

The Stain of Whiteness: Ivory's Journey from "Darkest Africa" to the Pianos of Victorian American Parlors

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The Social Life of Things (1986), *The Traffic in Things* (1995), and *The Empire of Things* (2001) explore the lives of objects as they circulate globally. Inspired by this work, this paper considers the materiality of ivory, embedded in the piano. For nineteenth-century Westerners, ivory embodied whiteness, purity, and opulence (literary references frequently connect fair skin and ivory at the keyboard). Ivory's meaning was tied to colonialism—"white gold" (ivory) was extracted from the "Dark Continent" on the backs of "black gold" (slaves). I trace the path of ivory from Africa to America in the later nineteenth century and juxtapose two (imagined) geographies: "Darkest Africa" and Union Square, New York.

The popular writings of white explorers, notably David Livingstone, inspired the West's imagined Africa. Livingstone's descriptions of the conjoined ivory and slave trades (he famously stated "the ivory and slave trades are one") in East and Central Africa caught the imagination of Western readers and inspired iconic representations ("soft" ivory extracted from this area made the ideal piano key: smooth, pliant, bleachable). Eliminating the internal African slave trade was a common rationalization for the "civilizing" mission that would devolve into Europe's "Scramble for Africa" (coterminous with the dramatic increase in the piano's popularity). Indeed, in the 1870s, Belgium's King Leopold gained political support for his Congo project by promising to drive out the "Arabs" who controlled the ivory and slave trades in the Central Lakes region.

In 1860s and 70s New York, the "upper ten" consumed much of their culture in Union Square, the musical and piano-making center of the nation. Across the street from the Union Square's most prestigious music venues—the Academy of Music and Steinway Hall—stood Grote's ivory store, whose logo featured a partially clothed African woman holding a tusk. Advertising literature for area piano manufacturers, too, leveraged racial stereotypes. I argue that ivory's racial charge contributed to the piano's allure, that whiteness was constructed at the piano bench along with gender and class, and that Union Square's geography reveals how "cultivated music" was situated in relation to colonialism

. In a field behind Deep River's historical society stands a small glass building shaped like a triangle. It looks like a greenhouse, but there is a U.S. patent for it filed by a local man named Ulysses Pratt. This "bleach house," as it was called, was designed not to grow plants but to expose to sunlight, for a period of 30 sunny days, ivory piano keys cut from the tusks of African elephants.