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The White Fraud: White Elephants, Siam, and Comparative Racialization

ABSTRACT: In this paper I examine P.T. Barnum's attempt to bring the first "sacred white elephant" to America, and his subsequent "white elephant war" with rival showman Adam Forepaugh, through the lens of Afro-Asian comparative racialization. I look at several accounts of white elephants that describe their skin color in terms of the U.S.'s black-white race dichotomy and ask why this animal was a popular figure for examining the U.S.'s shifting attitude toward race and transpacific imperialism in the late-nineteenth century. By reading the "white elephant war" through a comparative framework, I argue that the heterogeneous histories of both African American and Asian racialization inhere and intersect in this specific instance of racial comparison, while tracking the overlaps and oversights that this analysis reveals.

The *Lydian Monarch* had been sighted from Fire Island and was expected in Jersey City that evening. Everybody in New York City knew what was on board. It was March 28th, 1884, and P.T. Barnum, the circus proprietor and showman, after great effort and expense, had brought the first “sacred white elephant” to America. Barnum’s agent, J.B. Gaylord, had purchased the white elephant – named “Toung Taloung” or “Gem of the Sky” – from King Thibaw of Burma last November. From Rangoon, Toung Taloung was brought by ship through the Suez Canal, and arrived in Liverpool on January 14th. After a stay at the London Zoological Gardens, the white elephant, its handlers, and Barnum’s agents sailed for New York on March 8th.¹ When the *Lydian Monarch* arrived twenty days later, Barnum and his entourage rushed from Madison Square Gardens to New Jersey to meet Toung Taloung. The following day the *New York Times*² offered a dramatic account of Barnum’s first encounter with his prized white elephant. “Of course we have all learned by this time,” Barnum told his retinue, “that there is no such thing as a really

¹ For an overview of Toung Taloung’s stay in London, see Sarah Amato’s chapter “The White Elephant in London: On Trickery, Racism, and Advertising” in *Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 139-181. For Barnum’s interest in acquiring a white elephant, and his subsequent “white elephant war” with Adam Forepaugh, see A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 303-307 and Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), 266-271. For Barnum’s own version of these events, see P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs; or, Sixty Years Recollections* (Buffalo, NY: The Courier Company, 1889), 335-343.

² Hereafter abbreviated to *NYT*.

pure white elephant. This is a sacred animal, a technical white elephant, and as white as God makes 'em. A man can paint them white, but this is not one of that kind.”³

Although readers who had followed the coverage of Toung Taloung’s reception in London would indeed have learned that white elephants are not literally white, Barnum’s matter-of-fact statement belied the controversy that the color of white elephants had already engendered in the popular American imagination. The whiteness, or non-whiteness, of the white elephant became a potent metaphor for many nineteenth-century Americans. As an animal from Southeast Asia, the white elephant was often presented as a prominent sign of “Oriental” wastefulness and despotism. At the same time, the white elephant’s unstable relation to the category of whiteness made it a suitable figure for articulating the social importance of white supremacy in the context of the black-white race dichotomy during the post-Reconstruction nadir of American race relations. The white elephant was a ubiquitous figure in American discourse from 1856 (the year of the Harris Treaty between Siam and the United States) to the early-twentieth century, appearing in a range of popular print genres (magazine and newspaper articles, travel narratives, short fiction, advertisements, and cartoons). In this essay, I argue that the white elephant was mobilized in this discourse to demonstrate the perceived similarities between African Americans and Asians in debates about American race relations and imperialism. In order to demonstrate the myriad ways that white elephants were racialized in the late-nineteenth century, I read the “white elephant war” of 1884 between Barnum and his rival showman Adam Forepaugh, in

³ “The Sacred Beast Here,” *NYT*, 29 March 1884, 1.

which each circus proprietor claimed to have the only “genuine” white elephant in America,⁴ through the lens of Afro-Asian comparative racialization.

By considering the white elephant in the context of anti-black racism and imperialism, this paper sheds new light on the importance of comparative racialization for understanding the racial logic of the late-nineteenth century U.S. I argue that the racialized language used to describe Toung Taloung and other white elephants during the white elephant war, while drawing on the tropes and stereotypes of anti-black racism, was also subtended by a well-established discourse on Siam and white elephants that invoked the broader sentiments of Asian racialization but was predicated on an exceptional understanding of the U.S.’s relation to Siam. In “The Afro-Asian Analogy,” Colleen Lye writes that, “the foundational status of antiblackness in conceptualizations of racism obstructs Asian Americanist endeavors to elaborate the nonderivative nature of Asian racialization.” Thinking of Asian racialization as a kind of “second-order racism,” that is, a racism derived from an analogy to a “temporal[ly] and conceptual[ly] prior” anti-black racism, fails to account for the historical specificity and heterogeneity of Asian racialization.⁵ As critics like Lye, Hsuan L. Hsu, and Edlie Wong have all argued, discourses of racial analogy ignore the widely different genealogies of racial formation in the U.S., and assign a temporal priority to anti-black racism that does not always reflect the

⁴ I borrow the phrase “white elephant war” from Dexter W. Fellows’ memoir of circus life, *This Way to the Big Show* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 272.

⁵ Colleen Lye, “The Afro-Asian Analogy,” *PMLA* 123.5 (October 2008), 1733; 1734.

historical record.⁶ In this paper I do not wish to read the controversy over Toung Taloung and other white elephants only as an analogy to anti-black racism. Rather, I want to think about how the heterogeneous histories of both African American and Asian racialization inhere and intersected in this specific instance of racial comparison, while tracking the overlaps and oversights that this analysis reveals.

In the first section of this essay, I present an overview of how the white elephant was racialized in American discourse during the nineteenth century. I begin by looking at several accounts of these animals that describe their skin color in terms of the U.S.'s black-white race dichotomy. I then consider the relationship between the U.S. and Siam, arguing that the white elephant was a powerful figure for examining the U.S.'s shifting attitude toward race and imperialism in the late-nineteenth century. The white elephant emerges as an important figure in late-nineteenth century U.S. culture because it quite literally embodies the contradictions and complications of contemporaneous discourses of racialization, blurring distinctions between black and white, East and West, and the human and the animal that white Americans were anxious to establish and preserve. Popularly known as "the Land of the White Elephant," Siam was also a popular subject for American writers, and I argue that many descriptions of the white elephant conform to a well-established U.S. discourse on Siam, which position the Southeast

⁶ In addition to "The Afro-Asian Analogy," see Lye's *America's Asia* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2005); Hsuan L. Hsu, *Sitting in Darkness: Mark Twain's Asia and Comparative Racialization* (New York and London: New York UP, 2015); and Edlie Wong, "Comparative Racialization, Immigration Law, and James Williams' *Life and Adventures*," *American Literature* 84.4 (December 2012), 797-826.

Asian nation in exceptional relation to broader discussions of “America’s Asia” that tend to focus on China and Japan in the American construction of Asian racialization. Building on this broad analysis of the American discourse on white elephants, Siam, and comparative racialization, in the second section of my paper I read Barnum’s white elephant war as an especially potent and revealing moment in this history. I analyze the *NYT*’s coverage of this event, focusing on how the newspaper alluded to African American racialization in order to explain the color of Barnum’s and Forepaugh’s elephants. Because it was such a patently absurd situation, I argue that the white elephant war allowed Americans to speak about the social construction of race and racialization more openly than they could discuss – or would care to discuss – human race relations. In this way, the white elephant war made explicit the unspoken contradictions and inconsistencies that lay at the heart of the American racial imaginary. Finally, I look at a series of Pears’ Soap advertisements, to advance the argument that the white elephant war influenced anti-black racism, popular attitudes toward American imperialism, and the association between racialization and animality in the post-Reconstruction period.

