated in Rothman's report, who is visibly 'cleaner' than her white employers.

Domestic training was introduced into South Africa for a number of reasons, which differed according to the race of the person. Common reasons included the belief that domestic work was for women therefore the training was for girls only. Missionary bodies perpetuated the elevating cult of domesticity to African girls as the vocation or calling of women as a means of training them for monogamous marriage and motherhood as well as for domestic service (Caitskell 1983: 244, 245).

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the many factors that were present in the domestic environment of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, 'clean' white surfaces were maintained by black skins. The scare of the 'black peril' ignored the ubiquitous 'white peril' of exploitation, in much the same way as the 'poor-white problem' ignored the enforced poverty of black indigenous Africans. White as symbolic of cleanliness is also contradicted by the 'dirtiness' of the poor whites. The domestic appliance in all of this became a cosmetic status symbol or dare I say 'white elephant' in the presence of a cheap and replaceable labour source. The relationships between white madam and black servant were controlled by both a patriarchal nationalism and a cultural class divide. As such modernism as an elite resource was entrenched through segregated education and living arrangements. Modernism in such a combined pre-modern and modern environment thus became the face of cruelty.

White supremacy has been upheld by legislation in various forms throughout colonialism and continues in the apparently democratic post-colonial governments of the West. South African whiteness was part of the founding myth of Afrikaner fundamentalism that regained ascendancy in 1938 during the centenary celebrations of The Great Trek and entrenched religious notions of inherent white superiority and black servility. Whiteness became the colour of authority in both political and design space, impractical though white shows the dirt. Therefore to maintain the 'purity' of white, its borders have to be constantly monitored. In colour theory, white becomes graded towards an ultimate black if it is gradually mixed. While whiteness in skin colour is not the brilliant whiteness of colour in art, design and architecture, it shares the same ideological insecurity and requires unnatural force to maintain its position. White dominance in both race and modernist design is strategically maintained by silence. The un-naming of white as a colour in design is coupled with the historic denial of whiteness as a racialised entity.

NOTES
1 This chapter is a revised version of a paper presented at the 'Politics of Design' conference of the Design History Society, Belfast, September 9-11, 2004.
2 The work is part of an installation piece in which Platten explores the
commodification of products and people. Platten intended to expose white
tendencies to objectify and fetishise the 'black man', and with the consent
of her model, he elevated himself upon the plinth of white domesticity
and fecundity in an attempt to act out the controversy. The piece relates
to white skin and white surface as providing a brilliant backdrop for racial
and sexual drama. The white box operates in a white space but the entry of
black skin and black depth create an immediate potential for absorption.

REFERENCES


Gaitskell, D. 1983. *Housewives, maids or mothers: Some contradictions of
domesticity for Christian women in Johannesburg 1903-1939*.


Itten, J. 1973. *The art of color: The subjective experience and objective rationale of

McClintock, A. 1995. *Imperial leather: Race gender and sexuality in the colonial

———. 1997. ‘Soap and the commodity spectacle’ in *Representation: Cultural

and feminism*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Rothman, M.E. 1932. *The mother and daughter of the poor family: The poor white
(6). Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia-Drukkeria.

domestic servants in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1939* in *African