

Sarah Lawrence College

DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence

---

Women's History Theses

Women's History Graduate Program

---

5-2020

## For a Dark-Skinned Girl: A Retrospective Analysis on The History Of Colorism in America From 1950 to 1990

Monet N. Dowrich  
*Sarah Lawrence College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/womenshistory\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/womenshistory_etd)



Part of the [Women's History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dowrich, Monet N., "For a Dark-Skinned Girl: A Retrospective Analysis on The History Of Colorism in America From 1950 to 1990" (2020). *Women's History Theses*. 48.  
[https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/womenshistory\\_etd/48](https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/womenshistory_etd/48)

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Women's History Graduate Program at DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's History Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. For more information, please contact [alester@sarahlawrence.edu](mailto:alester@sarahlawrence.edu).

FOR A DARK-SKINNED GIRL:  
A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS ON THE HISTORY OF COLORISM IN AMERICA FROM  
1950 TO 1990

I believe that all men, black, brown, and white, are brothers.”  
— **W.E.B. DuBois**

Monet N. Dowrich

Master of Arts in Women’s History

---

Submitted in partial completion  
of the Master of Arts in Women’s History at  
Sarah Lawrence College  
May 2020



## **ABSTRACT**

For this study, I explored the trajectory of colorism from 1950 to 1990 through literature, film, poetry, and scholarly sources. I tracked the changes in the discussion and demonstrated repositioning of the narrative after the Black Power Movement from bias solely against darker skinned black women to include discrimination against lighter skinned black women. My findings suggest that colorism has been viewed predominantly as a dark-skinned women's issue. Efforts to design an individualized approach towards color bias against lighter skinned black women and darker skinned black women, would be instrumental in capturing the challenges faced and reducing the separation associated with skin tone bias.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This tumultuous and wonderful journey required the help of several people to execute successfully. It truly does take a village. I thought I was crazy to return to school after fifteen years, but each of you have played a significant role in the completion of my Master of Arts degree in Women's History and made it possible. Juggling work, school, and a household with two young children is not easy, but it can be done. I would like to acknowledge some of who helped make this process seamless.

I am tremendously grateful to my mom for her dedication to my family and ensuring that the moving parts were well oiled and fully functioning. It is a blessing to know that my children are always safe with you.

Thank you to my husband, Talbert, for rearranging his work schedule countless evenings to facilitate my classes. I appreciate you always having dinner ready for me when I returned home from school late at night.

Thank you to my heartbeats, Amalia and Isaiah. Not having mom around 24/7 was a learning curve for you and me. We both had to adjust. On those days when I had to lock my door and focus on an assignment, it hurt me just as much as it hurt you to shut you out. We have both grown through this process, and I hope one day you will understand that completing this program was just as much for you as it was for me.

When you have two amazing women to thank, I suppose it is best to go in alphabetical order... Lyde Cullen Sizer, thank you seems so insufficient. You were counselor as much as a professor. You guided and gently corrected me when needed, and for that, I am eternally grateful. You have become more of a friend and mentor. I look forward to growing as a scholar with all that I have learned through you.

Mary Dillard, one of the things that I find really special about you is your dedication to remembering my purpose. Your tailored responses made me feel fully supported- as though you had a stake in my success. Whenever you remind me of what I said in my personal essay or on that rainy December afternoon in 2016 when we met, I know that I made the right choice. Our relationship has been one of relating, respect, and understanding. For that, I am thankful.

Rachelle Rumph, you are a true gem. I appreciate your gentle wisdom and for taking the time to offer feedback on my thesis in the eleventh hour.

Thank you to my fellow thesis seminar cohort, Kathryn Brantley, Emilyn Kowaleski, Hannah McCandless, Monika Mitchell, Marian Phillips, I appreciate your camaraderie and meaningful feedback. You adopted me, although we did not start out together (with the exception of Kathryn). Thank you for your keen eye and discerning ear. Completing this thesis in the middle of a pandemic was brutal, but we did it. We are war buddies, and forever connected. I look forward to being able to say, “I knew her when...”

Emilyn Kowaleski and Monika Mitchell, I called you in crisis. I emailed you in meltdown. I texted you whenever I needed to vent or recharge. I appreciate our friendship and sisterhood.

These acknowledgements would be incomplete without recognizing the support of my dear friends who checked in to make sure that I was ok, sent articles on my thesis topic, or encouraged me along the way-**thank you**. I appreciate your genuine interest in my success.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3-4
LIST OF FIGURES.....	8-9
Introduction: .....	9-26
Chapter 1 In the Beginning .....	27-44
Chapter 2 In the Middle.....	45-67
Chapter 3 I SEE You .....	68-82
Discussion and Conclusion:.....	83-97
Bibliography .....	98-103

“

## **DEDICATION**

For my grandmother, Margarite Celestine...

Your perceived limitations have been the wind beneath my wings.

For Amalia and Isaiah,

If Could... I would change the world...just for you...

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Spanish Creole Girls in 1930s..... (Unknown)	33
1.2 French Creole Woman in 1930..... (Unknown)	33
1.3. French Creole Family in 1930..... (Unknown)	33
2.1 Astra Skin Bleaching Ad in 1964..... (Ebony)	59
2.2 Nadinoa Skin Bleaching Ad in 1953..... (Ebony)	59
2.3 Nadinola African Soap Ad, 1968..... (Ebony)	61
2.4 NYRW Protesting the Miss America Pageant..... (Bettmann Archive / Getty Images)	63
3.1 May 1959 Ebony Magazine Cover ..... (Ebony)	69
3.2 February 1951 Ebony Magazine Cover..... (Ebony)	69
3.3 October 1951 Ebony Magazine Cover..... (Ebony)	69
3.4 February 1951 Ebony Magazine Cover..... (Ebony)	70
3.5 July 1950 Ebony Magazine Cover..... (Ebony)	70
3.6 February 1972 Ebony Magazine Cover..... (Ebony)	70
3.7 November 1956 Ebony Magazine Cover..... (Ebony)	71

3.8 to 3.13 Jet Magazine Covers 1951.....	71
(Jet)	
3.14 to 3.21 Jet Beauty of the Week 1950 to 1989.....	74
(Jet)	
3.22 May 1970 Essence Magazine Cover.....	75
(Essence)	
3.23 June 1970 Essence Magazine Cover.....	75
(Essence)	
3.24 to 3.31 Essence Magazines 1970 to 1979.....	76
(Essence)	
3.33 April 1987 Essence Magazine Cover.....	77
(Essence)	
3.34 September 1984 Essence Magazine Cover.....	77
(Essence)	
3.35 June 1988 Essence Magazine Cover.....	77
(Essence)	

## Introduction

“Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that could hold a number-two pencil.”

Maya Angelou  
*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*<sup>1</sup>

In early 2020, an Instagram live video circulated of a female stylist combing the hair of Ariyonna, a four-year-old black girl who randomly and impulsively said, “I am so ugly.” The woman immediately addressed the comment by affirming the girl’s beauty and encouraging her. This video went viral, and public figures including, Former First Lady Michelle Obama, Jada Pinkett Smith, Viola Davis, and Laverne Cox commented on social media. It was Davis, however, who addressed the stain of colorism on the black community without directly using the terminology. She said, “We are fighting hundreds of years of brutal conditioning of being considered less than. It is sprinkled in our language, behavior, laws, music, and trickles down to our youth.”<sup>2</sup> Davis described the residual effects of slavery on generations of black women, and the impact skin color prejudice has on girls of color today.

Ariyonna was dark-skinned with naturally kinky hair. At the tender age of four years old, she struggled with color aesthetics and the notion of beauty. The incongruity between dark skin and beauty, however, is not new. Although there has been more widespread representation in

---

<sup>1</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (United States: Random House Publishing Group, 2010), 4

<sup>2</sup> Lindsay Lowe, “Hairdresser comforts little girl who calls herself ugly in viral video,” *Today on the Web*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.today.com/style/hairdresser-comforts-little-girl-who-calls-herself-ugly-viral-video-t175703> (March 11, 2020)



recent years, the roots of skin color prejudice are so deep that pain and insecurity continue to manifest throughout people of color.

In 1969, Maya Angelou shared a similar experience when she was a little girl, having her hair combed by her mother. Angelou, too, struggled in a world that stifled her blackness where she so deeply wanted to be recognized in a meaningful way. Whiteness was the epitome of beauty, and any deviation from that normative was othered. Angelou wanted and needed to be beautiful. She was beautiful. Acceptance of beauty in her mind, however, meant denying an identity etched within her soul. It meant abandoning all notions of color and the characteristics that were associated with her blackness. As a result, she did what any determined and well-meaning child would do. She conjured up a wicked stepmother who forbade her from shedding her dark skin and revealing her true beauty for the whole world to see. She dreamed of the day when her whiteness would be displayed, and everyone would behold how beautiful she truly was. In her mind, whiteness and beauty were synonymous.

Since the 1600s, the ripples of colorism have reverberated throughout societies of color, separating families and friendships across numerous brown communities. Unfortunately, the stain of colorism is still a sensitive topic. Scholars have researched color prejudice's adverse effects and artists have applied creative ways to approach the taboo topic. Despite the progress black people have made towards recovery of self-determination and self-esteem, black women still suffer tremendously.

Throughout this thesis, I will identify the root causes of color discrimination and the methods used to perpetuate skin tone bias as a value system from 1950 to 1990. I will discuss the ways in which filmmakers, writers, and scholars have been successful in creating work that asks their audience to confront the profundity and problematic qualities of skin tone prejudice. I will

explore whether scholars are engaged in a comprehensive discussion of colorism and how the conversation regarding internalized color prejudices has evolved over the four main decades identified by my thesis.

## **Contextualization**

Alice Walker defined the term colorism in her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. She describes it as, “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.”<sup>3</sup> Although this definition does not suggest that colorism is exclusively discrimination against dark skin, it is clear from Walker's subsequent writing that the pain she identifies with is being darker skinned.<sup>4</sup> Walker questioned the need to identify with “Blackness” in what might be considered extreme terms when she noted, “What bothers me is my statement that I myself, halfway between light and dark-a definite brown-must align myself with black black women, that not to do so is to spit in our black mother's face.”<sup>5</sup> Although she seemed to resent the corralling of black women into one, she was acutely aware of the pressure to do so as a result of our colorist society.

Walker recognized that separation from or hatred towards who she refers to as “black black”<sup>6</sup> women, is a form of self-loathing. She makes distinctions between “high-yellow”<sup>7</sup> blacks and “black black” blacks, exposing the differences in treatment based entirely on their skin tone. Her personal account, having birthed a daughter with a white man, offers Walker a voyeuristic perspective into the way the world responds to black women based on their skin color. She says,

---

<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Hartcourt Brace Janovich, 1983), 290

<sup>4</sup> Walker's description of her own pain is a good example of how subjective the sting of colorism can be, because it can be argued that she is in fact not dark-skinned.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Hartcourt Brace Janovich, 1983), 290

<sup>6</sup> In keeping with Walker's reference, I will use the term “black black” women throughout this thesis to capture darker skinned black women who are not mixed with any other racial blood.

<sup>7</sup> High-yellow blacks are very light skinned. As an example, anyone who could pass for white would be considered high-yellow.

“Ironically, much of what I’ve learned about color I’ve learned because I have a mixed-race child. Because she is lighter skinned, straighter haired than I, her life-in this racist, colorist society- is infinitely easier.”<sup>8</sup>

My interest in colorism was influenced by my Barbadian grandmother, whose perspectives on color politics inspired me to pursue a greater understanding of the history within various black communities. She often told stories of her small town in Saint Peter, Barbados, where men and women would say that she was “beautiful for a dark-skinned girl.” I never understood the need for the qualification. In my view, she was simply beautiful. As I explored further, I discovered that during the 1930s and 1940s when she was growing up, dark skin and beauty were seldom used in the same sentence. She held her exception of beauty near to her heart and, as her granddaughter who loved her dearly, her pride became mine.

Marita Golden, novelist and professor, quite vividly recalled her experiences with colorism. She spoke of the light-skinned elite as though they were in a distant land. In reality, though, they were all around her. Even so, achieving their status, was improbable. She mentioned having very little interaction with them, but their codes and beliefs were well-known in the black community in which she was raised. She wrote, “Colorism existed like a bitter, unalterable pollutant in the atmosphere of the black community, something of which we were all aware and yet tried to ignore.”<sup>9</sup>

Golden described her time spent as a young girl growing up in a middle-class neighborhood in Washington, D.C. as tinged with pain. Her first blush with color bias materialized at home with her mother, who urged her “Come on in the house-it’s too hot to be playing out here. I’ve told you don’t play in the sun. You’re going to have to get a light-skinned

---

<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Hartcourt Brace Janovich, 1983), 291

<sup>9</sup> Marita Golden, *Don’t Play in the Sun: One Woman’s Journey through the Color Complex* (New York: Anchor, 2005), 43

husband for the sake of your children as it is.”<sup>10</sup> Golden’s experience is not unique in that many black women’s first encounter with colorism is often within the family. Some relatives discourage children from marrying too dark and insist that they “lighten the color line.”<sup>11</sup> In *The Feast of All Saints*, novelist Anne Rice wrote,

... And over and over, from the little crowd about the bassinet came those shrill and sprightly observations. While examining a newborn baby, they exclaimed “Why that child has got his father’s nose and mouth, and good hair!” Course Anna Bella’s got good hair, just look at the pretty child!” And what if it had gone the other way, Anna Bella thought. It seemed it was all that concerned them, that mixture of the white and black, could this child perhaps pass?”<sup>12</sup>

The pressure from the family to produce a socially acceptable baby was tangible.<sup>13</sup> In this quote, Rice captured the concerns of many communities during the late 1800s. Having straight hair, angular features and light skin seemed more important than the health of the baby. The complicated history of how this mindset was created takes us back to a world before the ideas concerning race emerged.

### **Introducing Racist Theory and Slavery**

The term “slave” derived from the ethnic word “Slavs” used to describe Eastern European captives sold in Western Europe. By the mid-1400s Slavic communities, built forts against slave raiders, causing the supply of Slavs in Western Europe to plunge at around the same time slave trading from Africa to Europe increased. In 1452, Gomes Eanes de Zurara was commissioned by King Alfonso V — the nephew of Prince Henry of Portugal — to write a history of the life of slave trading. In 1453, Zurara published *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, the first European book on Africans during that era. Zurara’s work was later

---

<sup>10</sup> iBid, 4

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 97

<sup>12</sup> Anne Rice. *The Feast of All Saints* (UK: Cornerstone, 2001), 486

<sup>13</sup> A socially acceptable African American baby was one that had light skin, Eurocentric features, and straight or curly hair.

referred to as “the inaugural defense of African slave-trading.” *The Chronicle* began with recorded histories of anti-black ideas, immortalizing the concepts of Prince Henry’s racist policies concerning African slave-trading. In *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Ibram Kendi wrote, “The Portuguese made history as the first Europeans to sail the Atlantic beyond the Western Sahara’s Cape Bojador, to bring enslaved Africans back to Europe.” Zurara reported that, “while there were some Africans who were like mulattoes,<sup>14</sup> there were others who were as black, and so ugly that they almost appeared to be visitors from Hell.”<sup>15</sup> This bolstered one brewing enslavement theory which used the Bible as a buttress. Some theorists speculated that blacks were the children of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were singled out to be black as a result of Noah’s curse. The curse allegedly produced Ham’s color and the slavery God inflicted upon his descendants.<sup>16</sup> This assumption— originated by Persian scholar Tabari (838-923) — can be traced to Islamic and Hebrew sources. They believed that God permanently cursed ugly Blackness and slavery into the very nature of African people. Many enslavers, however, disregarded the curse theory because of the large numbers of non-black descendants that were previously enslaved. Medieval curse theorists, however, laid the foundation for separatist notions of black genetic inferiority. They were not completely in agreement with these theoretical Biblical notions and the curse of Ham was utilized as a tool to

---

<sup>14</sup> Mulatto or Mulatta, is considered a biracial person of African and Caucasian mixture. Mulatto refers to a man and Mulatta refers to a woman, although Mulatto can apply to either.

<sup>15</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 22-25

<sup>16</sup> The Biblical story of Noah and his son, Ham, can be found in Genesis 9:18-29. Noah is found drunk and unclothed by his son, Ham. Instead of covering his father, he shares the account with his brothers, Shem and Japheth, who located a garment, approached Noah backwards to avoid viewing his naked body, and covered him. When Noah awakened from his drunken slumber and found out about Ham’s involvement, he cursed him and his son, Canaan, and his descendants. He said, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will be to his brothers. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend Japheth’s territory; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.”

empower racist theories and ideas.<sup>17</sup>

The rebuttal to the “curse theory” was the “climate theory,” which focused on the positioning of the African countries in relation to the equator. Scientists believed that the closer one was to the sun, the darker they would be. Climate theory, however, fell apart when George Best, an English travel writer, saw on an Arctic voyage in 1577 that the Inuit people in northeastern Canada were darker than the people living in the hotter south.<sup>18</sup>

### **Coming to America**

In 1607, three ships arrived in Chesapeake Bay, stopping in Jamestown, Virginia. The Europeans built forts and planted crops but needed women and cheap labor to be successful. It was twelve years before European women walked the new land. Until then, Native American women were preferred as mates. They were either seduced or raped, resulting in an entire generation of mixed-race Indians within a short period after. In *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans*, Ronald Hall, Kathy Russell, and Midge Wilson, write “What might have been unthinkable in Europe and Africa was an everyday occurrence in this newfound wilderness.”<sup>19</sup> Racial mixing frequently occurred, and as a result, many skin tones and features ensued. This color wheel included light-skinned and blue-eyed Indians and helped construct a new social hierarchy which eventually gave lighter-skinned people economic and social advantages.