An Occasional Departure from the Ordinary Beast

A few months after Toung Taloung arrived in New York, Frank Vincent Jr., author of the popular 1874 travelogue *The Land of the White Elephant: Sights and Scenes in South-Eastern Asia*, used explicitly racialized terminology to explain the color of white elephants to readers of *The Manhattan*. “It should always be remembered that the term white, as applied to elephants, must be received with qualification,” Vincent writes, “In fact, the grains of salt must be numerous, for the white elephant is white only by contrast with those that are decidedly dark. A mulatto, for instance, is not absolutely white, but he is white compared with a full-blooded

negro. The so-called white elephant is an occasional departure from the ordinary beast.”⁷ For Vincent, both the white elephant and the “mulatto” share a kind of “qualified” whiteness that serves to distinguish them from “full-blooded” black bodies (Vincent refers to regular elephants as “black”) but stops short of aligning them with the kind of privileged white identity that Vincent himself possessed. In this article Vincent constantly explains white elephants to his readers in terms of the U.S.’s racial logic, from noting the labor performed by “black” elephants and speculating about why whiteness is “worshipped” in Siam to claiming that “[w]hen you possess an elephant whose color is that of a negro’s palm you possess a white elephant.”⁸

Vincent’s descriptions reflect a truism that can be found throughout the nineteenth-century discourse on white elephants: although these animals are not literally white, they are approximately the same color as white people, for whom the word “white” is a signifier of racial superiority and privilege. For example, the author of the *NYT* story about the arrival of Barnum’s white elephant writes that Toung Taloung “has a large pink splash on his forehead, which extends over his eyes and half-way down his trunk. His ears, which are of a peculiar triangle shape, are edged with the same flesh-colored pink, and mottled in large spots, and his breast and shoulders are likewise spotted. The under side of his trunk is also flesh-colored.”⁹ In *The Land of the White Elephant*, Vincent makes a similar observation, noting that the body of “the so-called

⁷ Frank Vincent, “White Elephants,” *The Manhattan* 4.1 (July 1884), 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹ “The Sacred Beast Here,” 1.

‘white’ elephant” has “the peculiar flesh-coloured appearance termed ‘white.’”¹⁰ Vincent’s description reflects a broad consensus in the popular American imagination that the epidermal signifiers of white identity must be carefully circumscribed so that they only have meaning and value when observed in white persons. When such physical characteristics are evident in a non-human form like an elephant, or in a human body that is considered to be biracial or “mulatto,” these privileged markers become “qualified” or “so-called.”

While Vincent’s comparison of a white elephant with a “mulatto” was written in response to Toung Taloung’s arrival in the U.S. in 1884, it was not the first time that a writer had used anthropomorphic and racialized language to describe a white elephant. For example, the ways in which white elephants were confined, and what effect confinement had on these animals, was often analyzed in terms of human social rank and slavery. In her analysis of Toung Taloung’s stay at the London Zoological Gardens, Sarah Amato writes that “[Toung Taloung’s] mild temper, in particular, was emphasized to obviate his rank as a ‘high-caste elephant.’ Elephants were generally likened to ‘slaves’ consigned to manual labour in the colonies” whereas “Toung Taloung was described as elevated above other elephants, rarely condescending to eat common hay and oats.”¹¹ Although white elephants were treated differently than regular elephants (who were used for their labor), many accounts suggested that they were perhaps more traumatized by confinement than their black counterparts. Consider, for example, the following description of a white elephant by the American surgeon William Ruschenberger from 1838: “On landing outside

¹⁰ Frank Vincent, *The Land of the White Elephant: Sights and Scenes in South-Eastern Asia* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874), 160.

¹¹ Amato, *Beastly Possessions*, 155.

of the wall, enclosing the palace and town, we were conducted to see a huge white elephant. He was dirty and wild, and, from being yet untamed, is called the mad elephant. Each of his four legs was secured to a post driven in the ground, and he was attended by three or four slaves. The irises were white.”¹² While this white elephant is prominent enough to warrant “three or four” attending slaves, Ruschenberger’s passage emphasizes the strain that confinement places on this “dirty,” “wild,” “untamed,” and “mad” animal. His description suggests that the whiteness that makes white elephants valuable to the Siamese, also contributes to the animals’ dissatisfaction with their captivity. Although regular black elephants were forced to perform labor in Siam, Ruschenberger does not describe them as particularly unhappy with their lot in life. In a way, then, the whiteness of the white elephant was a kind of burden for these animals: although ostensibly valuable, their white “flesh-colored” skin doomed white elephants to a kind of servitude that was more exacting than that endured by their black analogues.

Like Vincent, Ruschenberger also described white elephants using language that suggested an affinity between these animals and biracial persons. For example, he characterizes one of the other white elephants he saw in Bangkok as “the beauty of her race,” going on to praise her “soft white skin” and “beautiful chestnut-coloured eye.”¹³ While the “soft white skin”

¹² William Ruschenberger, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World During the Years 1835, 36, and 37; Including a Narrative of an Embassy to the Sultan of Muscat and the King of Siam Volume 2* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), 87. Ruschenberger was the surgeon for the U.S. expedition to ratify the first treaty between the United States and Siam, which had been negotiated by Edmund Roberts in 1833.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

of this elephant undoubtedly contributes to her “beauty,” her “race” is also signified by her “chestnut-coloured” eyes that – following American racial typology – could be taken as a sign of non-white ancestry. Ruschenberger’s gendered description of this white elephant calls to mind representations of the sexualized “tragic mulatta,” a figure popularized in antebellum African American and abolitionist literature. In her analysis of African American novels in the 1850s, Carla L. Peterson argues that, “the sexual plot of the tragic mulatta story is undergirded by an economic one. In the economy of slavery, the mulatta was a commodity sold at high profit as a ‘fancy girl’ or exploited to produce more slaves. Yet... the mulatta also constituted a surplus value produced for the personal consumption of the slaveholder.”¹⁴ The commodity value of the “tragic mulatta” is supplemented by her surplus value as an object of “personal consumption” (i.e., rape) for the slaveholder. There is a curious parallel between this account of the “tragic mulatta” and Ruschenberger’s description of the white elephant. The “beauty” of this elephant also sets her apart from the rest of her “race,” and seems to be a sign that – in addition to whatever her economic value might be – she has a kind of surplus value (not sexual value, but religious and political cultural capital) for her “owner” that sets her apart from her regular, “black” counterparts. In this passage, then, Ruschenberger adumbrates and complicates the burdensome nature of whiteness for the white elephant by subtly comparing this Asian animal with a well-known African American figure – the “mulatta” – for whom whiteness was also a “tragic” burden.

¹⁴ Carla L. Peterson, “Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s,” *American Literary History* 4.4 (Winter 1992), 568.

Further complicating the relationship between human whiteness and white elephants is the fact that the English term “white elephant” is an inadequate and misleading translation of the Thai word for these animals. The Thai word for elephant is *chang*, and a white elephant is a *chang pheuak*. According to Rita Ringis, “*chang pheuak*... literally means ‘albino (or strange-coloured) elephant’, the usual word for the colour ‘white’ being different entirely.”¹⁵ Like virtually every other American or European who wrote about Siam and white elephants in the nineteenth century, Vincent was open about the fact that “white elephant” was a poor translation of *chang pheuak*.¹⁶ And yet he still describes these animals as “so-called ‘white’ elephant[s],” glossing over what he admits is a semantic problem in order to cast creatures like Toung Taloung as racial imposters who – like an African-American “mulatto” – might try to pass as white in order to access the closely guarded privileges of white identity. Both Vincent and Ruschenberger display a significant amount of anxiety about extending the idea of racialized whiteness to white elephants. This anxiety makes sense when considered alongside what whiteness studies scholars have identified as, to borrow George Lipsitz’s phrase, “the possessive investment in whiteness.” Critics like Lipsitz, Cheryl I. Harris, and David Roediger have argued that whiteness bestows a tangible economic benefit on those who are permitted to claim white identity, and therefore

¹⁵ Rita Ringis, *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 94.