Indigenous people grew resentful of European colonists’ attempts to conquer them. Since Native Americans were more familiar with the environment, they were able to better resist

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 21

<sup>18</sup> *i*Bid, 31

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 9-10

enslavement. For this reason, the English and other colonial settlers recognized that they needed another labor source in their colonies.<sup>20</sup> The solution to the labor source shortage was found by the Dutch traders who brought slaves from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Africans were enslaved there since the 1500s and worked on sugar plantations. Ideas regarding slavery were undergirded by the racist theories of Gomes Eanes de Zurara<sup>21</sup> and the Puritans,<sup>22</sup> whose interpretation of Biblical Christianity was at the helm of their beliefs and perpetuated by Cotton Mather.<sup>23</sup>

As early as 1662, anti-miscegenation<sup>24</sup> statutes began to appear throughout the colonies. These statutory enactments, however, neither eliminated voluntary sexual relations between whites and blacks, nor thwarted the sexual aggression of white slave owners towards their black female slaves. As the offspring of these unions proliferated, colonists soon faced a pressing question: “Were these children black and therefore slaves, or white and presumably free?” The origins of colorism are inextricably linked to the way in which colonial legislatures responded to the question because the most distinguishing feature of mulattoes was their skin tone.<sup>25</sup> The social status of these biracial children, however, was determined by their mother. Since most of

---

<sup>20</sup> iBid, 12

<sup>21</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 28

<sup>22</sup> The Puritan’s involvement in black slavery in the early 1600s was economic and an answer to the labor force. The dichotomy in approach to black slavery permitted the Puritans to view the slaves as an “economic unit and an element of the divine plan.” As black slaves became greater in number, the Puritans’ perspective shifted and they became more regulatory, stripping the black slave of personal and civil rights. In the *Body of Liberties*, a law instituted to maintain order between them and the slaves was implemented to gradually reduce the status of the slave. Peter W. Mackinlay, *The New England Puritan Attitude Toward Black Slavery*

<sup>23</sup> Cotton Mather was a descendant of Richard Cotton and John Cotton, Puritans who inherited their thinking from old racist ideas that African slavery was natural, normal, and holy. He was played a pivotal role in continuing the messages of slavery.

<sup>24</sup> Anti-miscegenation laws are statutes that prohibit the mixture of races.

<sup>25</sup> Trina Jones, *Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color* *Duke Law Journal* 49, no.6 (April 2000) 1487-1557. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1373052>

these unions were the result of sexual relations between masters and their slaves, the children were born into slavery. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. noted,

The reactions of white fathers to their black progeny were varied. Some had no feeling for them at all and sold them when the opportunity presented itself, just as they would sell any other slave. Not infrequently they were encouraged to do this by their wives, who resented the presence of slave children who had been fathered by their husbands.<sup>26</sup>

The mistress of the house was positioned to serve as an asset or a hindrance to the house servant. Some would take the young woman under her wing and teach her useful trades. Others used their authority to punish the house slave who she knew was in no position to refuse her husband. She imposed at times, some of the most sadistic behavior in retaliation for her husband's affairs.<sup>27</sup> It would appear that the mistress' inability to take her anger out on her husband resulted in the abuse of another victim.

In the deep south, below North Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi, many plantation owners fathered children with their black slaves.<sup>28</sup> This led to a stark contrast in the predominant color composition of blacks. Although there were deviations from typical dark skin and tightly coiled hair, these unwanted and often illegal unions resulted in significant numbers of enslaved black children with lighter skin, angular features, and straight or curly hair. State legislators — who often fathered children with slaves — were more lenient towards mulattoes, wanting their children to be free and maintain some level of respect in society.<sup>29</sup> These illegitimate offspring were offered opportunities not available to other blacks, sowing seeds of resentment in those too black to benefit. In some colonies during the antebellum period<sup>30</sup>, if mixed race offspring were

---

<sup>26</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (USA: R.R. Donnelly & Sons Company, 1998), 140

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 21

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 9-10

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11

<sup>30</sup> The Antebellum Period is considered the time after the war of 1812 and before the American Civil War in 1861.



proper acting,<sup>31</sup> meaning if they were familiar with the societal mores of whites, they could apply for legal standing as white.<sup>32</sup> Others who were light enough to pass for white skirted the law by participating in the furtive operation of racial passing.

Many mixed-race children who were able to pass caught a glimpse of the world beyond their reach and made the difficult decision to leave their families behind to pursue a better, otherwise unattainable life.<sup>33</sup> Racial passing was the process of mixed-race blacks seamlessly gaining acceptance into white society. Those who chose not to pass were still in a position of superiority as a result of their skin tone, and generally had higher social status over blacks of darker complexion. Although opportunities for mixed-race blacks were not always the same as those afforded to white workers, many jobs and social circles afforded a more prosperous life to lighter-skinned blacks. These distinguishing factors contributed to divisions within black communities in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

## Historiography

Researchers from a range of disciplines have addressed the problems of colorism and skin tone bias. Scholars have studied historical records. Journalists have written noteworthy Op

---

<sup>31</sup> Proper acting blacks were those who were familiar with the norms and social mores of white people. They likely had some affiliation with someone who lived in the big house. This proper behavior made whites feel less threatened and more accepting of blacks.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 15

<sup>33</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2016), 19

<sup>34</sup> This phenomenon is not just limited to small towns in America. Latin, Asian, and Caribbean cultures face the difficulties of colorism as well. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde referenced the color prejudice dichotomy in her native land, Grenada. She wrote, “Grenada is a highly stratified society made up of a large, extremely poor mass of estate workers and small land-holding peasants.” She continued, “Problems of colorism and classism are deep, far reaching, and very complex legacies left from successive colonialisms.”<sup>34</sup> Although my focus was African American history in the United States, it is clear from Lorde’s quote that the “othering” of colorism was active in other cultures as well.

Ed pieces. Filmmakers have created works of art that force us to visually grapple with the insidiousness of colorism. Writers have crafted literature that imitates life. Sociologists have explored the effects of colorism on black women's psyche.

Prior to the 1950s, however, the term colorism had not yet entered the American lexicon. Consequently, significant emphasis concerning skin tone bias was placed on blacks who racially passed as a result of their mulatto heritage. Although the nature of racial passing does not discriminate, the opportunity to function within another race, while excluding those who are unable to do so, bellows colorism. One of the best analyses of racial passing has been provided by Allyson Hobbs, a history professor at Stanford University. Her book, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, published in 2016, provides an in-depth analysis of racial passing. In contrast, scholars Ronald Hall, et al, and Stephanie Rose Bird tendered a broader view. Hobbs' nuanced interpretation rendered historical illustrations of families who were torn apart as a result of passing. This was a crucial element in the landscape of crossing over, which humanized the subjects through a compassionate lens. Hobbs's argument was predicated on the understanding that racial passing was not simply walking away from one's family to a better life; it was also abandoning a sense of self and losing one's identity. She offered a glimpse into the lives of those who passed racially. Her examination of the topic rebuffed white society's belief that any black person who had the opportunity to pass did so without looking back. She relayed the emotional aspect of passing with facts and experiences to support her assertions.

*Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, by Ronald Hall et al., served as a barometer for several topics underneath the umbrella of colorism. Hall, et al, explored slavery, whiteness, identity, hair texture, families, marriage and workplace dynamics.

The authors utilized oral histories, literature, and statistics to draw conclusions about colorism and the harmful effects it had on the black community. Despite its panoramic viewpoint, *Color Complex* successfully addresses colorism as discrimination against both darker and light-skinned blacks. It offered the most comprehensive work, providing a broad-gauge from slavery until its release in 1992.

In *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, sociologist and scholar, JeffriAnne Wilder offers a meaningful discussion regarding colorism as it relates to both lighter and darker-skinned black women. She recognized the insidiousness of colorism as a damaging social problem, which made her insight thoughtful and inclusive. Her subjects shared oral histories that varied from themes of colorism within families to schoolyard brawls. Although colorism was initially practiced solely against darker skinned blacks, that narrative has evolved with time.

While the authors of *Color Complex* and *Color Stories* were more inclusive in their research, *A Chosen Exile* presented information that suggested skin tone bias was solely prejudice against darker skinned blacks by those of lighter complexion. Hobbs' position is supported by the time period in which she concentrates, leading me to believe that one's views on colorism are limited to their years of focus. *Color Complex* included the 1960s and 1970s, an era when the "Black is Beautiful" movement generated a social shift within the black community as part of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. This was one of the first times lighter-skinned blacks began to experience discrimination from other black people. By this point, as barriers of segregation dropped due to changing laws, racial passing was no longer necessary. For one of few times in US history, blackness was recognized as beautiful in a meaningful way. This ideological shift hearkened back to the teachings of Marcus Garvey in the early 1900s. The

Garvey Movement<sup>35</sup> generated a significant following and was responsible for instilling a sense of pride that influenced future generations of families of those directly impacted by his instruction.

Literature and film were also successful in providing a historical context for the desire of racial passing and the prejudices associated with colorism. Novels such as, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and the movie *Imitation of Life* (1939), used literary and visual art, respectively, to reinforce reality in the minds of their reader and viewers. *Passing* brought to life the experiences referenced in *A Chosen Exile* and filled the gaps with emotion in ways that more objective and scholarly sources fell short. Audrey Elisa Kerr, wrote in *The Journal of American Folklore*,

According to William A. Wilson, using folklore in cultural study offers a crystalline clarity in places where the historical insight offered by written records is cryptic; it provides insight into the beliefs and social ethics of past people and teaches us what communities believe their story to be, this facilitating a better understanding of the principles that govern their lives in the present.”

Kerr goes on to say that it is the single-most-useful way to reconstruct social histories in the case of complexion-based lore.<sup>36</sup>

In *The Blacker the Berry*, Wallace Thurman illustrated how closely art imitated life. His novel followed the experiences of Emma Lou, a young black girl navigating the murky waters of colorism within her environment. She had a rich complexion that some in her community refer to as “blue black,” signifying darkness that exceeded the average black person. She expected to face discrimination from whites but was disappointed when it came from her own. Emma Lou

---

<sup>35</sup> The Garvey Movement was led by Marcus Garvey and his wives Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey, respectively. The movement instilled black pride and African empowerment in blacks during the early 1900s. Garvey was an immigrant from Jamaica, West Indies, and generated a large following of supporters who were influenced by his teachings. The founding of the phrase “Black is Beautiful” is often attributed to Garvey.

<sup>36</sup> Audrey Elisa Kerr, “The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism” *Journal of American Folklore*, 272

cries out to God and questions why she is so dark, not why she is black. Why do her neighbors say, “Damn, she is black?” Are they not black like me?” Part I opens with Thurman writing, “more acutely than ever before, Emma Lou began to feel that her luscious black complexion was somewhat of a liability, and that her marked variation from the other people in her environment was a decided curse. Not that she minded being black, being negro necessitated having a colored skin, but she did mind being too black.”<sup>37</sup>

Emma Lou’s internal struggle as a teenager mirrored that of many dark-skinned black girls her age. When graduating from high school, an achievement to be applauded for a black girl during that time, Emma Lou believed that “the tragedy of life was that she was too Black.” Her grandparents, Samuel and Maria Lightfoot, raised their children to marry lighter and lighter, until they were white enough that the color issues they faced were non-existent. In this case, Emma Lou’s mother, Jane, married a man that was said to have been “so dark, that some remarked that he was directly from Africa.”<sup>38</sup>

In *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture and Identity*, Virginia R. Harris, writer and activist, shared her family’s account which offered several parallels to Emma Lou. Harris relates her mother’s commentary regarding complexion and the impact those words had on her self-esteem and psyche. She was the darkest of her siblings, and daughter to a light complexioned woman of mulatto heritage. Her father, too, was dark-skinned. Although her mother was advised by her parents not to marry too dark, she did not heed their warning. Similarly, to Emma Lou’s mother, when she was angry with her husband, she questioned why she married “a man that dark anyway.” Harris and her siblings were all deep brown, but for some reason, her complexion stood out. She was often punished for acting “too black,” or for her

---

<sup>37</sup> Thurman Wallace, *The Blacker the Berry* (1931)

<sup>38</sup> Thurman Wallace, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1931), 8

“loud, violent, attention getting behavior” which resulted in a beating. It became obvious to Harris that racism was alive and rampant within her household.<sup>39</sup>

Both *The Blacker the Berry* and Harris’ personal account share a common theme of pain, anger, and regret. Emma Lou and Harris both lived with the torment of their skin color. They internalize the anger felt by their mother’s rejection of who they are. And, they witness their mother’s regret for marrying men so dark that their union resulted in them.

In the same way that literature bolsters the historical narrative through oral histories, film serves as a visual representation of that theory. American audiences shared Peola’s pain as she pushed past the crowd to her mother’s casket in *Imitation of Life*.<sup>40</sup> This movie served as a benchmark for racial passing, and ultimately, the tragic mulatto trope.<sup>41</sup>

Color preferences repositioned based on the political causes of each decade, and transitions of light to dark and back to light were also apparent in black publications. *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence* magazine covers are critical to my research above other periodicals. *Ebony* and *Jet* offered longevity and the ability to span several decades, while *Essence* provided a birds-eye view into the visual messages shared with black women.

The beauty industry was largely responsible for preserving the opinion that lighter skin and straighter hair were more acceptable. In *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975*, Susannah Walker offered an account of hair and beauty standards over five decades. Advertisements revealed bleaching creams and hair straightening as a means

---

<sup>39</sup> Elena Featherson, *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture, and Identity* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1994) 9-15

<sup>40</sup> Please note that I provide a full account of the movie *Imitation of Life* in chapter two.

<sup>41</sup> The Tragic Mulatto is a stereotypical figure who was featured in literature from the 1840s and film in 1939. He/she is biracial and assumed to be sad because they do not completely fit into either world. They encounter a series of unfortunate events that all end tragically. Examples of 21<sup>st</sup> Century depictions of the Tragic mulatto include, *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*, *Caucasia*, and *Coffee Will Make You Black*.

of achieving what was considered the acceptable form of beauty. In the 1950s to 1960s, however, she noted an integration process of beauty where black models were used in notices that were originally all-white.<sup>42</sup> As previously mentioned, this position is visible in magazine covers and social circles and bolsters my position that political movements influenced black women's perspectives on beauty.

My goal is for my thesis to join this scholarly and creative discussion and cultivate a clearer path of understanding concerning the history of colorism, the effects it has had on the Black community, and how its mutations can either challenge the practice or perpetuate its growth. This thesis will explore the historical trajectory of colorism from 1950 to 1990. Through literature, film, poetry and scholarly sources, I will track the changes in the discussion and demonstrate that the narrative repositioned after the Black Power Movement from bias against darker skinned women to include discrimination against lighter-skinned women.

## **Chapter Review**

In chapter one, I return to the history of black enslavement which will offer the historical backdrop of colorism. The mindset of the slave master fills the gaps to understanding the pervasiveness of colorism. Their choices and words were the touchstone for prejudice and the energy behind the separation of blacks based on skin color. Chapter one opens with chronological details of how racism was introduced, including its origins in slavery. Plantations notoriously overworked darker skinned men and women in the cotton fields. These workers remained in the hot sun all day long, while the house slaves who were often of lighter complexion were shielded from hard labor. I provide context explaining the dichotomy in

---

<sup>42</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style & Status Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington Massachusetts: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 169-177

treatment that influenced interactions between lighter and darker slaves, and how resentment fueled their ongoing interaction. I further introduce the history of racial passing, including discussion on the one drop rule, Louisiana Creoles, and placage. I discuss the emergence of the brown paper bag test and Blue Vein Society.<sup>43</sup>

Chapter two examines the image of the tragic mulatto, identifying examples from film and literature to interpret how this trope was utilized in theaters and novels. I discuss the political impact on black womanhood and how the Civil Rights Movement changed the narrative in the 1960s. My analysis of the beauty industry outlines the role it played in black women's self-image, black beauty as a social construct, and the association between skin color and hair texture.

The theme of chapter three is "coming-of-age." I conduct a close read of the *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Jet* magazine covers and the messages about beauty that were conveyed throughout each decade.

In this chapter, I also discuss Historically Black Universities (HBCU's) and the sororities that were started on their campuses. I explore how environments designed for blacks perpetuated skin color bias and the social rift within the black community. I also include data on the black family and how colorism affects relationships between female members. The documentaries, *Dark Girls & Light Girls* will offer the viewer two sides of the discussion on colorism. Their experiences of the women interviewed feed into the issues many women faced in black sororities.<sup>44</sup>

In my conclusion, I address the core question of this thesis, "Have scholars and filmmakers effectively considered colorism in a way that honors the experiences of both dark

---

<sup>43</sup> References to the one-drop rule, Louisiana Creoles, placage, the brown paper bag test, and Blue Vein Society will be discussed within the chapters.

<sup>44</sup> *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls* were produced by Bill Duke through Duke Media. Duke is an African American actor who experienced difficulty in Hollywood because of his dark brown skin color.



and light skinned black women from 1950 to 1990. I explore the financial consequences of colorism over time and where it has positioned black women in 2020. Lastly, my thesis will discuss the evolution of filmmakers' incorporation of black women into mainstream media.

The chapters ahead are intended to inform the reader on colorism as it relates to both lighter and darker skinned blacks. An understanding of its trajectory is crucial to fully abolish the prejudices and social biases that disrupt our society and familial interactions. Before that can be accomplished, however, it is important to uncover the genesis of it all and return to the very beginning.

## Chapter 1| In the Beginning...

“I have no race prejudice,” he would say, “but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn’t want us yet but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step. ‘With malice towards none, with charity for all,’ we must do the best we can for ourselves and those who are to follow us. Self-preservation is the first law of nature.”

Charles Chesnutt  
The Wife of His Youth<sup>45</sup>

Since many white slave owners established clandestine and forced sexual relations with their female house slaves, the mulatto offspring—who were assigned slave status—extended the size of the house slave staff, said historian Lawrence Otis Graham in *Our Kind of People*. Graham continued by noting that, “It was the benefit of the master to mate with as many slaves as possible to expand his territory.”<sup>46</sup> Although illegitimate offspring had no special rights as the master’s biological child, their perceived benefits added to the division between light and dark-skinned blacks. The rift was predicated on where they fit into the landscape of slavery. This chapter examines ways in which slave masters created and perpetuated the separation of blacks by skin tone and how those in power used their positions of superiority to manipulate lighter-skinned blacks into believing they were dominant. I examine how slave masters raised the color bar by stigmatizing blackness in such a way that ultimately racial passing seemed the only way out of a life mired with adversity and disappointment.

Southern slave masters were at the forefront of asserting that darker-skinned slaves were more physically inclined to work in the hot field. In *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*-historian, Walter Johnson, writes that southern slave-master, John Knight, was quoted at a slave-market as saying, “I must have if possible the jet-black Negroes,

---

<sup>45</sup> Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth” *The Atlantic*, (July 1898)

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 7

they stand this climate the best.”<sup>47</sup> White slave masters spoke of black slaves as though they could determine their internal composition simply by looking at their skin color. In *Soul to Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Johnson, again addresses slave masters’ preference by noting that they believed that the “blackest slaves” were the healthiest and better suited for the field. It was common folklore that intellectual and skilled tasks were more fitting for lighter skinned blacks than their darker counterparts.<sup>48</sup> Johnson argues, “according to prevailing medical ethnography, slaves of mixed blood were best suited for those offices requiring more intelligence due to a mental superiority inherited from the white progenitor.”<sup>49</sup>

Field slaves faced very specific challenges. Some were forced to work 20-hour days and rarely offered an opportunity to maintain family connections. Often, enslaved people were separated from their family members and sold individually at the slave master’s discretion.<sup>50</sup> In *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss note that:

“The slave family experienced great difficulty in maintaining itself on a stable basis in a system where so little opportunity for expression was possible. Too seldom did the owner recognize the slave family as an institution worthy of respect, and frequently the blind forces inherent in the system operated to destroy it.”<sup>51</sup>

Field slaves were also most likely to be beaten or executed when tasks were not completed to the supervisor’s satisfaction. It was not uncommon for slave masters to punish slaves when they felt sadistic or needed someone to torture. Historian Christer Petley, wrote,

As elsewhere in the Americas, the right of masters in Jamaica to punish slaves was enshrined in law, and the violence that sustained slavery went far beyond whipping. Punishments could include amputation, disfiguring, branding and more. Slaves could also

---

<sup>47</sup> Walter Johnson, *In River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, February 2013), 160

<sup>48</sup> Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman, “Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” *Theory Into Practice* (2016): 40

<sup>49</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul to Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1999), 139

<sup>50</sup> Ned Sublette, *American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2016), 37-39

<sup>51</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (USA: R.R. Donnelly & Sons Company, 1998), 137-138

be put to death – a penalty most often enforced during the aftermath of rebellions. And they were rarely killed quickly<sup>52</sup>

By this account, What was true in Jamaica was also true in the United States.

Many house slaves, however, lived a different experience. They were afforded domestic roles that included housekeeper, nanny, and field foreman. Although the field foreman worked in the field, his experience was different to those actually toiling in the hot southern sun. The foreman was given authority over the field slaves. While he, too, was a slave, he supervised and did not engage in manual labor. He served as an assistant to the white overseers and his loyalty was to the master, and the master only.<sup>53</sup> This is one example of how the plantation owner planted seeds of superiority in the minds of the lighter slaves and how they in turn learned how to use it to their advantage. The foreman sometimes uncovered secrets of the field slave and shared it with the master to gain his trust. This sometimes led to a public whipping or death. The betrayal and lack of sympathy for their dark-skinned brothers and sisters created a deep resentment towards the house slave. Light-skinned blacks who abandoned their race were considered turncoats.<sup>54</sup>

Plantation owners systematically raped their black female slaves who were typically dark-skinned. The outcome was half-white/half-black children who compromised the gene pool.<sup>55</sup> Although mulattoes were ostensibly an asset, a racially mixed child in the big house<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>Christer Petley, “How Slaveholders in the Caribbean Maintained Control” November 2, 2018.

<<https://aeon.co/ideas/how-did-slaveholders-in-the-caribbean-maintain-control>> (Assessed May 4, 2020)

<sup>53</sup> Randall M. Miller, *The Man in the Middle: The Black Slave Driver*, The American Heritage Journal, Volume 30, Issue 6 (1979)

<sup>54</sup> Bianca Taylor, *Color and Class: The Promulgation of Elitist Attitudes at Black Colleges* 2009, (New York, NY: Palgrave Press), 189-206

<sup>55</sup> David Pilgrim, “The Tragic Mulatto Myth,” Ferris State University, November 2000  
< <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mulatto/>>

<sup>56</sup> The term “Big House” is used synonymously with “The plantation.”

created havoc and shame.<sup>57</sup> Sometimes the slave master would give these children special treatment by allowing them to work indoors, as opposed to toiling in the field.<sup>58</sup>

While the house slave was shielded from manual labor in the hot sun,<sup>59</sup> they endured many other difficulties. Not all house slaves were the offspring of their master. Many were purchased at a high price,<sup>60</sup> leaving them vulnerable to sexual abuse and molestation because of their proximity to the head of the house. Women were often raped multiple times by their slave masters, birthed their children, and continued the cycle of mulatto house slaves—a pattern that presumably offered special treatment.

Field slaves who were not separated from their families were able to return home each night and experience some semblance of community. The house slave, however, was forced to exist within a space where she was similar in physical features to her masters', but very much beneath them in the social hierarchy. She was forced to give up a sense of community shared by the field slave.<sup>61</sup> Although there were differences in treatment, enslaved people with light and dark-skinned slaves had unique challenges. Ultimately, they were both slaves.

There were advantages to being in the big house. Greater opportunity for formal and informal learning existed. Scholars Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman wrote that “slaves who became literate could teach their children to read and write, thereby passing on educational advantages generationally.” This led to a group of bondsmen and free blacks who were educated

---

<sup>57</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 24

<sup>58</sup> Bianca Taylor, *Color and Class: The Promulgation of Elitist Attitudes at Black Colleges* 2009, (New York, NY: Palgrave Press), 189-206

<sup>59</sup> Working in the field has been historically associated with grueling circumstances and unfair punishment by the slave master.

<sup>60</sup> The mulatto female slaves were worth more on the slave market than full-blooded black women. *Ebony Magazine* (May 1947), 33

<sup>61</sup> This seems to explain the feelings associated with some biracial women who struggle with acceptance in their families. In some cases, neither side fully embraces them, and the isolation appears to date back to slavery.

enough to purchase their freedom, enter into positions of power, and enroll in post-war black colleges and universities— ultimately positioning themselves above their peers. Another benefit of living in the big house was the opportunity to adopt white values and culture, making it easier to assimilate into white society. The ability to conform socially opened doors and opportunity.<sup>62</sup>

Scholar Trina Jones notes that instead of grouping mulattoes into an undifferentiated category of blacks, some southern states treated them as a third category— an intermediate class between blacks and whites. The need for large-scale slave labor on massive sugar and rice plantations meant that the number of blacks greatly outnumbered the number of whites in many areas of the Lower South. Fearful plantation owners looked to mulattoes as a mediating influence to help control black slaves. The report of a legislative commission appointed to investigate a planned slave insurrection in 1822 captured the thinking of southern whites. The commission report noted:

Free mulattoes are "a barrier between our own color and that of the black - and, in cases of insurrection, are more likely to enlist themselves under the banners of the whites.... Most of them are industrious, sober, hardworking mechanics, who have large families and considerable property; and so far as we are acquaint their temper, and dispositions of their feelings, abhor the idea of association with the blacks in any enterprise that may have for its object the revolution of their condition. It must be recollected also, that the greater part of them own slaves, and are, therefore so far interested in this species of property as to keep them on the watch and induce them to disclose any plans that may be injurious to our peace - experience justifies this conclusion."<sup>63</sup>

The implication, here, is that their white “blood” made free blacks more industrious, sober and hard-working, more likely to be skilled, and less willing to connect their fortunes with “the blacks.” Clearly it would be safer for free blacks to at least perform that kind of willingness. This report is an example of the insidiousness of color prejudice and intentional social division.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman, “Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” *Theory Into Practice* (2016): 39-42

<sup>63</sup> Trina Jones, “*Shades of Brown*,” *Duke Law Journal*, (2000): 1508-1509

## A Unique Culture

In Louisiana, Creoles were the elite mulatto voice, and often served as one of the buffer classes mentioned above. America purchased the state of Louisiana in 1803. Before that, African slaves, French and Spanish colonists, Cajuns, and Native American peoples of the area entered into various interracial relationships. This mixing of cultural and racial backgrounds created a subgroup of people named “Creole” after their French and Spanish roots. The indigenous whites of the area would eventually adopt the term and insist that it solely applied to them.<sup>64</sup>

The Creole were legally black, but many had very light skin with angular features. They could easily pass for white. Since the social hierarchy in America was often based on skin color, it is natural that Creoles were considered the leading voice of black society in New Orleans and quickly elevated to positions of power by elitists.<sup>65</sup> Creoles were known for their exclusive practices; while some resented them, others wanted to be like them.<sup>66</sup> The women were beautiful and powerful and used these attributes to their advantage; purchasing land and procuring security for them and their offspring.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Sybil Kein, *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 1-2

<sup>65</sup> Simon, Troy Lenard, "Black Creoles in New Orleans (1700-1971): the life of the educated, talented, and civilized black Creoles" (2016). Senior Projects Spring 2016. 108. [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2016/108](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2016/108)

<sup>66</sup> Stephanie Rose Bird, *Light, Bright and Damn Near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 132

<sup>67</sup> Troy Lenard Simon, "Black Creoles in New Orleans (1700-1971): The Life of the Educated, Talented, and Civilized Black Creoles" (2016). Senior Projects Spring 2016. 108. [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2016/108](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2016/108)

Below are images of Creole women and children from the early 1900s:



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

Creole women in Louisiana were a powerful sect. They owned land, property, businesses, and slaves. They selectively interacted with their own, discriminating against those who did not share similar features and furthering a cycle of segregation against darker skinned blacks. Their light skin generated resentment from those who did not fit within their circles of wealth and beauty standards, predicated on European values.<sup>68</sup> Louisiana's complexion discrimination, however, was different from that of other American States. Theirs was a three-caste society: the white population, the black population, and the Creole (free people of mixed blood). As the Louisiana slave population grew lighter and lighter, this three-tier system was an effective way of raising mixed race persons above the average slaves.<sup>69</sup>

The Creole culture operated with a unique set of practices. Placage, French for "to place with," existed within their society as a system with the intended purpose of matching European men with Creole women to serve as concubines. Since miscegenation was not permitted, this network allowed European men to secretly maintain interracial mistresses, who many kept in

---

<sup>68</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver, "The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order," *Social Forces*, Volume 86, Number 2, (December 2007): :643-670.

<sup>69</sup> Audrey Elisa Kerr, "The Paper Bag Principle: Of Myth and the Motion of Colorism," *Journal of American Folklore*, 2005, 282



lifelong relationships. In some cases, the man would also marry a white woman and raise what was considered a respectable family. Although placage was also practiced in parts of Mississippi and Alabama, it was most associated with Louisiana and Haiti. Creole concubines were not legally recognized as wives, but many had children with these men and had land willed to them as though they were in marital relationships.<sup>70</sup>

## Turning Point

The American Civil War<sup>71</sup> marked a turning point for the African American community. Prior to the war, free light-skinned blacks had a higher status among whites. After the war, darker-skinned blacks were also free and ostensibly afforded employment opportunities previously not available to them.<sup>72</sup> Once everyone was placed into the same category of blackness, employment was scarce. As a means of separation, lighter-skinned blacks created racist organizations and social groups with the sole intention of dissociating from blackness or, more specifically, brownness of a certain hue. An example of this fracture was the Brown Paper Bag Test.

The “Brown Paper Bag Test” originated after the American Civil War and was widely used in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to keep blacks who “were darker than a brown paper bag” out of various social gatherings and institutions.<sup>73</sup> In some cases, a brown paper bag was held at the door to forbid entrance to anyone who was not lighter than its tan hue. Dr. Henry Louis Gates, historian

---

<sup>70</sup> Audrey Elisa Kerr, “*The Paper Bag Principle: Of Myth and the Motion of Colorism*,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 2005, 282-283

<sup>71</sup> The American Civil War took place in the United States from 1861 to 1865. It was between the northern and southern states, fought primarily as a result of the long-standing dispute over the enslavement of black people.

<sup>72</sup> Martin Ruef, *Between Slavery and Capitalism: The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South* (United States: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2-4

<sup>73</sup> Bill Maxwell, “The Paper Bag Test” <[http://www.sptimes.com/2003/08/31/Columns/The\\_paper\\_bag\\_test.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2003/08/31/Columns/The_paper_bag_test.shtml)>. St. Petersburg Times. Tampa Bay Times. Accessed May 6, 2020

and author, notes in *The Future of the Race*-that the brown paper bag test likely began in Louisiana. Audrey Elise Kerr substantiates this theory with accounts from interviewees who described the stories shared from parents and grandparents regarding Creole women from Louisiana, who admitted to either participating in the practice or knowing someone who did. One woman suggested that the Catholic Church worked with the Creole women to institute the practice and “keep the darker people out.” Another woman reported that many times the brown paper bag was not held at the door, but if you entered the event and others could tell that you did not pass muster, no one would interact with you. You were then considered a “crasher” and treated like a social pariah. Churches, sororities, and fraternities were notorious for participating in this racist practice. If you were not lighter than a brown paper bag, you were not afforded the opportunity to satisfy requirements. These social stratifications drove additional segregation which weighed degrees of lightness and established restricted access based on your position on the color wheel.<sup>74</sup> Though it was not uncommon for one to be given a pass because of lighter skinned relatives, this likely created dissention within families where spouses, siblings and parents were on opposite sides of the bag.

Much like the brown paper bag test, the Blue Vein Society separated lighter skinned black people from darker skinned ones. If blue veins were not visible on one’s arm, access to certain clubs and organizations was not granted. This inspired the jingle: “If you yellow, you mellow. If you white, you all right. If you black, get back.”<sup>75</sup> In Wallace Thurman’s 1931 novel

---

<sup>74</sup> David Pilgrim, “Brown Paper Bag Test” *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, Ferris State University Press. November 2000 <<https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mulatto/>> (Accessed March 6, 2020)  
Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 1

*The Darker the Berry*, the main character, Emma Lou, described her grandparents as so light that they led the local chapter for the Blue Vein Society.<sup>76</sup>

The Blue Vein Society was also mentioned in the short story *The Wife of His Youth*.<sup>77</sup> Author, activist, and attorney, Charles Chesnutt-often explored intra-racial conflicts in the black community over skin color and class divide. The ambiguity of his racial features and journey undoubtedly raised these questions for him. Chesnutt was seven eighths white, but rather than passing, he identified with being black during a time when blackness limited opportunity and exposed one to danger.

In the story the protagonist, Mr. Ryder, was the president of the local Blue Vein Society. He was an eligible bachelor, catching the eye of many women. He began dating Molly Dixon, a sister mulatto from Washington, D.C., and planned to publicly ask her to marry him at a party he assembled for that purpose. On the afternoon before the party was held, he was interrupted as he wrote his intended speech. A sprightly but older, dark-skinned woman, dressed in gaudy colors and missing teeth, came to his door. She was looking for her husband, Sam Taylor, whom she had not seen in twenty-five years. Liza Jane had been enslaved, and Sam had been a free black—an apprentice at her master's house. Despite Taylor's legal status, however, the family wanted to claim him and sell him down the river. Liza Jane assisted Sam in his escape, and he promised to return to for her. He never did.

Ryder tells her that marriages before the War were never legalized. Perhaps her husband has moved on, he delicately suggests. No, she tells him, my husband was too loyal and loved me too well for that. She shows Ryder a photograph of her husband, and Ryder looks at it with interest, disavowing, however, knowing anyone who went by the name Sam Taylor.

---

<sup>76</sup> Thurman Wallace, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929), 18

That night, instead of his prepared speech, Ryder shared Liza Jane's story. Her husband, he told them, *had* moved on, and was contemplating marrying another. Should he? He asked them. Or should he acknowledge her as his wife. The audience emphatically asserted that he should acknowledge her. He agreed, opening a door and bringing forward Liza Jane, now dressed in demure gray and modestly remaining silent, "Ladies and gentlemen," he tells the assembled attendees, "this is the wife of my youth, and I am the man, whose story I have told you. Permit me to introduce to you the wife of my youth."<sup>77</sup> Chesnutt's story leaves questions unanswered: did Ryder not return for his wife because of her color? Will he be forced to step down from the Blue Vein Society with her by his side? Or is the entire story, as it seems, a challenge to skin color segregation? Ryder has a lot to learn from Liza Jane about character, persistence and loyalty.

### **A Passing Phase**

In 1896, despite the promises of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, the practice of segregation was given a legal imprimatur. In *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (163 US 537) the plaintiff, Homer Plessy, challenged a state but equal legal system that required racially segregated seating on trains in interstate commerce in Louisiana. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, upheld the segregation despite Plessy's contention that he was "only one-eighth negro and could pass for White."<sup>78</sup> The court thus enforced the "one-drop" rule. It stated that anyone with even one drop of black blood was considered black, despite the physical features of the individual in question or how they self-identified. Since racial mixing was so prevalent between slave masters and slaves, this rule left a

---

<sup>77</sup> Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth" *The Atlantic*, July 1898

<sup>78</sup> Stephanie Rose Bird, *Light Bright and Damned Near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture in America* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2009), 13

large population vulnerable in that they did not look black, but under this law were forced to identify with being black.

*Plessy vs Ferguson* preceded an historical moment characterized by the phenomenon of racial passing roughly from 1900 to the 1950s.<sup>79</sup> Some mulattoes grew tired of being cornered into expensive, run-down neighborhoods for housing, limited in the employment they could seek, and harassed by whites. They took matters into their own hands. Driven by a desire for change and better opportunity, some made the difficult decision to live their lives on the opposite side of the tracks.<sup>80</sup>

Although racial passing, or “crossing over,” offered a less challenging life, it also meant losing one’s family.<sup>81</sup> Dr. Allyson Hobbs discussed the identity crisis associated with racial passing and presented instances in which people presumably lost as much as they gained. Pearle Foreman, an interviewee, is quoted as saying, “Once family members crossed over, they were usually lost, essentially dead to their families.”<sup>82</sup> This social death was acutely painful to both sides. Those who were unable to pass were resentful because of the opportunities available to those who could. Those who passed were profoundly isolated. Feelings of rejection and loss were deep and intense.