¹⁶ For example, just before he describes the color of a white elephant as being like that of a “mulatto,” Vincent writes, “Is the white elephant white, or only so by a figure of speech? To this question it is impossible to answer yes or no. The Siamese never speak of a white elephant but of a *chang pouk* [sic], or strange-colored elephant” (“White Elephants,” 93).

whiteness is a valuable commodity whose possession is regulated by social and legal customs.¹⁷ Because whiteness is only valuable if certain persons are excluded from it, social fictions like the “one-drop rule” ensure that even African Americans who might “pass” as white will be denied access to white privilege.¹⁸ By comparing white elephants to biracial African Americans, both Ruschenberger and Vincent rely on the “one-drop rule” to ensure that, despite their “flesh-coloured” skin, white elephants will be strictly excluded from the benefits of whiteness.

If the white elephant is viewed as an imposter because of its improper claim on whiteness, this conception of the animal as a kind of fraud is also undergirded by the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of the word “white elephant” as both “A rare albino variety of elephant which is highly venerated in some Asian countries” and “A burdensome or costly possession (from the story that the kings of Siam (now Thailand) were accustomed to make a

¹⁷ See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993), 1707-1791; and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 2007).

¹⁸ For more on whiteness as a racial category that was gradually extended to different European-American groups, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). For racial passing and the malleability of whiteness for African Americans, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

present of one of these animals to courtiers who had rendered themselves obnoxious, in order to ruin the recipient by the cost of its maintenance). Also, an object, scheme, etc., considered to be without use or value.”¹⁹ Although this story of the Siamese king and his ruined courtier does provide a compelling explanation for why “white elephant” can mean “an object, scheme, etc., considered to be without use or value,” it is nevertheless a complete fabrication. Indeed, if read together, the *OED*’s two definitions for “white elephant” present an irresolvable paradox: If white elephants are “rare” and “highly venerated” why would the king of Siam give one away to punish a subordinate?²⁰ However contradictory, this figurative definition of “white elephant” would have been well known to people like Barnum, Vincent, and the American audiences who read about Toung Taloung. While it is not my primary focus in this essay, the discourse about the white elephant as a fatal gift or burdensome possession undergirds and influences my analysis of white elephants and comparative racialization.

Although white elephants played a prominent role in several Southeast Asian countries, in the American imagination they were almost always associated with Siam. So why were

¹⁹ “Elephant,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., www.oed.com/dictionary/white-elephant_n?tab=meaning_and_use#14365918 (accessed 20 July 2020).

²⁰ There is no recorded instance of this practice in Thai history. As Ringis notes, “[N]o Siamese monarch ever considered white elephants ‘burdensome’ nor gave them away, for according to ancient tradition, possession of one or many of these symbolized a king’s virtue or *barami*” (*Elephants of Thailand*, 96). For my analysis of the white elephant as fatal gift, see Ross Bullen, “‘This Alarming Generosity’: White Elephants and the Logic of the Gift,” *American Literature* 83.4 (December 2011), 747-773.

nineteenth-century American so interested in Siam? On the surface, there were few obvious reasons why Americans would take notice of this small Southeast Asian nation. Although the U.S. negotiated trade treaties with Siam in 1833 and 1856 it was never as valuable an economic partner as China or Japan, nor was there ever any possibility of mass Siamese emigration to the U.S. that might stoke nativist fears. At the same time, because Siam was the only nation in Southeast Asia never to be formally colonized by a European power, American travel writers like Vincent and George B. Bacon, viewed it through exceptionalist lenses as a nation that both resembled the U.S. in its history of anticolonial resistance, and as an uncanny projection of what could happen to American identity both at home and abroad as a result of increased contact with Asia and the Pacific. Thus the American discourse on Siam in the latter half of the nineteenth century reflected the ideological dispositions of a nation that saw itself as transitioning from a Republic founded on chattel slavery and resistance to British imperialism to a nascent free market power and imperial force.

Siam proved to be an ideal “text” for Americans’ ruminations on their own nation’s transformation. On the one hand, because Siam, like the U.S., had effectively resisted the European powers, and because many important Siamese figures – including King Mongkut – were open admirers of American society, Siam could be read as a sign that the U.S. would be welcomed on the global stage by other nations that shared its values and worldview. On the other hand, Siam was depicted as an exotic, Orientalized, and backward nation, ruled by a capricious despot, that served as a warning for Americans about what could happen to American society – and white supremacy – if the U.S. expanded its contact with Asian populations through both imperialism and increased immigration. Accordingly, many American narratives about Siam reflect a sense of ambivalence about the U.S.’s transformation into an imperial power through

their representation of prominent Siamese figures as national and racial hybrids. For example, in his 1873 travelogue *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, as It Was and Is*, Bacon describes Pinklao, brother of King Mongkut, as an admirer of American history and culture, who nevertheless could not be mistaken for a real American because of his “Half European, half Oriental” clothing, and the fact that “this gentlemanly and well-informed man was black.”²¹ Bacon’s description displays a convoluted logic of racial comparison, casting a Siamese royal as a “Half European, half Oriental” hybrid who is simultaneously racialized as “black.” Likewise, descriptions of Chang and Eng Bunker (the “original Siamese twins”) often focussed as much on the fact that the brothers married two white sisters and owned African-American slaves as they did on their conjoined bodies, suggesting that for the American public these racial transgressions were just as subversive as the twins’ exceptional physique.²² And although Siamese figures like “Oriental despots,” Siamese twins, and white elephants have much in common with other exotic Asian racial stereotypes that circulated during the nineteenth century, I would maintain that Siam occupied a discrete place in the popular American imagination. Siam has received limited attention from Asian American Studies scholars, especially when compared to Asian nations that

²¹ George B. Bacon, *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, as It Was and Is* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1873), 103-104.

²² For recent and critical accounts of Chang and Eng Bunker’s influence in the United States, see Cynthia Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), Yunte Huang, *Inseparable: The Original Siamese Twins and Their Rendezvous with American History* (New York: Liveright, 2018), and Hsu, *Sitting in Darkness*.

were perceived as an economic threat to the U.S. (China and, later, Japan), and Pacific nations that were the focus of American imperialism (Hawaii and the Philippines).²³ I believe, however, that the vast number of nineteenth-century American travelogues, newspaper articles, and visual media that depict Siam as having an exceptional, if ambivalent, relation to the U.S., constitute a unique and underexamined archive within the discourse of American orientalism and imperialism that is worthy of further critical attention.

No figure proved as vital for the American discourse on Siam as the white elephant. Because the white elephant figured prominently on the Siamese flag, it was commonplace to refer to Siam as the “land of the White Elephant.” While Toung Taloung was crossing the Atlantic, David Ker, a journalist and novelist who had visited Siam, published a column in the *NYT* arguing that this “deceptive national symbol” on the Siamese flag was “no inapt emblem of Siam itself,” since “from a distance... [Siam] suggests vague but imposing visions of boundless wealth and gorgeous Eastern luxury, stately palaces, and richly caparisoned elephants.”