A segment of the passing population maintained a white lifestyle at work and returned to their black families in the evening. The cognitive dissonance created through this arrangement was profound., wrought with its own unique set of difficulties. Within many black families, there were various colors represented within the bloodline. It was not uncommon for siblings of the

---

<sup>79</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016), 220

<sup>80</sup> Opposite side of the tracks is a reference used to describe an imaginary socioeconomic and sometimes racial line in certain neighborhoods.

<sup>81</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 165

<sup>82</sup> iBid, 169

same parents to have varying complexions. This encouraged rifts between family members. While the passer enjoyed the social benefits of having a lighter complexion during the day, the remaining family members faced the difficulties associated with blackness. These issues resulted in poor social relations between lighter and darker-skinned relatives.<sup>83</sup>

Dr. Allyson Hobbs analyzed Nella Larsen's life as a biracial woman and author. Larsen wrote several novels that touched on color prejudice, presumably because it was a topic she struggled with personally. Hobbs said, "race had over determined her life circumstances, severed her familial relationships, and heightened her emotional and professional insecurities." She appeared confused and angry with her blackness. In a letter to a friend, Larsen wrote, "Right now when I look out into the Harlem streets. I feel just like Helga Crane in my novel. Furious at being connected with all these niggers."<sup>84</sup> Helga Crane was light-skinned but could not pass; she was light enough to seem exotic to whites and desirable to blacks, but to fit in nowhere. Crane's character shared a likeness to Larsen's personal life. Both women had Danish mothers and Black fathers. Both experienced rejection from either sides of their families. Both were affected by their lives "in the middle." Larsen -"furious at being connected"- resented existing in the balance of blackness. She wished she could actually pass for white. Even so, Larsen seemed to reconcile her issues with race through the characters in her books, which is why she focused so meaningfully on biracial women. She understood the complexities associated with racial passing, and scholar Katheen Pheiffer noted that Larsen, "struggled to negotiate an identity

---

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: the Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York, NY: Doubleday Press, 1993), 96

<sup>84</sup> Kathleen Pheiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 141

troubled by the absence of family bonds and the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and respectability.”<sup>85</sup>

As noted above, although some passers returned to their households daily, others fully and completely abandoned their families in search of a better life. In *Our Kind of People*, Charlotte Schuster Price, the widow of a prominent Washington physician, recalled the day her older brother decided to forgo his life of a black man. She says, “It was in the 1920’s and my family was all in Washington for my brother Ernie’s graduation from medical school at Howard University. The whole family was proud of him. Then all of a sudden, Ernie turns to my father, hands him the diploma and says, ‘I hope you like this diploma because it is yours now. I’ll never be able to use it.’” It was at that point that they realized that he had made the decision to live his life as a white man. Ernie’s decision is particularly intriguing because as a physician, he would have been considered the elite of black society, still he decided that being white was better than being black. In this circumstance, this gentleman did not cross over in hopes of better employment opportunities. It appears that he simply did not want to be black.

In his poem, “*Passing*,” poet, activist and novelist, Langston Hughes, used art to fill the emotional and social gaps associated with racial passing. The speaker, Jack, is a black man passing for white. The piece is about a letter he wrote to his mother, whom he had passed on the street the day before. Jack could not speak to her because he was with his white girlfriend, who is unaware of his racial identity. He opened the poem by describing the emotions connected with not being able to formally recognize his mother. Jack said he “felt like a dog” passing her on the street. If his girlfriend were not with him, he admits that he would have spoken to his mother because he was not as fearful of being found out as he once was. Only when with whites does he

---

<sup>85</sup> iBid, 180

feel the anxiety that some passers experienced, constantly looking over their shoulders. Later in the poem, he returned to how badly he felt passing his mother and not speaking to her: here are the greatest costs. Hughes is at once sympathetic and searing, offering an intentional glimpse into the lives of many passers, reiterating how truly difficult abandoning familial ties were to accomplish.

*Passing* reveals so much through Hughes's character Jack about the way the white world functioned. He expresses frustration with enduring whites' negative commentary against blacks. He is struck by the depth of racist attitudes that bar black men from the employment. The poem later includes a stanza on Jack's father who died, willing everything to his white family, suggesting that he maintained two households. The speaker sarcastically referenced his white brothers and their shock at discovering they had black siblings. Jack expressed sympathy for his true siblings who could not pass. He spoke about the resentment his brother felt when teachers thought he was white until they found out that he had a black brother. He was also concerned about whether his siblings would be as tactful as his mother and pass by without exposing him. The worry of being uncovered inspired Jack think of moving far away from Chicago, to reduce the odds of encountering relatives.

There is no peace for Jack: he is torn. In the closing stanzas, he raves about his blonde haired and blue-eyed prize: his girlfriend. He intends to marry her. Still, the bond between him and his mother was strong, and he promised to maintain a post office box so he could stay in touch.<sup>86</sup> Although Jack was fictional, his experiences were real. He lived the life of many who left their families, experiencing the fear of being discovered, and struggling with the bonds they are forced to sever.

---

<sup>86</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks: Passing* (USA: Knopf, 1934)



The pressures of passing were vivid shortly after New Year's in 1932. The news of a lieutenant's car crash in San Francisco created a nationwide sensation. Lieutenant William J. French was found with his pistol nearby and a bullet wound to his head. Lieutenant French had been masquerading as a white man for 18 years. Unlike many men and women who pass, French did not fully abandon his former life. He visited with his mother every Christmas. His family and friends were loyal and never betrayed his secret, even in death. It was said that "scores of Negroes" in the city knew that French was passing as white. French was married to a white woman, but the last person to see him alive was Mrs. Gertrude McEnroe, who claimed that he was on the verge of a nervous break-down and had been driven to a state of insanity after years of fear that his racial identity would be exposed.<sup>87</sup>

Partisan shifting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, made to enhance the voting power of African Americans, proved problematic: there was an electrical solution. By the 1930s and 1940s blacks were still struggling to have their voices heard despite their turn away from the Republican Party around twenty years earlier. In the 1912 presidential election monumental numbers of African Americans diverged from the Party of Lincoln to vote for the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson promised that he would advocate for racial justice and fairness, but once in the White House, he dismissed 15 of the 17 black supervisors holding federal positions. Furthermore, the head of the Internal Revenue System of Georgia stated, "There are no government positions for the Negro in the South. They are to be in the cornfield." President Wilson voiced no objections to that statement or to segregation. On the contrary, he believed the

---

<sup>87</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 217-219

racial separation would help reduce friction in federal departments.<sup>88</sup> Considering a political climate such as this, it is no surprise that blacks who could pass for white did so.

Actress Fredi Washington, who played Peola in the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life*, addressed the assumption that everyone who could pass for white chose to do so. When asked why she opted not to pass, she said, “I want to be what I am, nothing else. Because I’m honest, firstly, and secondly, you don’t have to be white to be good.”<sup>89</sup> Janice Kingslow, another aspiring actress, also understood the temptation for those who could pass. She said,

Then like a dream of paradise came the final temptation. If I accepted this offer, I could go anywhere I wanted. I could do anything I wanted, without question. No saleswoman would ever again refuse to sell me a dress. No hotel clerk would refuse me a room. No head waiter would deny me a table. No man would ever look at me again the way that producer had when I told him I was a Negro. The sharp stabs which hurts so much each time they happened would be ended forever. I would be free at last from the unremitting hour to hour, day today burden of prejudice.<sup>90</sup>

Kingslow detailed those painful experiences but still, she remained true to her racial identity.

The secrecy associated with racial passing forced participants into an uneasy and somewhat erratic lifestyle. The identity they knew and accepted had to be hidden in order to gain notoriety or simply to enjoy a lifestyle with opportunity. Historian Stephanie Bird discussed the parallels between race and politics and the experiences of those who were able to pass for being white. “Many people become exclusive, isolating the other parts of their known ethnic identity to gain membership to a seemingly mono-racial group,” she explained. “For some, this is a political act.”<sup>91</sup> The Civil Rights Movement proved this statement to be more than true. Many passers began to make big changes in their personal lives to reflect their political activism.

---

<sup>88</sup> iBid, 227-228

<sup>89</sup> iBid, 172

<sup>90</sup> iBid, 259

<sup>91</sup> Stephanie Bird, *Light, Bright and Damned Near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 11

In the late 1940s to 1950s, racial passing began tapering off when more meaningful employment opportunities became available to blacks. As life as an African American improved press outlets, like *Jet* magazine, reported that “Negroes who passed to find employment were returning to their race.”<sup>92</sup> This account reinforces the notion that many blacks who passed did so out of necessity and not because they wanted to be white. In the July 17, 1952 edition of *Jet Magazine*, the author wrote an article titled, “Why Passing is Passing Out,” noting that blacks who could pass for white chose to instead identify with being high-class blacks, rather than low-class whites.<sup>93</sup> Class and race were deeply intertwined.

In *Don't Play in the Sun*, memoirist Marita Golden acknowledged that the mulatto elite ruled the black social and political scenes of Philadelphia, Atlanta, Charleston, New York and New Orleans. Even so, she argued, Washington, D.C. was the “capital” of colorism. She wrote, “I grew up in the shadow of a colorist past that included ‘Blue Vein’ societies in D.C., which would not allow membership to anyone whose veins could not be seen through the skin.”<sup>94</sup> While being a mulatto had its privileges, light skinned blacks struggled deeply with the sociological challenges associated with living life in the middle.

---

<sup>92</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 260

<sup>93</sup> “Why Passing is Passing Out” *Jet Magazine*, (July 17, 1952): 12-16

<sup>94</sup> Marita Golden, *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey through the Color Complex* (New York, NY: Anchor Press, 2005), 42

## Chapter 2| In the Middle...

I look white. I am as light as snowberries in fall. "I walk that walk, I talk that talk." Yet, still some say, "You're not really Black!" The words cut deep down. Beyond the bone. Beneath my snowy skin. Deep down where no one can see. I bleed the "one drop of blood" that makes me black. And I want to be as black as midnight and moonless water, so no words can wound me. Still, I'm thankful for all the blood drops I got. In my mind, even one drop's a lot.

Joyce Carol Thomas<sup>95</sup>  
*The Blacker the Berry*  
*Snowberries*

In the quote above, Joyce Carol Thomas captures the deep longing for acceptance mixed raced women have toward the race with which the world identifies them. Imagine existing in a space where everyone defines you by a marker you cannot see. By law, you are black, but your skin tone belies your identity. Blacks do not want you because you do not look like them. Looking at you is too much of a reminder. A reminder of the past. A reminder of privilege. You look like *him*. It is "their" blood that courses through your veins. You venture over to the race with whom you share more physical traits. But something torturous occurs; whites do not want you either. When they look at you, they see blackness. Regardless of how much you resemble them, you will never be them. No one wants you. Only in this equation does half of a whole equal one hundred percent. There is no such thing as one quarter or one eighth. Only one hundred. Living in a world where everyone looks at you, but no one sees you, is tragic, indeed.

The tragic mulatto archetype was often used among writers and movie directors as a way of soothing white women's resentment over their husbands' wanton ways towards black women.<sup>96</sup> The message was clear: although they are exotic and beautiful, they are still black and lost in a limbo where no one wants them.<sup>97</sup> The end to every storyline reminded readers and moviegoers that the life of the mulatto was doomed.

---

<sup>95</sup> Joyce Carol Thomas, *The Blacker the Berry* (New York, NY: Harper Collins), 15

<sup>96</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (Florida: Harcourt Jananovich, 1992), 13

<sup>97</sup> Donald Bogle, *Tom's Coons, Mulattoes, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012), 147-150

The tragic mulatto myth supported the notion that the consequences of miscegenation were harmful to those born of such circumstances. The archetype was often portrayed in three different ways: as a light-skinned mulatto woman of privilege who was ultimately subjected to enslavement or poverty; a mulatto woman who passed for white, fell in love with a white man, was discovered, and thrown out of her charmed life; or a mulatto woman who was raised to believe she was white, had her mixed-race heritage revealed, and lost favor in society.<sup>98</sup> Nineteenth-century white writers understood the necessity of tarnishing their mulatto's character in order to preclude full participation into white society by those who wanted to pass; black writers used the mulatto to challenge false ideas about racial difference. Literary historian Sterling A. Brown refers to the mulatto as a "victim of a divided inheritance."<sup>99</sup> This divided inheritance is the key to understanding the mulatto woman's tragedy.

Literature was the first art form to address the tragedy of being of mixed-race. Mulatto heroines were popular amongst early black fiction writers because often they, too, were of mixed heritage and wrote about what they knew best. In addition, mulattoes were a convenient illustration of the racial injustices imposed on black slaves. This was particularly relevant to Nella Larsen, noted in chapter one. In her 1929 novel *Passing*, the protagonist, Clare Kendry, was a black woman who chose to pass as white but lived with the torment of potentially being found out. One sweltering day in Chicago, in the café at the top of Drayton Hotel, Clare recognized her childhood friend Irene, who was also passing. For Irene, this was a temporary convenience, a place to rest during the intense heat. In general Irene embraced her black heritage. She was startled and secretly both curious and outraged by Clare's passing. Later, Irene joined

---

<sup>98</sup> Eva Allegra Raimon, *The Tragic Mulatta Revisted: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-century Antislavery Fiction* (United Kingdom: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 26-30

<sup>99</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (Florida: Harcourt Jananovich, 1992), 137.

Clare and another white-passing friend Gertrude for tea. While catching up, Clare openly expressed her fear of having a dark-skinned baby, one who could reveal her secret to her racist white husband. . The dichotomy between the two characters was stark, and in the end, Clare's husband discovers that she is black and angrily approaches her about her deceit at a party in Harlem. Although it is not clear whether she jumped or was pushed, Clare fell to her death from a window. Clare's untimely death is clearly tragic. Larsen used Clare's abandonment of identity to highlight how passing led to loneliness and isolation, which created a void that could only be filled by the very same people she had forsaken.

In 1934, cinema introduced moviegoers to the tragic mulatto with *Imitation of Life*.<sup>100</sup> *Imitation of Life* told the story of two mothers from opposite races who struggled to care for their children after the Great Depression. The Black mother, Delilah, seized an opportunity to work for the white mother while she built her career after her husband's death. Both widows had girls around the same age, and they all quickly become a family. Delilah's daughter, Peola, was light enough to pass for white; given the privileges associated with it, she desperately wanted to be white.<sup>101</sup> One scene showed Delilah visiting Peola's school. When Delilah entered the classroom, Peola put her head down and hid from her mother, embarrassed by her dark skin. The white children teased her once they learned her secret, and her experience at school changed.

As an adolescent, Peola dated a white boy who believed her to be white, too. Once he discovered that she was black, however, he beat her and left her in an alley. This scene classically identified the pain associated with being "found out." Once her true identity was revealed, she lost favor with friends; the comfortable white life she cultivated was shattered.

---

<sup>100</sup> Donald Bogle, *Tom's Coons, Mulattoes, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012), 57.

<sup>101</sup> In this case, Peola's desire to pass for white is different from the majority discussed in chapter one, whose desire to cross the color line was motivated by better opportunities.

Shortly afterwards, Peola left home to pass for white. She forbade her mother from contacting her. Yet one day Delilah disobeyed her daughter; she needed, she said, “to see her baby one last time.” Peola was obdurate, insisting on separation. Shortly afterwards, Delilah died, presumably from a broken heart. In the end, the filmmaker used Delilah’s death to make a point — life caught in the middle of two races resulted in pain and sadness. The scene tugged at audience’s heartstrings nationwide, and the film was hailed for recognizing the humanity of black people.<sup>102</sup> Cinemas filled with storylines that shared the same message: “life in the middle is miserable.” There was no place to fit in, and that isolation was bound to lead to unhappiness.

Following the success of *Imitation of Life*, *Pinky* was released 15 years later in 1949. The titular character, Pinky, was a mulatto woman who moved to the North to study as a nurse. While there, she passed for white and fell in love with a white doctor not familiar with her ethnicity. Suddenly, she returned to the South to visit her grandmother. Upon her return, Pinky experienced a number of unlucky events. Her grandmother convinced her not to return to the north, and she remained in the south to care for an unlikeable old neighbor. The white doctor who she fell in love with, visited her in the South, and asked her to return to the North with him and live life as a white woman. Pinky declined the doctor’s offer. In the end, the sick neighbor willed her home to Pinky, who faced challenges to maintain it because, legally, she was black— despite her features and skin tone. *Pinky*’s ending was vastly different from *Imitation of Life*. Although she experienced some bad luck throughout the movie, her exploits culminated into a more positive development. After Pinky’s true identity was discovered by the white doctor, he still wanted a romantic relationship with her, and she was also able to keep the home left by her white

---

<sup>102</sup> Donald Bogle, *Tom’s Coons, Mulattoes, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012), 59-60

neighbor. *Pinky* received critical acclaim, which sent another strong message: moviegoers enjoyed movies featuring the tragic mulatto.

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Film Historian Donald Bogle (2016) offers context for the tragic mulatto trope and describes how filmmakers brought the question of tainted blood to the table.<sup>103</sup> One such example was the 1949 movie, *Lost Boundaries*. The film *Lost Boundaries* was about an African American family who were so light that they passed for white with ease. The husband and father, Dr. Carter, was a medical doctor who was unable to obtain work at both Negro and non-negro hospitals in the South. He and his wife made an informed decision to move farther north and live as a white family. They did not share this secret with their children until several years later.

Once the town of Keane, New Hampshire discovered the Johnston's secret, they remarked, "How awful it is that these good white people should have their lives ruined simply because of Negro blood." Although the concealed information regarding their identity had been exposed, their decency and good behavior still aligned them with whiteness in their neighbors' minds.<sup>104</sup> The Johnston family's ability to assimilate into white culture afforded them social favor beyond their deceit. In the end, however, they met the same tragic fate as other tragic mulattoes: the family was blamed for having wronged the townspeople by keeping this tremendous secret. They were thereby culpable, making them the tragic characters. Their true identity was revealed and their reputations were tarnished.

---

<sup>103</sup> The term "tainted blood" was often referenced in the media as a way to suggest that mulattoes' blackness sullied their existence.

<sup>104</sup> Donald Bogle, *Tom's Coons, Mulattoes, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012), 149-150



*Lost Boundaries* was based on the true-life story of the Johnston family, who were instrumental in selecting the roles and providing the storyline behind the movie. However, most disappointing to many blacks was the choice of the production company to use white actors instead of actual African Americans who could pass for white. The production company's explanation was white audiences more readily accepted white actors, making the message of passing and racial prejudice more palpable.<sup>105</sup>

*Life* and *Ebony* magazines featured articles on the Johnstons after their identity was revealed. Surprisingly, there was unexpected emphasis placed on their neighbors. The reviewer suggested that "The real heroes were the sympathetic and kindhearted white friends and neighbors who embraced the Johnston's after discovering their racial ancestry." The residents of Keane, New Hampshire were commended for their "tolerance, transcending racial bias and color lines to accept a Keane family as neighbors, though they have Negro blood."<sup>106</sup> *Life and Looks* even released photographs of Keane as an integrated community. They featured Johnston's daughter, Ann, playing cards with her white friends with the subtitle, "still the most popular girl in her high school class." *Ebony* magazine showcased the Johnstons entertaining European guests. Other photos featured Dr. Johnston in professional settings, supervising white doctors and tending to white patients. The media's disingenuous coverage of the story neglected to include the political battle that occurred at Elliot Community Hospital, where the Board of Directors tried to oust Dr. Johnston from his position shortly after they discovered his racial identity.<sup>107</sup> In addition to presenting a distorted portrait of an "integrated" community, the media absolutely failed to reveal the tragic tightrope mulattoes are forced to walk. Perhaps the idea was

---

<sup>105</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 252

<sup>106</sup> *i*Bid, 243-244

<sup>107</sup> *i*Bid, 245

to present an *ideal* scenario, the narrative the black community would like to see replicated, the year after President Harry Truman had desegregated the armed forces.

A real-life illustration of the tragic mulatto was actress Dorothy Dandridge. Ms. Dandridge enjoyed a successful acting career but led a complicated personal life that ended tragically. Dandridge's personal struggles with marriage, relationships, and being swindled out of her fortune contributed to her eventual substance abuse and intense depression.<sup>108</sup> She married a philanderer, Harold Nicholas, whose extramarital relationships led to divorce. When Dandridge was in labor, she waited for him to return home from playing golf before going to the hospital. Once she and Nicholas finally arrived there, however, the doctors were forced to use forceps that could have contributed to brain damage her daughter received during birth. Shortly after birth, her daughter, Harolyn, was committed to a mental institution for life, and she never recognized Dandridge as her mother. Dandridge blamed herself for not going to the hospital sooner. The guilt from that decision haunted her throughout the remainder of her life.

Dandridge rose to fame for her role in *Carmen Jones* in 1954 and was the first black woman nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress. Dandridge was appreciated by black and white audiences but was limited by Hollywood's restrictions. Her career would have been easier if she fit neatly into being either white, which offered a world of opportunity, or black, which also presented its own range of acting options. She was too light to play some of the roles usually reserved for black actresses, like mammies or African Queens, and too sophisticated to play a harlot.

Dandridge was one of many black actresses who struggled to cope with life in the middle. Along with Lena Horne—who was also light complexioned with straight hair and sharp

---

<sup>108</sup> Earl Mills, *Dorothy Dandridge: A Portrait in Black* (United States: Holloway House Publishing Company, 1970)

features— Dandridge was one of the more successful black female stars of the 1950s. In *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women*, historian Susannah Walker noted that it was difficult for black female entertainers to break out of the old-world stereotypes. Horne was consistently cast as a sultry night club singer and Dandridge as the tragic mulatto.<sup>109</sup> There was a long history of black actresses feeling like they were the problem or that they were not enough. Directors asked Dandridge to wear darker make-up for a role in 1952; producers advised Horne that she was too light and should try to pass for Spanish. Ethnicity was a commodity that the film industry held seriously, and they chose the image they wanted to portray over the artist.<sup>110</sup>

Fredi Washington, who was discussed more in-depth in the section on racial passing in chapter one, also lived in the middle. Movie directors often thought she was Italian or French, and although aesthetically she *could have* played the role of a white woman, she was never cast. Washington, too, did not fit the description of the average black woman, and therefore was limited to niche roles that were few and far between.<sup>111</sup> Movie directors had a very specific image that they wanted their black actresses to portray. Those expectations limited opportunities for black women caught in the middle.

### **Black is Beautiful**

A number of changes occurred as a result of the Civil Rights Movement,. African Americans were employed in a wider array of jobs, giving them income and a larger presence as consumers. In *Style and Status*, Susannah Walker analyzed the history of hair and beauty

---

<sup>109</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 134.

<sup>110</sup> *i*Bid, 135

<sup>111</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (United Kingdom: Anchor Books, 1993),143

standards before and after the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>112</sup> Advertisements prior to the 1950s revealed that bleaching creams were prevalent and hair straightening was encouraged. After 1950, however, there was an integration process in the beauty industry: black models were now occasionally hired for commercials that were originally all-white.<sup>113</sup> It was evident that political movements influenced black women's perspectives on beauty, thereby affecting how they internalized physical appeal and beauty standards. Along with the goal of upward mobility emerged a sense of self-pride and love. Black skin, black hair, and black apparel were on display for the world to see, and darker-skinned women were finally able to embrace their natural beauty and appreciate their reflection on magazine covers and movie screens for the first time. Many black women –especially younger women -- stopped straightening their hair and wore afros or braided styles.

Although equality and parity were at the center of the work of Civil Rights activists, the Movement was not exempt from accusations of colorism and racial discord. Pioneer Claudette Colvin was arrested on March 2, 1955, for refusing to give her seat to a white woman on a segregated public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, months before Rosa Parks's arrest. This occurrence was not widely publicized for two reasons. First, Colvin was an unmarried teenager, who was allegedly pregnant by a married man at the time of her arrest. Second, Colvin was dark-skinned. Danielle McGuire (2014) confirms these claims through E.D. Nixon, a civil rights leader and union organizer with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When Nixon arrived at Colvin's house and saw that she was pregnant, he

---

<sup>112</sup> The civil rights movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for blacks to gain equal rights under the law in the United States.

<<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>>

<sup>113</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 169-177

believed her condition would serve as a divisive symbol for the black community. He later said, “Her stomach was beginning to swell, and her mother was ashamed to have her appear in public.” McGuire went on to say, “It was more than Colvin’s pregnancy and her parent’s shame that concerned Nixon. Colvin’s dark skin color and working-class status made her a political liability in certain parts of the black community.”<sup>114</sup> Some in the NAACP believed that Colvin’s efforts to advance the Civil Rights Movement<sup>115</sup> would be more of a liability than an asset. Rosa Parks,<sup>116</sup> secretary for the NAACP, was one of them, noting that although she was a straight A-student and member of the NAACP Youth Council, she had “stepped outside the bounds of respectable behavior for a young woman in the 1950s,” by becoming pregnant out of wedlock.

On October 21, 1955, police arrested Mary Louise Smith, an eighteen-year old woman who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus. Smith, however, was not considered as the symbol for the boycott. In this case, respectability politics was the sole determining factor.<sup>117</sup> On December 1, 1955, when E.D. Nixon received word that Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white woman on the Montgomery city bus, he could barely contain his glee.<sup>118</sup> Parks had proven herself, working with publicized cases like Recy Taylor, Gertrude Perkins and Jeremiah Reeves. She grew up in the Garvey movement, worked with the NAACP for over a decade, and was affiliated with several organizations. For these reasons, she

---

<sup>114</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance-a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 91

<sup>115</sup> The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a civil rights protest during which African Americans refused to ride city buses in Montgomery, Alabama, to protest segregated seating. The boycott took place from December 5, 1955, to December 20, 1956, and is regarded as the first large-scale U.S. demonstration against segregation. < <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/montgomery-bus-boycott>>

<sup>116</sup> Rosa Parks was one of the faces of the Civil Rights Movement. She played many roles in the fight for African American’s freedom, but she is most known for refusing to give her seat to a white woman on a Montgomery, Alabama bus on December 1, 1955. Douglas Brinkley, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Life of Rosa Parks* (London: Orion Publishing House, 2000)

<sup>117</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance-a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 92

<sup>118</sup> iBid, 97

was the perfect person for the role. It did not hurt that she was light-complexioned with black, silky hair. Although she was not a mulatto, her parents were, and her physical appearance likely complimented the cause as much as her accomplishments.<sup>119</sup>

As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, the job market offered opportunities previously not available to both light and dark-skinned blacks. Although racial passing began to decline in the late 1940s to 1950s, stragglers who were holding on made a sharp return to their black families and abandoned the furtive lifestyle. This return to their roots further bolstered the theory that many blacks who chose to racially pass did so out of necessity and not hatred for their race.<sup>120</sup>

Directors and screenwriters continued to use film and television to expose and cure the “virus of prejudice.”<sup>121</sup> The political climate of the 1950s and 1960s revealed a Civil Rights Movement that propelled blacks and women into the limelight, while racial issues of ambiguity, stereotype, and prejudice took center stage. Questions of identity had always been at the forefront of the African-American narrative, and white moviegoers were intrigued by their experience. Hobbs wrote, “In a world made a new, one question loomed large for African-Americans of all complexions, “Who am I going to be?”<sup>122</sup> This question of individuality and autonomy stood at the heart of the social and emotional landscape felt by the African-American, especially those who decided to cross the color barrier and pass for white. The broad scope of

---

<sup>119</sup> The NAACP played a significant role in identifying the prejudices blacks faced in the southern states. Walter Francis White, NAACP President from 1918 until his death in 1955, was light enough to pass for white, and he went undercover to expose the indignities blacks faced at the hands of whites. White painfully attended the lynching of many black men and sat amongst racists who would have killed him had they been aware of his true ethnicity. White was mixed race, with African and European heritage on both sides of his family. In this case, as well as with Rosa Parks, the NAACP leveraged their lighter skin color to promote their activism

<sup>120</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 226

<sup>121</sup> N. Megan Kelley, *Projections of Passing: Postwar Anxieties and Hollywood Films 1947-1960* (University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 31

<sup>122</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 76

racial murkiness blurred the lines of symbolism in ways beyond physiological representation. Blackness represented shades that ran the gamut from milk to coffee, making it difficult to easily identify.

The messages of equality and black beauty in the Civil Rights movement resonated with black youth. Black celebrities functioned in dual roles as activists, dispatching opinions and personal struggles through music and on screen. Nina Simone, hailed as the “songstress for the elite,” was an example of such. She used music, lyrics, and performance strategies to develop black power perspectives that were free of misogyny and claimed black women’s experiences as relevant.<sup>123</sup> In “Four Women,” released in 1965, Simone took the voices of four black women, burdened by their gender and skin color, and gave them their own narrative. There was Aunt Sarah, elderly with black skin and wooly hair; the young yellow woman, Saffronia, the product of a white man raping her mother; Sweet Thing, a tan prostitute with fine hair; and Peaches, who was brown and bitter.<sup>124</sup> These women each have a different story, yet share a common thread: despite their difference in appearance, they are all black and a part of that cultural landscape.

Lena Horne also used her platform to respond to violent acts against blacks, such as the Birmingham church bombing and the murder of Medgar Evers. Historian Ruth Fieldstein noted that Horne was “working to engage with black activism politicized culture in a new way.” She changed her musical style, and songs like, “Now,” reflected her new voice. Although the lyrics were not like the typical freedom songs of the era, they were racially uplifting and affirming.<sup>125</sup>

The lyrics to “Now” challenged white audiences:

If those historic gentlemen came back today  
Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln

---

<sup>123</sup> iBid, 86

<sup>124</sup> Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 108

<sup>125</sup> iBid, 85

And Walter Cronkite put them on channel 2  
To find out what they were thinkin'

I'm sure they'd say  
Thanks for quoting us so much  
But we don't want to take a bow

Enough with the quoting  
Put those words into action  
And we mean action now

Both Simone and Horne maintained a faithful following. Both shared frustration with the treatment of blacks. However, they were on opposite sides of the color spectrum, reinforcing the range of blackness. Simone was dark-skinned with naturally kinky hair, while Horne was very light-skinned and could pass for white. Their political voice was challenged in different ways and that was largely due to their varied skin color.

### **Lights, Camera, Action**

On screen, actresses were doing their part to politicize black womanhood. In 1968, Diahann Carroll challenged the narrative of the black woman with *Julia*, a television series about Julia Baker, an African American widow who worked as a nurse. The pilot episode was very telling as Julia prepared for a job interview. She was forced to leave her six-year-old son in their apartment to care for himself while she kept her appointment. The little boy promised to stay at home and watch television and not answer the door, but when the doorbell rang and he discovered another six-year-old boy, he let him in. While Julia was in her interview, she experienced racism from someone who appeared to be the hiring manager. She was fully qualified, but it was clear that he was not expecting to interview a woman of color. Consequently, Julia was turned away. When she returned home, her door was open and her son was nowhere to be found. Alarmed, she ran through the building and found her son in the apartment of the little boy who he made friends with. The boy's white mother immediately began



to scold Julia for leaving such a young boy at home alone. She was likely a stay-at-home mother and had a husband to financially support her. Once Julia explained that she was a widow seeking employment with no one to care for her son, the white mother instantly and unnaturally softened her stance, and offered to watch her son when Julia was away so that he would not be at home alone in the future. This mechanical pivot to compassion felt like somewhat of a white savior<sup>126</sup> moment in the episode.

*Julia* was groundbreaking in that it portrayed a black woman as a professional, single mother living in a nice community. Her neighbors were white women, which signaled a strong message of upward mobility for blacks. The producers were apt to include that Julia's husband died in the Vietnam war so she did not fall into the unwed black mother stereotype. In 2018, *Smithsonian Magazine* wrote an article on *Julia* and questioned whether the show was relevant as a cultural milestone for black women in television. The commentary suggested that many critics "insisted that television should not sacrifice African-American authenticity to win viewers." Critics perceived the show to be a "sanitized view of African-American life."<sup>127</sup> Critics' consistent refrain was that *Julia*'s message of "middle class comforts" could not possibly be relevant to most African Americans.<sup>128</sup> Despite these remarks, *Julia* did a credible job bringing to the fore the plight of the African-American woman in the workplace. While her

---

<sup>126</sup> The white savior is a cinematic trope where a white character delivers people of color from a terrible fate or undesirable circumstance. An example of this is often portrayed when whites visit countries like Africa, take pictures with impoverished children, and post pictures on social media. In the case of *Julia*, the white mother swooped in, saved the day, and after lambasting the Julia for leaving her six-year old boy alone, offered to care for him while she was at work.

<sup>127</sup> Alice George. "Was the 1968 TV Show 'Julia' a Milestone or a Millstone for Diversity." *Smithsonian*, September 6, 2018 <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/was-1968-tv-show-julia-milestone-or-millstone-180970198/>>

<sup>128</sup> Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 114

experience did not draw parallels to many within the black community, the fact that the first episode portrayed an experience of racism on her first interview cannot be ignored.

In the second episode, the hiring doctor called Julia in for a second meeting, and she informed him that she was a colored nurse. He made a point to let her know that he was not concerned with the color of her skin but did tell her to make herself as “handsome as she could because he was tired of looking at ugly nurses.” Beauty played an important role in the workplace and being presentable was a priority.<sup>129</sup>

## Beauty and Image

Advertisements, like television, sent a decided message. In a 1964 advertisement for bleaching cream (see figure 2.1), an image of a light-skinned model with neatly coiffed hair is directly above the words, “Lighter, Lovelier Skin Beauty with Artra Skin Tone Cream.”<sup>130</sup> The message is clear: the lighter, the lovelier. This ad was featured in a publication that catered to black women, reinforcing the message that blacks should desire lighter skin over dark.



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2

<sup>129</sup> In many ways, workplace dynamics have changed overtly, but beauty standards are still encouraged in covert ways.

<sup>130</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style & Status Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 158

Even when blacks controlled the narrative, skin color was communicated in harmful ways. This was an opportunity support self-love, but instead, the message “You are not enough without the assistance of bleaching creams” was prevalent and used to perpetuate the notion that lighter skin was more appealing. Black women were encouraged to change their skin, hair, and eye color to be recognized as beautiful. Even then, there were no guarantees. Although the ad for bleaching cream was printed in 1964, black beauty was under evaluation, reigniting pride not seen since the Garvey Movement at the turn of the century. There was a grassroots effort to redefine what was considered beautiful. Many black women embraced the natural look that the afro offered while others made it clear that they were not rejecting straight hair altogether.”<sup>131</sup>

### **Strength in Numbers**

A focus on black power as opposed to nonviolent resistance was a growing message among black youth, and the Black Panther movement had a consistent following.<sup>132</sup> This changed the cultural message, at least for some time. The movement’s following was strong in shaping the thoughts and views of their loyalists, and within a few years, commercials and ads shifted from bleaching creams and hair straighteners to African soap and afros (see figure 2.3).<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style & Status Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 169-170

<sup>132</sup> The Black Panther Party was a far-left political organization created Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, to fight back against police brutality and unfair treatment against blacks.

<sup>133</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style & Status Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 177



Michelle Wallace discussed the challenges she faced in 1968 when she let her hair go natural for the second time. She regarded her old hairstyle as a cultural trapping of femininity, and abandoned make-up, heels, and girdles in exchange for jeans and African print dresses.<sup>137</sup> In *Style and Status*, Susannah Walker effectively captured the pressure women experienced while trying to meet a cultural aesthetic expectation regarding “proper” dress and hair.