²³ Huang, Hsu, and Wu all discuss Chang and Eng Bunker in great detail, but none of these studies focus on Siam itself. For a critical study of the development of Siam as a modern nation state, including its relationship with Western nations, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: The History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997) and Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, eds, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010). For an overview of the relations between Siam/Thailand and the United States from a Thai perspective, see Vimol Bhongbhibhat et al., eds, *The Eagle and the Elephant: Thai-American Relations Since 1833*. Trans. Napa Bhongbhibhat. (Bangkok: United Production, 1987).

However, when “[s]een close at hand in the sober light of cold facts,” Siam “shrinks into a small, semi-barbarous, and comparatively feeble kingdom.”²⁴ In his article about “White Elephants” in *The Manhattan*, Vincent tacitly agrees with and complicates Ker’s analysis by arguing that although the white elephant is a fitting emblem of Siam, it is understood best in terms of the U.S.’s black-white race dichotomy. This complicated racial genealogy – a symbol of Asian decadence and despotism refracted through the lens of anti-black racism – attests to the fact that in 1884, the year Toung Taloung arrived in the U.S., the American dialogue on race was rapidly transforming. The Civil War had ended almost twenty years ago, but the failure of Reconstruction and a resurgence of anti-black racism meant that the rights of African Americans had been severely curtailed. At the same time, the perceived threat of Chinese “coolies” for white American labor had culminated with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the rise of “yellow peril” discourse. Furthermore, the 1870s and 80s were marked by American expansion and intervention in the Pacific, setting the groundwork for American imperialism in Hawaii and the Philippines in the 1890s. In short, the racial landscape of the U.S. in 1884 was defined by transition, transformation, and ambiguity. Northern white Americans could look back on the Civil War and the end of slavery with a sense of civic pride, while nevertheless protecting their own white privilege by circulating racist stereotypes that cast both African Americans and Asians as naturally inferior. Likewise, nativist anxieties about Asian immigration could coexist with nascent support for American imperialism, which would increase America’s contact with foreign nations and people. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that a period of shifting racial

²⁴ David Ker, “Siam and the Elephants,” *NYT*, 16 March 1884, 5.

boundaries and allegiances would be conducive to generating discourses of comparative racialization.

The white elephant was a potent figure in discussions of the U.S.'s changing attitude toward Asia and the Pacific. Following the 1884 controversy over Toung Taloung and the white elephant war, the phrase "white elephant" would become a cultural keyword for discussions of American imperialism during the build-up to the Philippine-American War. In October 1898, newspapers across the country reported Brigadier General Irving Hale's contention that by securing the Philippines, "Uncle Sam has acquired something of a white elephant, but having corralled the animal he is in duty bound to keep him."²⁵ While Hale's figurative language draws on the story of the white elephant as a burdensome possession, other accounts used explicitly racialized language to describe the Philippines as a white elephant. An article titled "How Many Elephants?" in the *New York World* expands on the idea of the white elephant in order to contrast the Philippines with the U.S.'s other racialized burdens, including Hawaiians and African Americans:

According to the observations of eminent students of social and political science, the people of the United States have a large-sized black elephant on their hands in our own Southern States.

How many more do we want?

²⁵ "Gen. Hale's Views," *Parsons Weekly Blade*, 22 October 1898, 2. Versions of this story were also reported in newspapers in Connecticut, Idaho, Kentucky, Montana, and Oregon.

Do we really need a white elephant in the Philippines, a leper elephant in Hawaii, a brown elephant in Porto Rico [sic] and perhaps a yellow elephant in Cuba?

If ever a benevolent old gentleman was entitled to nail up on his door in big, black letters the legend, “I have troubles of my own – no owners of elephants need apply,” Uncle Sam is that chap.²⁶

In this article the white elephant functions as a clear and comprehensive metaphor for Uncle Sam’s “white man’s burden.” It is a figure that is used to organize a crude comparative racial analysis, albeit one that does not break with what Hsu calls the “logic of analogy.”²⁷ This analogy, though, does offer an oppositional reading to what Lye calls “the foundational status of antiblackness in conceptualizations of racism.” An Asian animal – the white elephant - serves as the basis for an unflattering comparison of African Americans with Filipinos and other “burdensome” populations, thus showing how a racialized Asian figure was constitutive of a particular form of anti-black racism. Although the Philippine-American War provided a wealth of material for white elephant metaphors in the American press, this was only possible because of the racialized discourse that was produced during the white elephant war of 1884. In the next section of this essay, I will analyze this conflict through the lens of Afro-Asian comparative racialization, arguing that public debates about white elephants – played out in newspaper accounts, Barnum and Forepaugh’s own writings, and popular advertisements – drew on racist stereotypes about both African American and Asians in a manner that complicates common

²⁶ “How Many Elephants?,” *New York World*, 19 June 1898, 6.

²⁷ Hsu, *Sitting in Darkness*, 2.

perceptions about Asian racialization as a kind of “second-order racism” that was only developed through an analogy to “temporal[ly] and conceptual[ly] prior” anti-black racism. If the white elephant is a racialized figure, then it is the reification of a heterogeneous genealogy of racial forms – both African American and Asian – that congealed at specific historical moments. And no moment in this history was more decisive than the spring of 1884.

The Real Secret of the White Elephant

The story of Barnum and Toug Taloung illustrates the significant cultural fascination with white elephants in nineteenth-century America. The controversy surrounding the reception of this animal was ironic since Barnum, who had made a fortune passing off frauds and imitations as genuine articles, now possessed a real curiosity but was afraid that nobody would accept it as authentic.²⁸ Moreover, since Barnum supposedly paid a considerable sum to purchase Toug

²⁸ There are several book-length studies that examine the relationship between showmanship, authenticity, and race in Barnum’s career. See, for example, Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture, 1850-1877* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Barnum also had a long

Taloung (in his autobiography he claims to have spent \$250,000) and the elephant was only a moderately successful attraction, we can also note the irony of Toung Taloung's transformation from a literal to a figurative white elephant.²⁹ In order to best understand how the story of Barnum's elephant intersected with broader cultural conceptions of white elephants, Siam, and comparative racialization, it is necessary to consider two other elephants who were introduced to the American public in the summer of 1884: Forepaugh's "Light of Asia" and Barnum's own "The White Fraud." Both of these animals were regular, "black" elephants that had been painted white by their owners. Although Forepaugh's elephant, originally named "Tiny," was designed to be a whiter rival to Toung Taloung, and Barnum's "The White Fraud" was created as a parody of Forepaugh's obvious forgery, both "white" elephants demonstrated the considerable cultural anxiety about the malleability of whiteness as a racial category in the U.S. and the ways in which this category was connected to both African American and Asian racialization. By tracking the history of these three elephants – Toung Taloung, Light of Asia, and The White Fraud – we can see not only the significant role of the white elephant in nineteenth-century American culture,

history of presenting and promoting racially ambiguous figures, perhaps most notably people with vitiligo who were billed as "Leopard Boys" or "Leopard Girls." The implied joke – can a leopard change its spots? – only served to increase Barnum's audience's concerns about racial transformation. See Charles D. Martin, *The White African American Body: A Cultural and Literary Exploration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

²⁹ For Barnum's claim about the cost of Toung Taloung, see *Struggles and Triumphs*, 339. There is little reason to believe that Barnum actually paid this much. In his biography of Barnum A.H. Saxon cites the more believable sum of \$6,000 (304).

but also how this animal served as an overdetermined signifier for competing, and often contradictory, discourses of racial logic in the U.S.

The arrival of Toung Taloung and Light of Asia in the U.S. was widely covered by the New York papers, with stories and editorials appearing in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, *New York Times*, *New York Tribune*, and *The Sun*. Papers in Forepaugh's hometown of Philadelphia were also drawn to the white elephant war, with advertisements and stories about the two elephants being published on a regular basis during March and April of 1884.³⁰ Many of these stories were reprinted or excerpted in newspapers across the U.S. Although the white elephant war was national news in 1884, in what follows I primarily focus on the *NYT*'s coverage of this event. Because both elephants arrived in New York, reporters for the *NYT* were able to be firsthand witnesses to Barnum and Forepaugh's antics. Moreover, several well-known (and self-proclaimed) authorities on white elephants – including Frank Vincent and David Ker – were either quoted in the *NYT* or wrote for the paper themselves. In his analysis of late-nineteenth century New York newspapers, Randall S. Sumpter claims that the *NYT* was thought of as a “serious” – as opposed to “commercial” – paper, which meant it published “editorials, essays, and important facts” instead of the “sensationalism” and gossip associated with many of the

³⁰ Both Barnum and Forepaugh advertised extensively in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, while the *North American* offered coverage of the ongoing conflict that was more sympathetic to Forepaugh than the New York media.

other New York dailies.³¹ Although the *NYT* certainly treated the white elephant war with a degree of levity, its coverage, even when tongue-in-cheek, was always substantial.³²

Eight days before Barnum welcomed Toung Taloung in Jersey City, the steamer *City of Chester* arrived in New York with a white elephant on board. From the moment Light of Asia appeared in America there were doubts about its authenticity. In the two days after Light of Asia's arrival, the *NYT* published at least three articles that treated both the elephant's skin color – and the story of its acquisition from Siam – with a great deal of suspicion.³³ All of these articles note that Light of Asia's color – a uniform white evenly distributed over its entire body – did not match any existing description of a Siamese white elephant, and spend some time speculating how Forepaugh must have dyed this animal (whether by using paint or some kind of chemical process). A March 21 editorial quotes at length a “gentleman... whose travels in Asia have fitted him for expressing an opinion on the genuineness of this elephant.” This elephant

³¹ Randall S. Sumpter, “Sensation and the Century: How Four New York Dailies Covered the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *American Journalism* 18.3 (Summer 2001), 82.

³² Because the *NYT* published the most comprehensive and detailed coverage of the white elephant war, and because many of the *NYT*'s articles make reference to one another, for the sake of coherence and clarity I largely limit myself to this one paper. That said, it is important to keep in mind that the *NYT*'s coverage was only one, albeit prominent, iteration of the much broader discourse on white elephants I discussed in the first section of this essay.

³³ See “A Very Seasick Elephant,” *NYT*, 21 March 1884, 5; David Ker, “Holy or Holystoned? Something About the White Elephant from Siam,” *NYT*, 22 March 1884, 5; “White Elephants,” *NYT*, 22 March 1884, 4.

expert (possibly Vincent), explains that Light of Asia's white toes do not indicate that it is a genuine white elephant since this characteristic is "very often found in elephants of the ordinary kind, without any pretension whatever to 'white blood'."³⁴ Whiteness, in this context, cannot be evaluated solely by physical characteristics. Rather, whiteness is dictated by white blood, which – following the logic of the "one-drop" rule – can be negated by any trace of non-white ancestry. A white elephant, then, must not be judged by its appearance alone. In fact, its physical appearance – its toes, in this instance – could actually belie its true "black" identity. While a panel of New York City's white elephant experts concluded that Toung Taloung was a genuine *chang pheuak*, there was far less agreement about Forepaugh's elephant.³⁵ At least one of the experts who authenticated Toung Taloung – David Ker – made a point of writing to the *NYT* to express his doubts about Light of Asia's genuineness, while an editorial published in that paper the same day strongly implied that Forepaugh's animal had been painted white.³⁶ In the weeks following Toung Taloung's arrival in the U.S., the white elephant war between Barnum and

³⁴ "A Very Seasick Elephant," 21. I suspect that the "gentleman" quoted here is Vincent because he also describes the color of white elephants as being like "the palm of a negro's hand" (5). The fact that Vincent would use the same phrase in his *The Manhattan* article a few months later suggests that he would have been a likely source.

³⁵ An article published in the *NYT* on, suspiciously enough, April 1st reports on this white elephant accreditation panel: "All the gentleman who had seen a sacred white elephant before pronounced him genuine. A number of them wrote and signed certificates of his genuineness." See "Stamped as Genuine," *NYT*, 1 April 1884, 8.

³⁶ Ker, "Holy or Holystoned?"; "White Elephants."

Forepaugh intensified. On April 11th, the *NYT* reported that Light of Asia was definitely a hoax.³⁷ Eight days later, Barnum's retinue headed from New York to Philadelphia where Forepaugh and Light of Asia were already waiting. Barnum's star attractions were Toung Taloung, of course, and a regular elephant, named "Tip," which had been dyed white and was now called "The White Fraud." Forepaugh was far from amused with Barnum's latest stunt. He responded to Barnum's arrival in his hometown with a pamphlet – titled "Too White For Barnum?" – that claimed both Toung Taloung and The White Fraud were imposters and that Light of Asia was "*the first and only Sacred White Elephant that has ever been landed on the shores of the New World.*"³⁸ As the title of this pamphlet suggests, Forepaugh used the considerable public confusion about the color of white elephants to his advantage, calling into question Toung Taloung's authenticity because it was not as literally white as Light of Asia. Whiteness, in the white elephant war, was a malleable category that was unavoidably caught up in discourses of deception, transformation, and authenticity.

In November of 1884 Light of Asia died, prompting a few years later the following tongue-in-cheek obituary in Barnum's autobiography: "The owner of this imposition soon announced that it had suddenly died. It was simply *un-dyed!*"³⁹ While both Barnum and

³⁷ "A Whitewashed Elephant: Forepaugh's 'Light of Asia' a Fraud on the American People," *NYT*, 11 April 1884, 2.

³⁸ Adam Forepaugh, "Too White For Barnum?" (Buffalo: Press of The Courier Company, 1884), 3. A copy of this pamphlet is held as part of the McCaddon Theater Collection at Princeton University.

³⁹ Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 338.

Forepaugh would soon move on to other circus ventures, the episode of *Toung Taloung*, *Light of Asia*, and *The White Fraud* proved to be a catalyst for broader discussion of whiteness in the U.S. Public speculation about the kind of skin-dyeing technology Barnum and Forepaugh might have used to color *Light of Asia* and *The White Fraud* quickly gravitated toward discussions of how such technology might affect African Americans. A remarkable article in the *NYT* titled “An Interesting Experiment,” published the same day that Barnum displayed *The White Fraud* in Philadelphia, is worth quoting in its entirety:

Mr. Barnum’s plan of making an elephant white by artificial means in order to contrast it with the dark and genuine white elephant is an ingenious one, but it is of less interest to elephants than it is to another class of our population. The inventor of the process of bleaching elephants claims that it can be applied without the slightest injury to colored people, and that it furnishes a complete answer to Job’s famous inquiry as to the possibility of whitening an Ethiopian. The experiment now making with the elephant is watched by the entire population of Thompson-street with the utmost interest, and if it succeeds the colored man will be as rare among us as the sacred white elephant himself.

The bleaching process, as now conducted, will not make the complexion of the colored man identical with that of the white man. The cleansed Ethiopian will be of a dazzling whiteness, rivaling that of the snow. The purest blonde of Madison-avenue will appear dark by the side of the beauties of Thompson-street, and what was once the white race will suddenly become the colored race.

It will be a curious sensation for white people to find themselves treated with contempt on account of their color by the bleached colored people. All the

laws and regulations still existing which are aimed at the colored people will then apply to the Caucasian race. We shall have to pass a new Civil Rights bill to secure admission to hotels and sleeping cars, and we may even hear ourselves contemptuously described as “niggers,” should the bleached colored people condescend to adopt white methods of expression.