Beauty and skin color, then, represented a contested terrain for black women. Discrimination and bias amongst women of the same race based on their skin color was no longer one-dimensional. By the late 1960s, both dark and light-skinned women experienced varying forms of skin tone prejudice.

In *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body*, Meeta Rani Jha discussed beauty as gender oppression and radical feminism. She specifically focused on the Miss America pageant and how it defined beauty. The feminist organization, New York Radical Women (NYRW), active from 1967 to 1969, was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and used its business model for protest against the Miss America Pageant.<sup>138</sup> NYRW said “the pageant not only judged women based on ludicrous beauty standards, but supported the immoral Vietnam War by sending the winner to entertain the troops.” NYRW also protested the racism of the pageant, which had never yet crowned a black Miss America.”<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> iBid, 147

<sup>138</sup> Meeta Rhani Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body* (Routledge, 2016), 14

<sup>139</sup>Linda Napikoski "New York Radical Women: 1960s Feminist Group." ThoughtCo.  
<https://www.thoughtco.com/new-york-radical-women-group-3528974>



Figure 2.4  
NYRW Protesting the Miss America Pageant

The first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, was crowned in 1984. Ms. Williams was light-skinned with straight hair and green eyes. The responses to Williams' success varied. Some viewed her crowning as society's way of perpetuating racist ideologies regarding black beauty and skin color. Others were pleased to see a black woman receive the long overdue chair at the beauty table.<sup>140</sup>

In *The Antioch Review*, historian Gerald Early recalled listening to a local black call-in radio show the Monday morning following the pageant. He said many black men complained vociferously about Williams. One caller, a journalist for the local black newspaper, found her "politically unaware" because she refused to be a spokesperson for her race. He considered her a "liability to the black community." Another man expressed bitterness over his perception that white America wished to diminish the black man by elevating the black women. It was other black women, however, who spoke favorably of Williams' accomplishment. Early noted that the black women he knew were "overjoyed about a black woman becoming Miss America."

Although Early recognized that Williams could have passed for a "very pronounced

---

<sup>140</sup> Gerald Early, "Waiting for Miss America." *The Antioch Review* 42, no. 3 (1984): 291-305. Accessed April 26, 2020. doi:10.2307/4611364.

quadroon,”<sup>141</sup> in that moment, black women seemingly accepted her as black, marking a significant shift in how blackness was defined within the African American circuit. Although by legal standards any drop of black blood reflected blackness, when women were very light skin, they were represented as not really black or only “kind of” black. Each of these made black women’s acceptance of Williams as Miss America very significant.

Black women’s experiences with skin tone bias were often shaped by their families. As Marita Golden discussed, it was her mother’s commentary that molded her perspectives on skin color and beauty.<sup>142</sup> In *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, JeffriAnne Wilder uses oral histories to relay the accounts by subjects Rachel and Monica, and their experiences within the family unit. Rachel was the lightest of her siblings, and the obvious favorite of her parents. Rachel’s siblings grew to hate her and lashed out by slashing her clothing and cutting her hair while she was asleep. Once her father left the home, her mother invited her aunt — who resented her light-skin — to live with the family. She often scolded her for “flipping her hair like a white bitch.” Rachel, who was in her twenties at the time of the interview, began to feel insecure each time she happened to toss her hair. She was, however, gaining confidence through therapy.<sup>143</sup>

Monica’s grandmother, by contrast, perpetuated another kind of color bias within her family. She was significantly lighter than her other two siblings, and her light-skinned grandmother, who could easily pass for white, made comments about her beauty in ways that elevated her above them. One sister ultimately gained acceptance with her grandmother because

---

<sup>141</sup> Gerald Early, “Waiting for Miss America.” *The Antioch Review* 42, no. 3 (1984): 291-305. Accessed April 26, 2020. doi:10.2307/4611364.

<sup>142</sup> Marita Golden, *Don’t Play in the Sun: One Woman’s Journey through the Color Complex* (New York, NY: Anchor Press, 2005), 9

<sup>143</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (Florida: Harcourt Jananovich, 1992), 95-96

of her angular features and smooth, curly hair.<sup>144</sup> This is a prime example of how color bias and hair politics are closely related. Although Monica's sister did not possess the coveted light skin color, her hair texture served as a modifier. Certain textures were preferred above others amongst blacks. The term "good hair" was used socially to reference black hair textures that retained limited African features.<sup>145</sup> The notion of what constituted "good hair" symbolized the presence of a culture other than full blooded blackness. It was redundant to refer to other non-African ethnic groups as having good hair. By this standard, the word "good" meant anti-African.

In *Black is a Woman's Color*, feminist author and social activist bell hooks opened by sharing an experience many black girls are familiar with sitting between the legs of their mother, sister or aunt and having their hair combed. She noted that we pretend that the standards of beauty we measure ourselves against are our own, but they are not. hooks' characters were fictional, all the while sharing authentic experiences. The protagonist was a little black girl who recognized that having her hair straightened with a hot comb was an important ritual that did not represent a desire to be white, but rather an acceptance of the standards set in a world she had no control over. These rituals were inspired by the longing to achieve good hair at any cost. This included sitting in fear as the hot comb approached your head. This was a rite of passage for black girls on their way to womanhood. Long and flowing hair was a signifier for beauty and maturity. According to hooks:

Good hair is hair that is not kinky, hair that does not feel like balls of steel wool, hair that does not take hours to comb, hair that does not need tons of grease to untangle, hair that is long. Real good hair is straight hair, hair like white folks' hair.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> JeffriAnne Wilder, *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century* (California: Praeger Press, 2015), 110

<sup>145</sup> *ibid*, 147

<sup>146</sup> bell hooks, "From *Black is a Woman's Color*," *Callaloo* No. 39 (1989): 382-388



By this definition, good hair was equated with beauty, which was tantamount to whiteness. It is safe to conclude that beauty and whiteness are synonymous terms used to shape the minds of black girls and women hoping to achieve good hair.

Michelle Wallace recalled playing with her sister and tying scarves at the ends of her pigtails to achieve long flowy hair. Like millions of other little girls, they pretended to be women. Her perception of womanhood, however, meant altering her natural beauty. She perceived at an early age that she was not enough. Like Ariyonna and Maya Angelou, Wallace discovered that the line between wanting to look white and wanting to be beautiful was a blurry one.<sup>147</sup> By their estimation, “being feminine meant being white,” and they longed to exist in their own skin and feel beautiful. Black and beautiful. Black and free.

Freedom Hair  
unrestricted/unrestrained/uncompromising  
untamed/not straightened/natural/protesting  
Kinky/nappy/Revolutionary hair/Black folks hair  
Don't want to be arrested/subdued/controlled  
checked/restricted/restrained/or corralled/black  
folks hair/freedom hair  
Every grain not the same/exalt itself to  
the sky/giving freedom cry/Hair/Black  
folks hair/freedom hair  
unrestricted/unrestrained/uncompromising  
untamed/not straightened/natural/protesting  
kinky/nappy/Revolutionary hair/Black folks hair<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky), 147

<sup>148</sup> Abraham Chapman, *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (New York: New American Library, 1972), 388

### Chapter 3| I SEE You...

In a land who loves its blond, blue eyed children, who weeps for the dreams of a black girl?

*Toni Morrison*  
*The Bluest Eye*<sup>149</sup>

Sandra Braine, the program director at a social services clinic, shared her experience of working with black, teenaged girls. The girls would fantasize about babies with “light-skin, light eyes, and good hair.” According to Braine, the ones who desired lighter-skinned babies the most were dark-skinned and had lighter-skinned mothers. They grew up internalizing the shame their mothers felt for having daughters who were dark. Some girls confessed to intentionally getting pregnant by lighter-skinned boys in hopes of having a light-skinned baby who would finally bring them love.<sup>150</sup> Although the narrative regarding skin tone bias was formed by their mothers, it is safe to say that the media likely played a key role in perpetuating the message to these young black women that they were not enough.<sup>151</sup>

For over a decade, black publications such as *Essence*, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Our World*, *Negro Digest*, *Hue*, *Tan*, *Color and Eyes*, and *Sepia* functioned as a separate social entity of American society.<sup>152</sup> Black-owned media outlets used their platform to communicate with African Americans in a more intentional way and became a powerful voice in a world where everything that was right, was white. Black women, specifically, turned to “their own” for direction and acceptance. Early on in this media relationship, however, black women were stymied by capitalist ventures and motives. They were confronted by pages detailing myriads of products

---

<sup>149</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Random House, 1970)

<sup>150</sup> Ronald Hall et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York, NY: Doubleday Press 1992), 94-95

<sup>151</sup> This is an example of how dangerous cycles are embraced throughout generations. Their mothers were likely influenced by media as well.

<sup>152</sup> Lorneth Delora Fahie, *Colorism in African American Magazine Publications* (2005)

that communicated to them that they were not enough. It was not until the late 1960s that black black<sup>153</sup> women found solace in the ability to identify with the beauty portrayed on the covers. These depictions have evolved over the years, and with each evolution, emerged a new purpose. Accurate portrayals of black womanhood in pop culture were relatively new, so representation was vital to laying the groundwork for lasting impressions. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus predominantly on the ways *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence* communicated skin tone bias through their magazine covers and interweave commentary and images from other sources.

*Ebony Magazine* was the first of the trio to be introduced to mainstream media in 1945. Created by Johnson Publication, the intention of the magazine was to address social issues of its time. It was to be the African American comparative to *Life Magazine*<sup>154</sup>. Over the course of the magazine's first decade, magazine covers ranged from social to political to entertainment. *Ebony* addressed issues specific to the black community such as racial passing, marrying outside the race, cultivating identity, and befriending whites. This magazine was holistic in that it encompassed almost every facet of life. In my review of the cover images from 1950 to 1990, I discovered that celebrities of all shades of brown received nearly equal recognition. They featured men and women ranging from Lena Horne and Cicely Tyson to Nat King Cole and Muhammed Ali. Skin tone bias was not relevant until questions of romance and beauty unfolded.

On occasions when the magazine featured a male and female couple, eight out of ten times, the man was darker, and the woman was considerably lighter (see figures 3.1 to 3.6 on the next page). A semiotic analysis revealed that the cultural norms visually communicated to the

---

<sup>153</sup> I will use "black black" as a schematic following Alice Walker's description in her book, *"In Search of Our Mother's Gardens."* "Black black" will make distinctions regarding the kind of pain relative to the color.

<sup>154</sup> Life Magazine was a general interest magazine that served as the preeminent voice on social issues and entertainment in America. It's original motto, "While there's Life, there's hope" was indicative of the energy behind its weekly messages. Ebony Magazine wanted to offer that same energy to the African American community with topics that were specific to the needs of blacks.

black community through these images were “black men prefer lighter skinned women,” “light skinned women get the man,” or “black men find lighter skinned black women more attractive.” This cultural phenomenon was not limited to magazine covers, though. In a 1952 article of *Our World Magazine*, black cartoonist E. Sims Campbell attempted to articulate what he considered sex appeal. He responded by saying:

If I were to draw a picture of the perfect Negro beauty, I would have to select at least one feature from each of nine lovely women, including Lena Horne’s nose (“I like the refined, extremely sensitive curves of her nostrils”) and “full-bodied” but not overly sensuous” lips. Marian Anderson’s “chin, throat, and shoulders,” Dorothy Dandridge’s “sensuous and weaving” waist, Pearl Bailey’s arms and hands, Katherine Dunham’s hips, and Josephine Baker’s autumnal brown complexion.<sup>155</sup>

Campbell’s rendering of his perfect Negro woman sends the message that light-skinned women and their Eurocentric features are more attractive than dark-skinned women; with the exception of their hands and arms. Although *Ebony* never officially used this language, the images depicted on the covers where beauty and relationships were portrayed seem to align with Campbell’s sentiment.

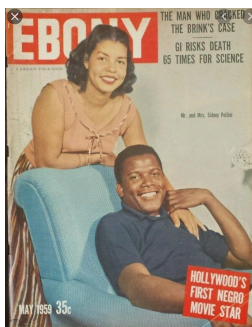


Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2

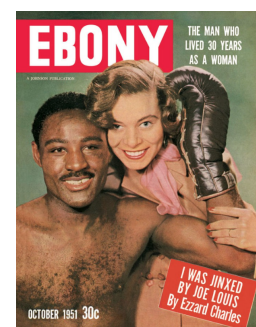


Figure 3.3

<sup>155</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 133



Figure 3.4



Figure 3.5



Figure 3.6

My observations regarding *Ebony* align with the studies of Michael K. Chapko and N. Van Goodlow, who both conducted research that included *Ebony* advertisements from 1950 to 1991. Chapko measured the years 1952 to 1968, and Van Goodlow approached his examination of female depiction in the media in three spans: 1950–1964, 1965–1978, and 1979–1991. Their research revealed that men are often featured in the media with darker skin, and women are represented with more European features. Van Goodlow differs slightly from Chapko in that natural hair, which is considered an Afro-centric feature, was reflected throughout each decade.<sup>156</sup>

Beauty was held to a different standard from entertainment and politics, but often communicated in the same manner as romantic relationships. Lighter-skinned women were portrayed as sensuous and these illustrations represented a standard of appeal that normalized black women's concept of the "ideal" skin tone. This conditioning further perpetuated color prejudice within the black community and shaped black women's self-image by way of social comparison.<sup>157</sup> In November 1956, *Ebony*'s cover story read, "Women's hairstyles that men prefer." The model portrayed had light skin with long and silky black hair. This look was a stark contrast from the hairstyles and textures representative of black black women, which encourages

<sup>156</sup> Lorneth Delora Fahie, *Colorism in African American Magazine Publications* (2005), 13

<sup>157</sup> iBid, 12

the consumer of these magazines to assume that men prefer light skinned women or that women should wear their hair in styles that appeal to men. With which race do the men who were polled for this article identify?



Figure 3.7

*Jet Magazine*, which was also represented by Johnson Publication, released their first issue in November 1951. In that issue, Johnson wrote, "In the world today everything is moving along at a faster clip. There is more news and far less time to read it."<sup>158</sup> There was a great deal of information packed into one small booklet, so *Jet Magazine* had to be intentional with what was included. Like *Ebony*, *Jet's* publication was intended to cover many facets of life including: beauty, politics, entertainment, and fashion. The appeal was to both men and women, and *Jet Magazine* used beauty to lure readers to their stories.

The first cover featured an image of a light-skinned woman dressed in a fur coat. The underlying message communicated that "Black prosperity is on the rise." This cover was published at the onset of the Civil Rights Movement where increasing numbers of African Americans experienced upward mobility. The first six issues featured sultry photos of light-skinned women, with the exception of the third, where Billy Daniels was highlighted (see figures 3.8-3.13).

---

<sup>158</sup> Brenna Wynn Greer, "Represented: The Black Imagemakers Who Reimagined African American Citizenship (PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) 186





1960s



Figure 3.16



Figure 3.17

1970s



Figure 3.18



Figure 3.19



1980s



Figure 3.20



Figure 3.21

The Eurocentric-leaning beauty standard was consistent until the 1970s where one of the models appeared medium-brown and the other wore an afro. Both images were a deviation from the cover photos in previous years. The message signaled by these images supports the political shifts that influenced beauty and the media during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>159</sup>

According to Teresa Martin and Jennifer Woodard Bailey, "On newsstands in May 1970, *Essence* spoke to Black women and was privy to their concerns in a way that was culturally unique distinct, and specific."<sup>160</sup> *Essence* entered the black media scene at a time when it was fitting to recognize the black woman. *Essence* was unique from *Ebony* and *Jet* in that it

<sup>159</sup> Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Status Selling Beauty to African American Women. 1920-1975* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 171

<sup>160</sup> Teresa Martin and Jennifer Bailey Woodard, Black Womanhood: *Essence* and its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women, *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol 36, No.2, (2005): 264-281

catered specifically to black women, as opposed to the black community as a whole. This niche marketing was essential in meeting the needs of black women in a way that no other publication had done before. Black women turned to *Essence* to be recognized and heard. The first two issues did not disappoint readers with two black women with afros featured on the cover.



Figure 3.22



Figure 3.23

*Essence* also differed from *Ebony* and *Jet* in the way it represented black love and how black men defined beauty. Black men were consistently featured on the cover with dark skinned black women, a stark contrast to *Ebony* and *Jet*. In this case, a semiotic analysis of these images of black love conveyed that black men love black women, black men find black women attractive, and black love is sensual. A close reading of the images also suggests that black men are protective of black women.



Figure 3.24

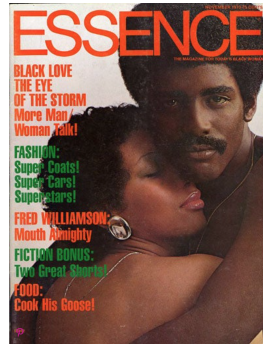


Figure 3.25



Figure 3.26



Figure 3.27



Figure 3.28



Figure 3.29

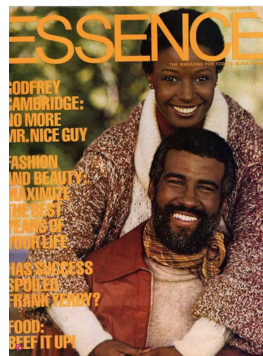


Figure 3.30



Figure 3.31<sup>161</sup>

Whereas *Ebony* and *Jet*'s inaugural issues featured lighter-skinned women and gradually introduced darker-skinned women, *Essence* employed the reverse strategy. They did not acknowledge lighter-skinned black women on their cover until the mid 1980's (See figures 3.32-3.34). An analysis of their cover images revealed that they did not feature a light-skinned woman until Vanessa Williams, in 1984, after she was the first black woman crowned Miss America.<sup>162</sup> *Essence*, however, did not discard their appreciation for darker-skinned women once they introduced Williams. They continued to disproportionately feature darker-skinned women, and the only notable change was the shift from natural to chemically straightened hair. *Essence*

<sup>161</sup> I was unable to make appointments to view archives due to the Coronavirus pandemic. For this reason, I do not have release dates for every magazine referenced in this chapter.