To avoid such an embarrassing situation it is to be hoped that the bleacher of Mr. Barnum’s elephant will find some way of accurately imitating the Caucasian complexion. In that case the ex-colored man will be distinguished from the original white man only by the quality of his hair. Probably a method of straightening Ethiopian hair and repressing the exuberance of Ethiopian lips will soon follow the grand discovery of bleaching Ethiopian skin, and in that case all distinctions between the two races will at once disappear, and the negro question will vanish from our politics, never to reappear.⁴⁰

Although the author of “An Interesting Experiment” has adopted an obviously satirical tone, it is nevertheless intriguing to note the candor with which he acknowledges that white supremacy and the “negro question” are contingent on social conventions. If Barnum’s bleaching process is able to turn African Americans the same shade of white as *The White Fraud* or *Light of Asia*, then the black-white race dichotomy will be reversed, and “what was once the white race will suddenly become the colored race.” Since the social prejudices previously directed against black people will now be applied to the “Caucasian race,” the author is implying that whiteness is an absolute social value: more whiteness is always better than any visible trace of blackness. In this way,

⁴⁰ “An Interesting Experiment,” *NYT*, 21 April 1884, 4.

“An Interesting Experiment” aligns with Cheryl I. Harris’ argument in her well-known essay “Whiteness as Property” that the American legal system “has established and protected an actual property interest in whiteness itself, which shares the critical characteristics of property and accords with the many and varied theoretical descriptions of property.”⁴¹ By presenting whiteness as valuable property in and of itself, the author allows for the possibility that this social value could be acquired by groups other than the “Caucasian race.” Although the scenario described in “An Interesting Experiment” is fanciful, it nevertheless speaks to real social anxieties about racial ambiguity in the post-bellum era.⁴² We have already seen how Vincent and Ruschenberger described the color of white elephants in terms of the complexion of biracial people. The *NYT* story builds on this analogy; in her analysis of “An Interesting Experiment,” Sarah Amato writes that it “makes...explicit that the exhibition of Toung Taloung was a forum to discuss theories of race... In post-[R]econstruction America, in the context of the debate about the political future of the union, which was bound up in race relations, the significance of bleaching an elephant was all the more resonant.”⁴³ The fact that this forum for discussing black-white race relations took the form of an elephant from Southeast Asia attests to the fact that

⁴¹ Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1724.

⁴² For similar anxieties about “losing” whiteness in a nineteenth-century U.S. context, see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), Brigitte Fielder, *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020) and Hannah Lauren Murray, *Liminal Whiteness in Early U.S. Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

⁴³ Amato, *Beastly Possessions*, 179.

nineteenth-century Asian stereotypes were in some ways constitutive of anti-black racism during the post-Reconstruction era.

Perhaps the most striking episode in the white elephant war was an advertising campaign launched by Pears' Soap in March of 1884. Although the ad was first published in a British periodical (*The Graphic*), after T'oung Taloung arrived in the U.S. it was re-printed in American periodicals like *Puck*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Frank Leslie's Sunday Magazine*.⁴⁴ The full-page ad features an elephant and its trainer, a bearded, brown-skinned man, dressed – as Amato observes – like T'oung Taloung's "native attendant" Radee.⁴⁵ The man is standing on a tall wooden crate, such that he is able to easily touch the top of the elephant's head. A bucket is resting on top of the elephant, and with his left hand the man holds a cloth that he has been using to scrub the elephant's skin, transforming it from black to white. In his right hand, extended toward the viewer, he holds a bar of soap. The text at the bottom of the ad reads, "THE REAL SECRET OF THE WHITE ELEPHANT – PEARS' SOAP. *Matchless for the Complexion*" (see Figure 1). The ad leaves open the question of whether Pears' Soap has revealed the "real" white elephant underneath a layer of black dirt or has simply whitewashed a regular elephant to make it appear white, thereby replicating the debate about the white elephant that had played out in London's newspapers, and anticipating the back-and-forth of Barnum and Forepaugh's white elephant war in April of 1884. The Pears' Soap ad strongly implies, in Amato's words, "that human whiteness

⁴⁴ See, for example, *Puck*, 30 April 1884, 141 and *Frank Leslie's Sunday Magazine* 16.1 (July 1884), 100.

⁴⁵ Amato, *Beastly Possessions*, 168.

is an ephemeral condition that can be regenerated by the commodity.”⁴⁶ For Karl Marx, the fetishized commodity has a secret, namely that its exchange value is a reflection of human labor rather than one of its inherent properties.⁴⁷ The white elephant also has a secret, an open secret, acknowledged and satirized by both Pears’ Soap and the author of “An Interesting Experiment”: namely, that whiteness is a social construct, the limits of which must be carefully circumscribed and regulated in order to maintain the power of white supremacy. If the privileges of whiteness can be extended to anyone (African Americans; Asians) or anything (an elephant), then it would lose its value for the Anglo American elite.

Texts like “An Interesting Experiment” and “The Real Secret of the White Elephant” demonstrate significant cultural anxieties about the malleability of whiteness in a way that resonates with both African American and Asian racialization. In both texts, an animal, the white elephant proves to be an ideal figure for capturing white American anxieties about both post-Reconstruction black-white relations and ambivalent feelings about the United States’ emergence as a transpacific power. Recent animal studies scholarship has examined the relationship between racial form and representations of animals in American visual culture. Mel Y. Chen, for example, argues that in the late-nineteenth century U.S., “animality played a visibly mediating role within the unstable landscape of racialization,” drawing on comparative racial analysis to

⁴⁶ Amato, *Beastly Possessions*, 171.

⁴⁷ See Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret” in *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 163-177.

interpret the simianization of both African Americans and Asians in popular visual culture.⁴⁸ By reading the white elephant through the lens of comparative racialization, we can see how this figure emerged as a potent metaphor at the intersection of two discrete racial types (African American and Asian) *and* a well-established discourse about Siamese *chang pheuak* that maintained these creatures were fraudulent, decadent, and burdensome. If the visual texts Chen examines imply that African Americans and Asians are both “ape-like,” then texts like “An Interesting Experiment” and “The Real Secret of the White Elephant” suggest that these racial groups also have a shared “white elephant-like” connection, which supplements the processes of racialization with an archive of negative stereotypes about these animals. Although white elephants were well-known to Americans before the white elephant war, this event proved to be the ideal catalyst for reifying social anxieties about whiteness, African Americans, and the U.S.’s transpacific encounters in this explicitly racialized animal figure. Never before had the whiteness of the white elephant been so controversial.

Just as “An Interesting Experiment” drew on a racialized Siamese elephant to adumbrate white anxieties about African Americans, so too did “The Real Secret of the White Elephant” inform a later Pears’ Soap ad that transferred the relationship between soap and whiteness from a Siamese to a black figure. First published in *The Graphic* on December 25th, 1884, this well-known ad depicts a white child bathing a black child in a small tub (see Figure 2). Like “The

⁴⁸ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 107. For an analysis of animals and biopolitics in American literature, see Colleen Glenney Boggs, *Animalia Americana: Animal Representations and Biopolitical Subjectivity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

Real Secret of the White Elephant” this ad was also reprinted in the U.S. In the first panel, the black boy is sitting in the tub while the white boy stands over him holding a bar of soap (which, like the bar of soap that Radee is holding in “The Real Secret of the White Elephant,” is presented toward the viewer of the ad). In the second panel, the black boy is seated outside the tub, while the white boy is holding a mirror in front of the black boy’s face. Although the black boy’s head is still black, the rest of his body has been turned white, thereby creating a visual parallel between this figure and the white elephant in the earlier ad. The surprised look on the black boy’s face suggests that he is pleased with this transformation, although it is significant that he has not been completely whitewashed – while the ad suggests that whiteness is malleable, it stops short of suggesting that Pears’ Soap, or anything else for that matter, can completely eradicate racial difference and the established racial hierarchy. Amato, Nadine Attewell, Anne McClintock, and Anandi Ramamurthy have analyzed this “whitewashing ad” in the context of British imperialism, especially in light of the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the Scramble for Africa.⁴⁹ Both Amato and Attewell have noted that this ad was obviously influenced by “The Real Secret of the White Elephant.”⁵⁰ There is a complicated transpacific and transatlantic

⁴⁹ See Amato, *Beastly Possessions*; Nadine Attewell, *Better Britons: Reproduction, Nation, and the Afterlife of Empire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 97-99; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 207-231; and Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (New York and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 24-62.

⁵⁰ See Amato, *Beastly Possessions*, 171, and Attewell, *Better Britons*, 98.

genealogy at play in these advertisements. A British ad, “The Real Secret of the White Elephant,” was republished in the U.S. and contributed to the convoluted racial logic of the white elephant war, which influenced in turn texts like “An Interesting Experiment” that associated white elephants with whitewashing African Americans. This trope of racial whitewashing was then taken up by the second Pears’ Soap ad in order to capitalize on the British public’s interest in Africa. Reprinting this second advertisement in the U.S. clearly spoke to American anxieties about racial ambiguity in the post-Reconstruction era. To the extent that this ad takes up “Job’s famous inquiry as to the possibility of whitening an Ethiopian,” it reflects the ideas voiced in “An Interesting Experiment,” and several other texts that I have discussed, that connect the controversy surrounding Toung Taloung with African American racialization. Like “An Interesting Experiment,” the whitewashing ad is surprisingly candid about the fact that whiteness is a social construction. However, the humorous tone of both “An Interesting Experiment” and the ad, and the limited effectiveness of Pears’ Soap in whitewashing the black boy, suggest that despite the apparent malleability of whiteness, it is nevertheless a closely circumscribed social privilege that cannot be extended to African Americans who happen to look white, an observation that, in the context of a soap ad, is clearly indebted to “The Real Secret of the White Elephant” and the white elephant war.

By reading this image in the context of this “war,” and through the lens of Afro-Asian comparative racialization, we can see how it defies common assumptions about “the foundational status of antiblackness in conceptualizations of racism.”⁵¹ The process whereby Asian racialization is understood only through an analogy to a “temporal[ly] and conceptual[ly]

⁵¹ Lye, “The Afro-Asian Analogy,” 1733.

prior” antiblackness is undone in this instance, by showing how a racialized Siamese figure, the white elephant, was constitutive of a well-known cultural text that is often cited as an example of late-nineteenth century anti-black racism. My point is not to reverse the terms of the Afro-Asian analogy by suggesting that Asian, rather than African American, racialization should be afforded a kind of “foundational status.” Rather, I would like to suggest that one of the advantages of a comparative racial analysis is that it can help us think about the historical reification and deployment of racial forms without making constant recourse to questions of foundation or priority. For example, although the white elephant may appear at first glance to be an impenetrable nexus of cultural connotations and contradictions, comparative racial analysis reveals it to be a racialized figure that emerged at the intersection of African American and Asian racializations, during specific historical instances wherein both white anxieties about African American racial crossing *and* ambivalence toward the U.S.’s growing involvement in Asia and the Pacific were viewed as threats to the hegemony of Anglo American white supremacy.

How did reprinting these two Pears’ Soap advertisements in the U.S. enable the colonial subtext of the ads to intersect with American anxieties about U.S. imperialism in the Pacific? The U.S., which saw itself as founded on resistance to British imperialism, now found that its own black-white race dynamic had influenced a text that endorsed the expansion of the British Empire and that, in turn, spoke to American readers concerned about their own nation’s nascent empire. By the turn of the century and the Philippine-American War the U.S.’s transpacific empire was a reality. I have already shown that one way Americans debated the war in the Philippines was by comparing the islands to a white elephant. This conflict was also represented in advertisements, including an 1899 Pears’ Soap ad that owes a debt to the white elephant war, “The Real Secret of the White Elephant,” and the whitewashing ad of 1884. The ad features

Admiral George Dewey, who had secured the Philippines for the U.S. by defeating the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in 1898, standing in front of a mirror and washing his hands on board a battleship⁵² (see Figure 3). Surrounding the portrait of Dewey there are smaller images of boats, a load of Pears' Soap cargo, and a white man offering a bar of soap to a kneeling dark-skinned native. The text of the ad reads, "The first step toward lightening The White Man's Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears' Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while among the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place – it is the ideal toilet soap." While the phrase "White Man's Burden" is obviously an allusion to Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name, for American readers this aspect of the ad would also resonate with the broader discourse on white elephants, racialization, and transpacific imperialism. Many of the tropes of "The Real Secret of the White Elephant" and the whitewashing ad are reproduced here, including a figure offering soap to a racialized other, and wordplay that associates whiteness with cleanliness and civilization and blackness with dirt and ignorance, but in this instance these tropes are grafted onto the project of American imperial expansion. By drawing on the two Pears' Soap ads of 1884, and popular newspaper accounts that described the Philippines as a white elephant, the Admiral Dewey advertisement tacitly extend the racial logic of the white elephant war into the Philippine-American conflict and the realities of American empire.

⁵² For an analysis of Dewey in U.S. visual culture, including the Pears' Soap ad, see David Brody, *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism & Imperialism in the Philippines* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 113-139.

If, on a figurative level, a white elephant is a possession that, to cite Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*, “comes with a burden attached,”⁵³ then when Toung Taloung stepped off the *Lydian Monarch* it was accompanied by a host of stereotypes and significations that spoke to anxieties that lay at the heart of American culture. When considered alongside Light of Asia, The White Fraud, and the white elephant war, the arrival of Toung Taloung in the U.S. was not simply another episode in Barnum’s long history of passing off frauds on the American public. Rather, it marked a unique historical juncture where anxieties about African Americans, Asians, and the future of American imperialism were reified in a figure, the white elephant, which had long been viewed as an apt metaphor for waste and deception. If 1884 was the *annus mirabilis* for white elephants in the U.S., this was not a simple historical accident, but the result of decades-long processes of Asian and African American racialization, a process that would continue into the 1890s, influencing popular representations of the Philippine-American War. The spectacle of the white elephant war was a signal event in the history of American racialization, and I believe that comparative racial analysis, and reading the white elephant as an explicitly racialized figure, can provide us with a compelling explanation for why the American public was so fascinated with, and infuriated by, the *chang pheuak* that Barnum had brought across the Atlantic.*

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⁵³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990), 41.