<sup>162</sup> This makes me wonder whether the crowning of Vanessa Williams as a black woman was critical in black women's acknowledgement of light-skinned black women as black.



utilized an entire decade of paying homage to black women in a considerable way. They conveyed the message “Black, black is beautiful,” and laid the groundwork for black women to accept a space where their beauty was appreciated and understood.



Figure 3.32



Figure 3.33



Figure 3.34

The Black is Beautiful movement was highlighted in social science studies from 1960 to 1990. Research showed that African American women in college were more satisfied with their skin tone and body types, irrespective of how light or dark they were. Researchers also found when investigating the impact of mass media on black women’s self-esteem and body shape, black women dismissed images of white women as unimportant, but were negatively affected by images of attractive black women.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Meeta Rani Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism and the National Body* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2016), 43

## HBCUs

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), were the only institutions in the United States created for the express purpose of educating African Americans.<sup>164</sup> With the help of The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church), most HBCU's were erected during the years following the Civil War and throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

Institutions such as Spelman College (1881) in Atlanta, Georgia, Wilberforce (1856) in Ohio, Morgan State (1867) in Baltimore, Maryland, Howard University (1867) in Washington, D.C., Hampton University (1868) in Virginia, and Fisk University (1866) in Tennessee, were among the best in liberal arts and highly esteemed by whites and blacks alike. Unsurprisingly, lighter-skinned blacks were often in a better position to gain acceptance because of their exposure to formal education.<sup>165</sup> Darker skinned blacks were steered towards institutions like Tuskegee Institute of Alabama who offered a vocational curriculum. Tuskegee was founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington,<sup>166</sup> who believed that "Negroes, particularly those who were not members of the aristocracy, should concentrate their energies on becoming skilled workers."<sup>167</sup> Scholars, Marybeth Gasman and Ufuoma Abiola, wrote, "After the fall of slavery, lighter-skinned blacks used a combination of their skin color, informal education learned in plantation houses, and adoption of white values to assimilate into white culture to the extent that whites would allow them to do so."<sup>168</sup> In *Color and Class: The Promulgation of Elitist Attitudes in*

---

<sup>164</sup> Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman, "Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities," Theory into Practice (August 2015): 40

<sup>165</sup> iBid, 42

<sup>166</sup> Booker T. Washington was a prominent and respected figure in the black community. He derived from the last generation of black American leaders born into slavery and became the leading voice of the former slaves and their descendants. Booker T. Washington, "Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of American Literature, (vol.4, Gale, 2009), pp. 1626-1630

<sup>167</sup> Ronald Hall et al, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 28-29

<sup>168</sup> Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman, "Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities," Theory into Practice (August 2015): 41

*Black Colleges*, Bianca Taylor wrote, “From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, HBCUs served as either a barricade or a conduit toward achieving social acceptance and influence within the black community, and success depended upon one’s skin color, family status, and the education level of the family.”<sup>169</sup>

In *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Gloria shared her account of migrating from Jamaica to attend an HBCU in the Northeast. She was darker than a brown paper bag, but her grandmother was light-skinned, along with other close relatives. Her experience back home was very different as the community vouched for her based on her family members and their light color.<sup>170</sup> When Gloria came to the States, her brown skin became more salient as she was forced to navigate an all-black college without the support of her family, whose skin color had previously gained her access to social groups and benefits typically only afforded to light-skinned women.

Social activities at HBCUs were often an opportunity to promote skin tone bias. The problem was particularly pronounced in some black sororities. Some sorority sisters at HBCUs were subject to blue vein and brown paper bag tests (mentioned in Chapter One), and women who did not pass these tests were denied admission. HBCU homecoming beauty queens and members of the homecoming court also brought skin tone and colorism dynamics into play.<sup>171</sup> If a dark-skinned woman was selected as Homecoming Queen, she often became the victim of verbal and emotional abuse.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>169</sup> <sup>169</sup> Bianca Taylor, *The Promulgation of Elitist Attitudes at Black Colleges*. In Gasman M.” 2009

<sup>170</sup> Some dark-skinned women were given a free pass because of lighter skinned relatives.

<sup>171</sup> Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman, “*Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities*,” *Theory into Practice* (August 2015): 42

<sup>172</sup> Bianca Taylor, *The Promulgation of Elitist Attitudes at Black Colleges*. In Gasman M.” 2009

There was an unspoken understanding within HBCU sororities and fraternities that lighter-skinned women pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), and darker-skinned women pledged Delta Sigma Theta (Delata).<sup>173</sup> Shirelle shared her sorority experience and frustration with being stereotyped as a snob. She said, “People always assume that because I’m light skinned that I am stuck up, and they say, “Oh, you’d make the perfect AKA...” AKA’s became synonymous with lighter skin and conceited behavior. Although Shirelle refutes the assertion that she is arrogant or snobby, the internalized script of superiority perpetuates the chasm between light and dark-skinned women.

Conversely, there are women who experience other forms of color bias within these sororities. Bernice and Yolanda are both members of the AKA sorority, but they are visibly darker than a brown paper bag. They discussed the pain felt once others discovered which organization they pledged. Yolanda wrote, “Everyone around here is confused because we are members of AKA. We joke about it because we just crossed into Alpha Kappa Alpha a few weeks ago and because Bernice and I are a little bit darker than a paper bag, people assume that we wouldn’t be AKA’s. But the stereotypes that are connected out there, they are hurtful, and people just perpetuate them continuously.”<sup>174</sup>

*School Daze*, the 1988 film directed by Spike Lee, was set on the campus of Mission College, a fictional HBCU in Atlanta, Georgia. *School Daze* centered around the experiences of women and men pledging in sororities and fraternities. For this reason, there was a strong undercurrent of color prejudice. There were the Gamma Rays, whose aesthetic was similar to the AKA’s in that the women were predominantly light-skinned with long hair, although this claim

---

<sup>173</sup> JeffriAnne Wilder, *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 122-123

<sup>174</sup> *i*Bid, 71

is not necessarily true, this is the perception of many people. The other group of women were not part of a sorority but functioned in a similar manner and shared a sisterhood. They were led by Rachel, a woman who was the girlfriend of a militant student who headed the anti-apartheid movement on campus. These female characters flaunted unprocessed hair, short haircuts, and a low maintenance beauty lifestyle. They called the Gamma Rays “Wannabees” and the Gamma Ray’s called them “Jigaboos.”<sup>175</sup> For much of the film, these women debated skin color and hair texture.<sup>176</sup>

*School Daze* was successful in generating discussion about colorism and the relationship between skin tone and hair. The serious but almost jovial nature disarmed those who enjoyed the dance-off<sup>177</sup> among Rachel, Jane, and their cohorts, yet still conveyed an important message. In other ways, the movie perpetuated the colorist stereotypes it was trying to expose. The Gamma Rays were “well-kept,” wore fashionable clothing, and sought after by attractive men on campus. This image supported the studies which claim lighter-skinned women were more likely to wed successful men than darker-skinned women. Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver noted in *The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order* that dark-skinned blacks were less likely to marry, and if they did, their spouses were of relatively lower socioeconomic status.<sup>178</sup>

Skin tone politics repositioned during the Civil Rights Movement. Blackness was embraced and lighter-skinned students found themselves defending their blackness, particularly at HBCUs.<sup>179</sup> As a result, “colorism seemed to increasingly encompass new dimensions of backlash, where-in light-complexioned people perceived that they were marginalized within their

---

<sup>175</sup> Jigaboo is a derogatory term used to define a black person. It is often used interchangeably with the word nigger.

<sup>176</sup> The notion of good hair was discussed in chapter 2 and is tantamount to skin tone bias.

<sup>177</sup> A dance-off is an informal dance competition.

<sup>178</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver, “*The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order*,” *Social Forces*, Volume 86, Number 2, (December 2007): 6



own communities.”<sup>180</sup> This substitution of ideals turned colorism on its head, and what was originally one-dimensional, became a binary.

---

<sup>180</sup> Ufuoma Abiola and Marybeth Gasman, “*Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities*,” *Theory into Practice* (August 2015): 39-45

## Discussion and Conclusion| Do we REALLY get it?

I, too, sing America. I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen when company comes, but I laugh, and eat well, and grow strong. Tomorrow, I'll be at the table when company comes. Nobody'll dare say to me, "Eat in the kitchen," then. Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed- I, too, am America,

I, Too  
Langston Hughes<sup>181</sup>

The ubiquitous effort to create hierarchies of value based on skin color inspired hate and division. The purpose of this thesis was to identify the foundation of those divisions, evaluate the journey of discrimination within the black community, and discover ways to reduce the separation between lighter and darker-skinned black women.

I analyzed the discussion surrounding colorism from 1950 to 1990 and determined that while some scholars, artists, and filmmakers were successful in portraying the challenges black women faced, others were unwavering in their conviction that color bias only pertains to dark-skinned women. I am inclined to believe that scholars who wrote about colorism prior to the Civil Rights Movement were accurate in their depiction, which was one dimensional as we know it today. Scholars who addressed colorism after that period without exploring all accounts did not consider its evolution.

Just as colorism developed, so has racial passing. When Barack Obama was elected, some argued that we live in a post-racial society but we can no longer make this argument seeing the reality of Donald Trump and his supporters. Racial fluidity is a buzzword, and I cannot help but wonder, "Who has curated the symbols that determine race?" Societal demands relocated the discernible trademarks for passing within the African American community and racial identity is a fluctuating social construct that shifts with time and context. The underlying question,

---

<sup>181</sup> Thomas R. Frazier, *Afro American History: Primary Sources*, (USA: The Dorsey Press, 1988), 246

however, is “Does racial identity changeable or remain fixed?” The answer is vital to understanding how colorism is viewed amongst African Americans.

## **Representation**

For decades, popular culture has predominantly portrayed African Americans in roles of poverty, criminality, or servitude, which created an image other races use to perpetuate discrimination. In recent years, however, there has been very little to socially distinguish black and white families on screen. The television comedy, *Black-ish*, is an example of racial fluidity that blurs the identity lines. The show follows the interpersonal and sociopolitical issues that arise within a family between a mother, father, four children, and the father’s parents. The mother, Rainbow (Tracee Ellis Ross), is a medical doctor and biracial. The father, Dre (Anthony Anderson), is a public relations executive and a black man. They live comfortably in a California suburb, which is a stark contrast to where Dre grew up in Brooklyn.

In season 5, an episode entitled “Black Like Us” featured colorism as a theme and the questions that arise as a result. Diane, the youngest daughter and darkest member of her family, took school photos that cast her in an uncomfortable light. Rainbow called the photo “thoughtless and hurtful.” Diane’s parents immediately reacted defensively and suggested that the school was insensitive in not taking her skin tone into account. This prompted Dre to give the family an abridged African-American history lesson where he defined colorism as “the racist belief that light skin is good and dark skin is bad.”<sup>182</sup> Rainbow, offended by the assumption that darker-skinned blacks are the only ones who experience colorism, argued that light-skinned blacks face discrimination, too. Dre’s mother, Ruby, played by Jennifer Lewis, joked, “It is the same way that rich people have problems. “Oh, no, I can’t fit all my money in my pocket!”

---

<sup>182</sup> ABC, *Black-ish*, Season 5, Episode 10, aired January 15, 2019

Rainbow became visibly upset, and Dre claimed to be joking. Rainbow made an important point by saying that their reactions were why she never wants to discuss colorism; all she gets in return are jokes at her expense. Ruby chimed that she “would gladly trade a few jokes for light skin privilege.” Her assertion buttresses the point that colorism against light-skinned people is not taken seriously. Dre and Ruby’s comments regarding Rainbow’s ability to assimilate easier seems as though darker-skinned blacks valued approval from white society more than acceptance from within their own culture. Dre and Ruby continued to invalidate Rainbow’s feelings by reiterating that they “were only making jokes, not oppression,” as though mean comments parading as humor is acceptable so long as it does not rise to the level of abuse. When their very light-skinned son, Junior, asked if it was okay if he made a dark-skinned joke, Dre dared him in a threatening manner. Ruby then said to Rainbow that “she can be hurt if she wants to, but if she (Rainbow) gets to complain about a few jokes, then she (Ruby) gets to complain about how light skin is the black standard of beauty.” This suggested that light-skinned women were punished by darker-skinned women for a beauty standard they did not create. Rainbow expressed frustration because when she walks down the street, all whites see is a black woman; not a light-skinned black woman. She was tired of hearing that she was not black enough.

The episode ended with Ruby explaining that she was the darkest in her family. Her mother’s people were Creole with very light skin, and her father was dark. She was treated poorly by her mother’s family and not allowed to play in the front yard with her cousins. Because of her dark skin and nappy hair; she had to play in the back. Ruby recognized that her anger was misdirected and she was punishing Rainbow for the way she was treated as a child. Rainbow expressed sympathy for Ruby’s upbringing and Ruby affirmed Rainbow by telling her that she is a “good black mother.” This emotional episode offered an example of how intense the

discussion of colorism can be. It also confirmed that, if addressed in the right way, healing can take place.

Covering such an important topic, I searched for critical responses to this episode of *Black-ish*, and the overwhelming majority of people were in awe of its candor and how well it was executed. The only complaint (if you can call it one) was the representation of gender issues specific to the African American community. Viewers took to Twitter to express their disappointment over the lack of acknowledgement of black women's struggle versus black men. These fans pointed out that colorism on television often affects black women more than black men, and actors like Idris Elba and Denzel Washington are desired as sex symbols.<sup>183</sup> I cannot help but juxtapose the Twitter commentary to my research on *Ebony* magazine covers and note that, despite the fact that much changes in the field of representation, much stays the same.

### **Light Like Us**

Discrimination against lighter-skinned blacks often stems from the perception that they believe they are “better than” darker blacks, as opposed to facing an elitist structure as was the case with prejudice against black black women. This conviction stemmed from years of slave masters conditioning black black mothers into believing that lighter-skinned women were better, than darker complexioned women. Even though this line of reasoning is antiquated, its effects are still in full view today.

In 2011, director Bill Duke released *Dark Girls*, a documentary exploring colorism from the perspective of darker-skinned women. I believe it was Duke's intent to bring to the fore the perpetuation of skin tone bias and examine its roots in slavery. In his effort to do so, however, he nullified the experience of an entire group of black women. *Dark Girls* opened with a little girl

---

<sup>183</sup> Kearie Daniel, “I Love That Black-ish Took on Colourism, But It Missed One Big Thing.” Flare, 18 January 2019

answering questions regarding color bias and her concerns with having dark skin. “Do you like being called black?” asked the male voice. The little girl explained that she was not black, and therefore, did not appreciate the reference.<sup>184</sup> This scene was instrumental in establishing a tone for the documentary. It was evident to me that there was a deeper understanding of what being called “black” meant to women with dark skin. Black meant being ugly.

Participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences with colorism. Some shared the pain of being isolated and taunted in school. Others expressed the void of never being enough for their mothers or rejection from boyfriends who dated them but made it clear that they could never take a dark-skinned woman home to their families. I distinctly recall a woman sharing an interaction with her mother who was on a telephone call and expressed pride in having such an intelligent and beautiful daughter. She, then, deflated her spirit by noting how far she could go in life “if only she had light skin.”

In addition to oral histories and personal experiences, scholars interviewed for the film were available to elaborate on the disparity in treatment between light and dark-skinned black women. Much of this exploration dated back to slavery, where the house and field slave narrative was prevalent. A comprehensive opinion analyzing the effects of discrimination on both light and dark-skinned blacks would have been a good faith effort at addressing colorism and unifying African American women. Unfortunately, Duke did not do this.

It appeared as though Duke received backlash from lighter-skinned women who shared their experiences which was the motivation for his release of *Light Girls* five years later. In my opinion, anyone who discussed colorism from the perspective of dark-skinned women without

---

<sup>184</sup> “Dark Girls.” Duke Media and Urban Winter ENT, 2011.

including the discrimination and bias against light-skinned women beyond 1970 is reinforcing the colorist prejudices they allegedly seek to expose. Colorism is no longer just a dark-skinned woman's issue.

The follow-up documentary, *Light Girls*, seemed like an afterthought and did not offer the same level of analysis as its predecessor. The separation from the original detracted from its credibility, exposing its message to critics who claimed plausible deniability and questioned whether lighter-skinned black women were capable of experiencing colorism. Actors, comediennes, scholars, and non-public figures shared their thoughts on colorism in this film. Iyanla Vanzant, inspirational speaker and lawyer, said that, "The issue of value and worth associated with color of one's skin was cellular." Dr. Allyson Hobbs, historian and professor, noted that slave masters raping slaves were part of what produced a light population. Ronald Hall and Dr. Margaret Hunter (Head of Sociology, Mills College) added to the scholarly voices exploring the history behind the paper bag and comb tests. There were credible sources available to discuss the issues light skinned women face, but still, it felt a bit thrown together and lacked the powerful message of the previous one.<sup>185</sup>

In a 2015 *Essence* article, journalist Janelle Harris wrote a review regarding the controversial film. On one hand, Harris seemed to take issue with the quality of the content, expressing concern over whether *Light Girls* received the same attention as *Dark Girls*. On the other hand, she appeared to mock the notion of colorism against light-skinned black women. She said, "To be fair, a documentary about the colorism-related hurts of light skinned and biracial women had a hard way to go before it even aired. Critics were loaded, cocked, and aimed well in advance across social media, so much so that the controversy around the show probably netted

---

<sup>185</sup> "Light Girls"." Duke Media and Urban Winter ENT, 2015

more viewers than it would've gotten without it.”<sup>186</sup> This attitude dilutes the potency of light-skinned women's personal experiences. Most shocking is that Harris' comments were made just four years ago after so much progress had seemingly been made in relation to these divisions.