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Figure 1: Pears' Soap advertisement, "The Real Secret of the White Elephant,"

The Graphic, 8 March 1884

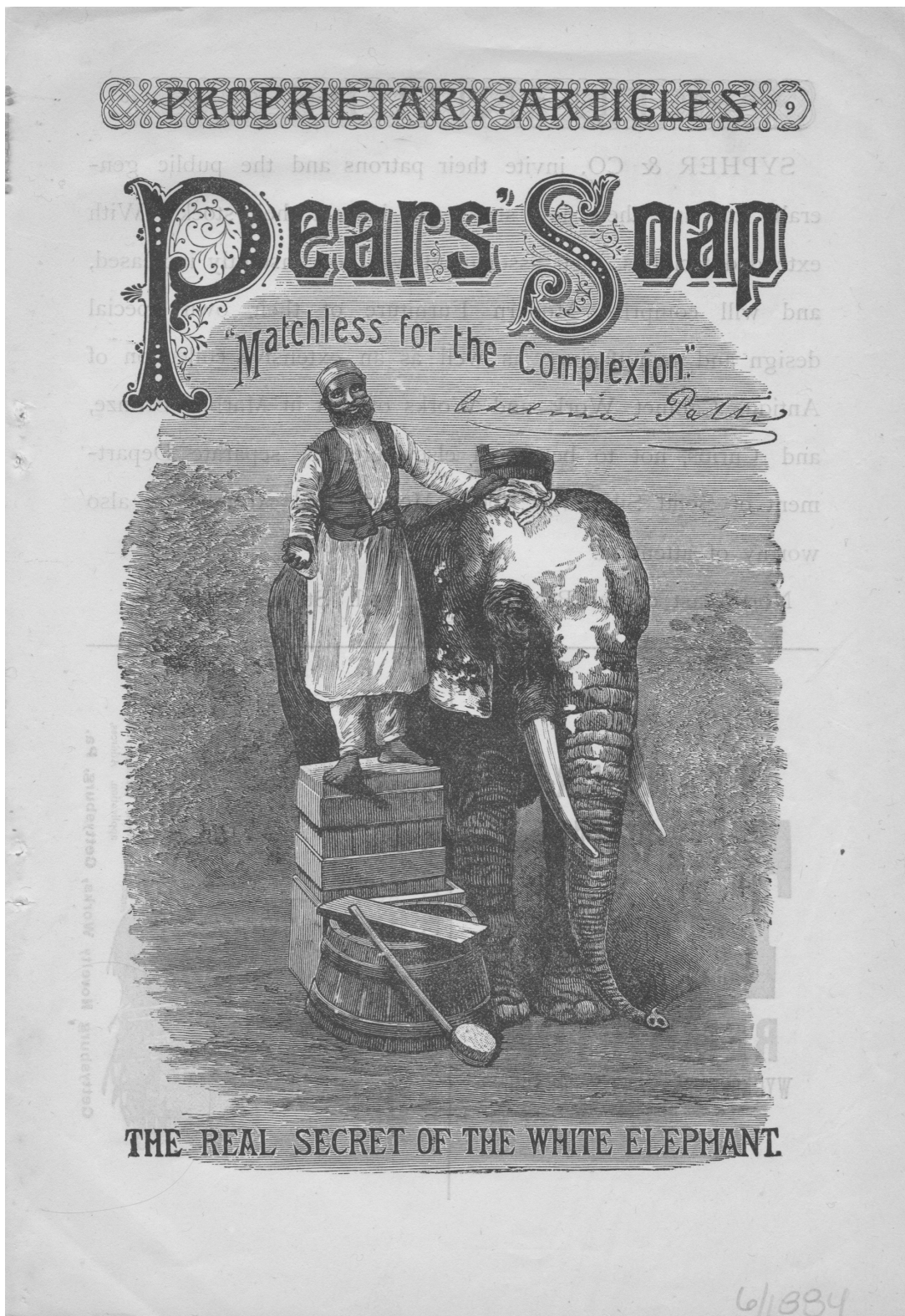


Figure 2: Pears' Soap advertisement, *The Graphic*, 25 December 1884

FOR GENTLEMEN

FOR LADIES

Matchless for the Complexion

"For the Hands and Complexion I prefer it to any other."
Zellie Langley

PEARS' SOAP.

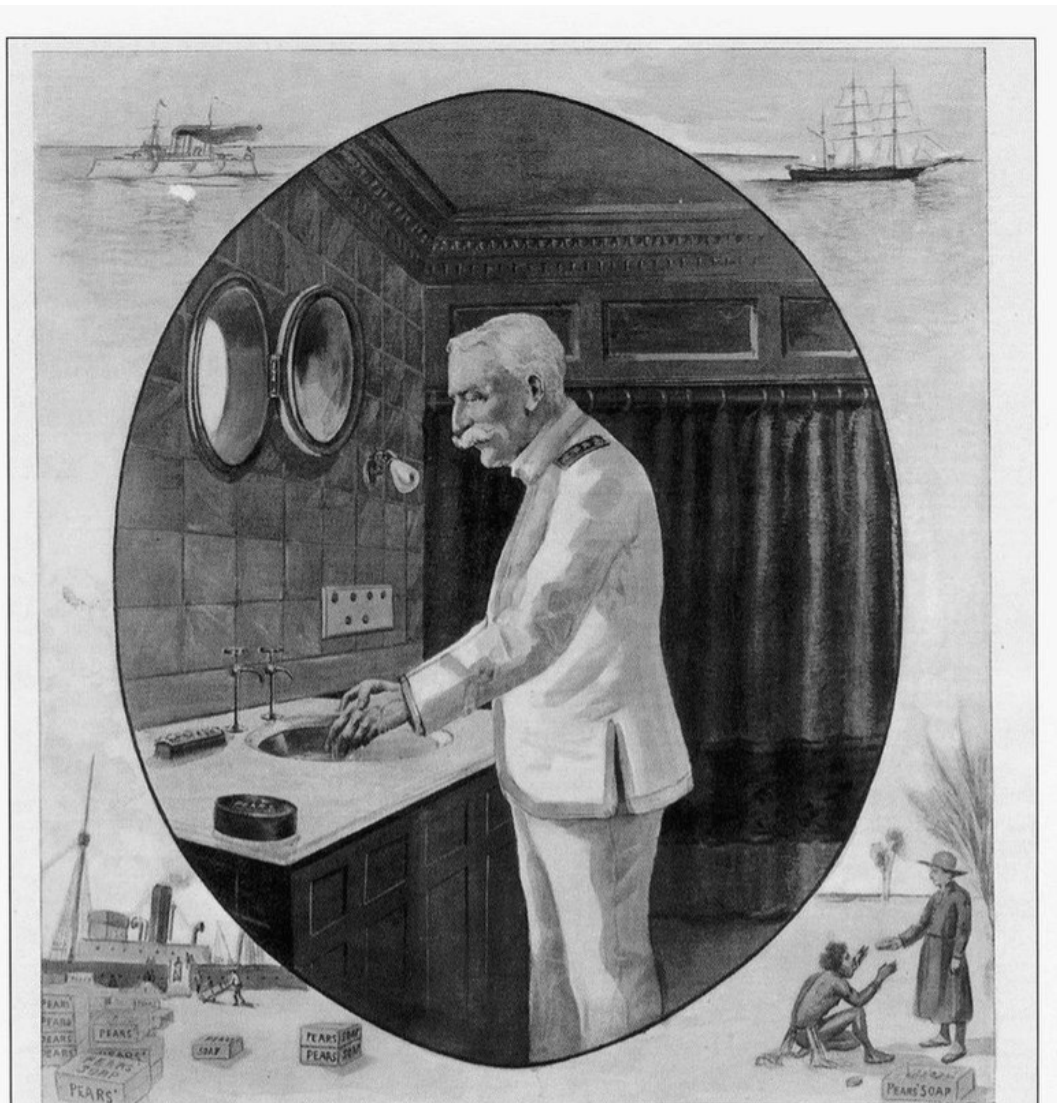
"I have found it Matchless for the Hands and Complexion."
Editha Patten

FOR CHILDREN

FOR BABIES

HIDDLE & COLEMAN LONDON S E

Figure 3: Pears' Soap advertisement, *McClure's Magazine*, October 1899



The first step towards lightening

The White Man's Burden

is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.

Pears' Soap

is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place—it is the ideal toilet soap.