## Identity

Black women's identity has historically been commodified and politicized for financial gain. The documentary, *My Black is Beautiful: Imagine a Future* (Cortes 2007), was about a young black woman who struggled with the belief that she was ugly because of her dark skin and African features. The documentary was predicated on the Black is Beautiful movement previously discussed in Chapter 2. Just when viewers were ready to identify with the experiences portrayed, researchers discovered that Procter and Gamble sponsored the film. Their involvement cast a shadow on this production since they promote contradictory messages on race and beauty.<sup>187</sup>

In 2017, Dove soap aired a commercial where a brown-skinned woman used their product to become clean. As the black actor washed her skin, she turned into a white woman, promoting the message that brown is dirty.<sup>188</sup> The criticism was swift, and Dove issued an apology. Despite the significant strides society has made in addressing color-related matters, companies and filmmakers still get it wrong sometimes. In this era where people are arguably

---

<sup>186</sup> Janelle Harris, “Light Girls Presented More Problems Than Answers,” *Essence Magazine*, 21 January 2015 < <https://www.essence.com/news/write-or-die-chick-light-girls-presented-more-problems-answers/> >

<sup>187</sup> Meeta Rani Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism and the National Body* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2016), 31

<sup>188</sup> Cleve R. Wootson, “A Dove ad showed a black woman turning herself white. The backlash is growing,” *The Washington Post on the Web*, 9, Oct 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2017/10/08/dove-ad-that-shows-a-black-woman-turning-herself-white-sparks-consumer-backlash/>



woke,<sup>189</sup> the insidiousness of colorism makes it difficult to overlook. In “*If You is White, You’re Alright...*” *Stories about Colorism in America*, Kimberly Jade Norwood noted that even in cases where the media has taken an authentic role in exposing colorism, it paradoxically continues to broadcast its own preference for light skin tones.<sup>190</sup>

Although discrimination against lighter-complexioned women became more widespread after the Civil Rights Movement, novelist and activist Zora Neal Hurston proved its existence long before. In Zora Neale Hurston’s, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie made efforts not to stand out because of the discrimination she experienced as a result of her skin color. Janie was a mulatto with light skin and long hair. She did not want her skin tone and sharp features to separate her from the rest of her black community. Throughout the novel, she struggles with the people of Eastonville and their perception of her. Although Janie was accepted amongst whites, she longed for recognition from her own. The othering of colorism has not fully explored this concept.<sup>191</sup>

In *A Question of Color*, Kathe Sandler (1993) created a documentary that examines the experiences of black Americans and skin color. She found that dark and light-skinned blacks both had negative experiences associated with their skin tone. Some of the light-skin subjects’ experiences included being labeled as uppity and that others thought they were better than everyone else. The light-skin females felt that being light was often a burden and that they were not seen as a person—just as a light skin color. The women felt that black men only wanted them because they were light and, for some black men, having a light-skin woman was a prize. There

---

<sup>189</sup> Woke is defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary as: aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of race and social injustice).

<sup>190</sup> Kimberly Jade Norwood, *If You is White, You’re Alright...*” *Stories about Colorism in America*, 14 Wash. U. Global Stud. L. Rev. 585 (2015)  
[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law\\_globalstudies/vol14/iss4/8](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_globalstudies/vol14/iss4/8)

<sup>191</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (India: General Press, 2019)

was a belief that black men really wanted to be with white women, and if they couldn't have a white woman, then they would go after a light-skinned black woman because they were the next best thing.<sup>192</sup> The experience of being desired for the wrong reasons must be a disappointment. The perception that light-skinned women get the men because of their skin color or that they are favored amongst whites suggests that the value system placed on acceptance by a Eurocentric society is the greater issue. Until black and brown people face the deep psychological need to satisfy colonial values and values from the long-lasting legacy of slavery, colorism will persist.

### **Workplace Drama**

Color prejudice exists surreptitiously in various spaces. A University of Georgia study by Matthew S. Harrison revealed that employers of any race preferred light-skinned black applicants to their dark-skinned counterparts, regardless of qualifications or skill level.<sup>193</sup> Leah Hollis, a Morgan State University graduate, studied 158 blacks and analyzed color as a predicting factor in who faces workplace bullying. Using a Chi-Square analysis, Hollis confirmed that those of Russet and Peru skin tones (darker) are more likely at a statistically significant level to endure workplace bullying when compared with lighter-skinned blacks.<sup>194</sup> Kimberly Jade Norwood also noted that "In the United States, people with light skin have higher annual earnings and wealth, live in more affluent neighborhoods, are more educated, have higher status jobs, and marry higher status spouses than their darker-skinned counterparts." This report supports Bodenhorn's findings on complexion homogamy, referenced in chapter one.

---

<sup>192</sup> Kathe Sandler, *A Question of Color*, 1993

<sup>193</sup> Matthew S. Harrison, *Colorism in the Job Selection Process: Are There Preferential Differences Within the Black Race?* University (2005)

<sup>194</sup> Hollis, Leah, *Results of Study: Workplace Bullying and Colorism* (December 11, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3501991>

Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2009) argued that the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement offered temporary change and did nothing to permanently alter the Eurocentric standard of beauty. She stated that both whites and blacks place more value on light complexion, proving that women with darker skin continue to lose out in both marital and economic opportunities.<sup>195</sup>

### **Black Hair and Modernity**

The black hair movement was a collective push towards black women's acceptance of their hair in its authentic, unprocessed state. The movement swept the nation over a decade ago and received so much notoriety that even whites wanted to become a part of it. Despite its recognition, however, natural black hair has not been encouraged in all spaces that accept blacks. Women and men have been under fire for wearing their hair in styles that are deemed unacceptable to whites.

In Chris Rock's documentary, *Good Hair*, directed by Jeff Stilson, he tackled hair politics and the language used to discuss blackness and black hair. Rock's daughter was the motivation behind the sensitive topic when she inquired about her lack of "good hair." This inspired an investigation that led him from hair shows in the United States to Indian hair-shaving ceremonies. While the documentary received mixed reviews concerning Rock's controversial conclusions — specifically black women's inherent desire to be white women — it was effective in generating relevant discussion about the sensitive topic of hair politics.<sup>196</sup> He explored the nature of what was considered "good hair" and whether blacks who used the term were aware of its negative connotations. Although *Good Hair* contributed to a discussion that encouraged a

---

<sup>195</sup> Meeta Rani Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism and the National Body* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2016), 44

<sup>196</sup> Alynda Wheat, "Good 'Hair?' Hardly, How Chris Rock Gets it Wrong" October 12, 2009 <https://ew.com/article/2009/10/12/good-hair-hardly-how-chris-rock-gets-it-wrong/> (Accessed March 11, 2020)

closer look at the history of black hair politics, it is troubling that neither the director nor any writers were female. The absence of black women from their own narrative sends a strong message about where they fit into the landscape of their own story. I believe that had black women (or women at all) participated in the making of this documentary, Rock might not have come to the same conclusions.<sup>197</sup>

In 2018, Brittany Noble Jones, news anchor for WJTV in Jackson, Mississippi, was told that her natural hair was too unprofessional for television. Jones said, “I was wrongfully terminated from a position I’ve worked my whole life to achieve.” Upper management had no problem hiring Jones, but had a difficult time supporting her black hair texture.<sup>198</sup> *Being Mary Jane*, which aired for 5 seasons on BET and featured Gabrielle Union, reflected the artistic version of Noble Jones’ life. Mary Jane was a successful anchorwoman for a television network in Atlanta, Georgia. Each episode featured Mary Jane donning styles with the best hair weaves money can buy. In one episode, which aired on March 31, 2015, Mary Jane’s hair is seen in her natural state while she is at home. Her hair was fabulously unprocessed, and the audience loved every minute of it. Like Mary Jane, Noble Jones worked fastidiously at maintaining the image the network expected. When Noble Jones had a baby, however, she recognized the need to represent what she wanted her daughter to embrace. She began to wear her hair natural at work, which created a level of discomfort, leading to her termination.<sup>199</sup>

---

<sup>197</sup> In November 2010, model, Beverly Bond founded Black Girls Rock, an event that honors and promotes black women. The organization has been instrumental in encouraging black women to embrace themselves in her natural state, including hair love.

<sup>198</sup> Chrissy Callahan, *Brittany Noble Jones was told her natural hair was 'unprofessional' and fired*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.today.com/style/brittany-noble-was-told-her-natural-hair-was-unprofessional-fired-t146857> (Accessed May 1, 2020)

<sup>199</sup> *Being Mary Jane*, Season. BET. (2015)

Sadly, teens, too, have to grapple with Eurocentric hair standards. In December 2018, images of a coach cutting the dreadlocks<sup>200</sup> of a high school male wrestler circulated throughout mainstream media, and sparked outrage. The referee for the match demanded he cut his dreadlocks or forfeit his match. In the heat of the moment, the young man acquiesced to the haircut. No one should ever have to make that choice. The insistence of the referee was a prime example of blatant discrimination. He was fired and received death threats as a result of his behavior. In January 2020, a Texan teen was banned by his high school from attending his graduation after he refused to cut his dreadlocks. The student, DeAndre Arnold, faced in-school suspension, a policy that barred him from attending classes. Despite acknowledgement from mass media that black hair seemed to gain acceptance in more social circles, this is still not true not in establishments with traditional Eurocentric views.<sup>201</sup>

A *Huffington Post* article, written by journalist Esther Akutekha was titled, “How the Natural Hair Movement Has Failed Black Women.” She noted that although there are positive elements, the natural hair movement is still motivated by Eurocentric standards. She initially thought it was created to encourage black women to love their hair in its natural state. However, she is disappointed with the focus on creating defined curls, a clear lean towards Eurocentric standards. While Akutekha is pleased with black women throwing out chemicals, she is looking forward to women understanding that loose curls and waves are no better than kinkier textures.<sup>202</sup>

---

<sup>200</sup> Dreadlocks is a hairstyle associated with the Jamaican culture, Rastafarism, and popularized by Bob Marley.

<sup>201</sup> Note that these matters were purely related to hair as both De Andre and the wrestler were light skinned.

<sup>202</sup> Esther Akutekha, *How the Natural Hair Movement Has Failed Black Women*. *Huffington Post*, < [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/natural-hair-movement-failed-black-women\\_1\\_5e5ff246c5b6985ec91a4c70](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/natural-hair-movement-failed-black-women_1_5e5ff246c5b6985ec91a4c70)> (March 1, 2020).

## **The Remedy**

In the last thirty years, there has been a tug-of-war over the term “colorism.” Some consider it laughable that lighter-skinned women experience abuse at the hand of their darker sisters and remind us of the years of paper bag testing and blue veining. Although the roots of discrimination against black black women are deep, ignoring the pain of one will never make the other’s go away. The terrible historical experiences of black black women do not negate the truth of lighter blacks who also have scars. Do women with lighter complexions have to undergo years of discrimination to have their voices heard? The contention between light and dark-skinned blacks reduces the experience of both.

When Alice Walker defined colorism in 1983, she never identified a specific skin tone. Although I believe she was referring to who she called our black black mothers, the ambiguity left room for interpretation. Throughout the last thirty years, scholars, novelists, and filmmakers have gravitated towards one construction, almost as though there is a magnetic pull in that direction. Colorism has been notoriously recognized as discrimination against darker-skinned people. This evidence leads me to conclude that discrimination against lighter-skinned blacks should be conferred its own term, “light skin complexion bias” or simply “complexion bias.” It would therefore be defined as discrimination against lighter-skinned people by others within their own race or complexion bias could encompass both.

I initially questioned whether the varied terminology would further divide black women, but the opposite would occur. With two separate identifications, each woman can be heard and the appropriate resources can be put into place to address and remedy the issues caused by colonialism and slavery. Discrimination against our black black mothers was and is tragic, and there is no denying that. Notwithstanding, the experiences of women who have had their faces

slashed or had shaving cream thrown in their hair was tragic as well. The experiences are different, but pain is universal. It is time that we address the pains different ways.

In 2014, Iyanla Vanzant joined Oprah Winfrey on an episode of “Oprah’s Lifeclass” to discuss the matter of colorism. The initial exploration into the subject was centered on discrimination against darker-skinned blacks. Lighter skinned audience members, however, surprised Iyanla with stories of colorism they faced. One was fully aware of skin tone bias against darker skinned blacks because she had intimate experiences with family members who were victims. She shared some of the names she was called, which included redbone, lite-brite, and high yellow. She said, “Having longer hair or lighter skin makes others in your community assume you think that you are better than them. You’re alienated from your own people. You’re never black enough. But we’re still black in America. None of us feel advantaged.”<sup>203</sup>

In Gabrielle Union’s autobiography, *We’re Going to Need More Wine*, she references colorism by writing,

“It’s an age old ‘us against us’ oversimplification, that boils down to the belief that the lighter your skin tone, the more valuable and worthy you are. The standard of beauty and intelligence, that has historically been praised by the oppressor, has been adopted by the oppressed.”<sup>204</sup>

I initially took issue with this statement, but Union is correct. Colorism against darker skinned blacks **is** the belief that lighter skin is better than darker skin. Colorism against lighter complexioned women, however, are the biases, attitudes and behaviors inflicted on them after it is assumed that that they themselves have bought into this notion. Unfortunately, it is also the opinion of the one who lashes out and participates in this bias.

---

<sup>203</sup> Lisa Capretto, Colorism: Light Skinned African American Women Explain the Discrimination They Face, OWN, January 23, 2014

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/colorism-discrimination-ianla-vanzant\\_n\\_4588825](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/colorism-discrimination-ianla-vanzant_n_4588825)

<sup>204</sup> Gabrielle Union, *We’re Going to Need More Wine* (USA: Harper Collins, 2017) 109

Either the issues associated with colorism are addressed in their totality by identifying and remedying skin tone bias against both darker and lighter skinned blacks or there needs to be a tailored focus that can tackle and reverse the individualized needs of each color bias.

Acknowledging colorism against lighter skinned black women (#teamlightskin)<sup>205</sup> does not discount the years of unfair treatment against darker complexioned women (#teamdarkskin)<sup>206</sup>.

We are an amalgam of shades and cultures. We will never rise above the ashes of our past if we turn a blind eye to each other's pain.

---

<sup>205</sup> The hashtag #teamlight skin is and Instagram reference to black women with light skin complexions.

<sup>206</sup> The hashtag #teamdark skin is and Instagram reference to black women with dark skin complexions.



## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Ebony Magazine Covers (1950 to 1972)

Essence Magazine Covers (1970 to 1988)

Jet Magazine Covers (1951 to 1952)

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. United States: Random House Publishing Group, 2010.

Chapman, Abraham. *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature*. New York: New American Libr, 1972.

“*Dark Girls*.” Duke Media and Urban Winter ENT, 2011.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Knopf, 2010.

Frazier, Thomas W. *Afro American History: Primary Sources*. 2nd ed., Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988.

*Imitation of Life*. Universal Pictures Co., 1959.

Golden, Marita. *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey through the Color Complex*. New York: Anchor, 2005.

*Good Hair*. HBO Films and Nappy Productions, Inc., 2009.

*Hair Love*. Sony Pictures, 2019.

Hughes, Langston. *The Ways of White Folks: Passing*. USA: Knopf, 1934

Hurston, Zora. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Press, 1937

Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. New York: Anchor Books Edition, 1929.

“*Light Girls*.” Duke Media, 2016

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches*. New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Random House, 1970.

*School Daze*. Columbia Pictures, 1988.

Schuyler, George S. *Black No More*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1931.

Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia*. New York, NY: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1998.

Sinclair, April. *Coffee Will Make You Black*. New York: The Hearst Organization, 1994.

Thurman, Wallace. *Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life*, 1929.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose*. United States: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

### **Secondary Sources**

Bird, Stephanie Rose. *Light, Bright, and Damned Near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture in America*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009.

Bodenhorn, Howard. “*Colorism, Complexion Homogamy, and Household Wealth: Some Historical Evidence*.” *American Economic Review* 96, no. 2 (2006): 256–60.  
<https://doi.org/10.1257/000282806777211883>.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2012.

- Chesnutt, Charles. *The Wife of His Youth*. The Atlantic, July 1898
- Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe. *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017.
- Durrow, Heidi W. *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010.
- Early, Gerald. "Waiting for Miss America." *The Antioch Review* 42, no. 3 (1984): 291-305. Accessed May 3, 2020. doi:10.2307/4611364.
- Fahie, Lorneth Delora. *Colorism in African American Magazine Publications*, 2005.
- Featherston, Elena. *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture, and Identity*. Freedom, CA: Crossing press., 1994.
- Fieldstein, Ruth. *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Ford, Tanisha. "Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul." University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 123–57. Stable URL: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469625164\\_ford.9](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469625164_ford.9).
- Franklin, John Hope, and Alfred A. Moss. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. Vol. 2. 7th ed. USA: R.R. Donnelly & Sons Company, 1998.
- Gasman, Marybeth, and Ufuoma Abiola. "Colorism Within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)." *Theory Into Practice* 55, no. 1 (August 2015): 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1119018>.
- Graham, Lawrence. *Our Kind of People: Inside Americas Black Upper Class*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999.
- Gray, Herman. *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

- Greer, Brenna Wynn. *Represented: The Black Imagemakers Who Reimagined African American Citizenship*. United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 2019.
- Harris, Janelle. “*Write or Die Chicks: Light Girls' Presented More Problems Than Answers.*” *Essence Magazine*, January 21, 2015.
- Hobbs, Allyson Vanessa. *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Hochschild, J. L., and V. Weaver. “*The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order.*” *Social Forces* 86, no. 2 (January 2007): 643–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/86.2.643>.
- Hooks, Bell. “*From Black Is a Woman's Color.*” *Callaloo*, no. 39 (1989): 382–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931578>.
- Jha, Meeta Rani. *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body*. London: New York, NY, 2016.
- Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Jones, Trina. “*Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color.*” *Duke Law Journal* 49, no. 6 (April 2000): 1487–1557. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1373052>.
- Kein, Sybil. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisianas Free People of Color*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.
- Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. London: The Bodley Head, 2017.
- Kerr, Audrey Elisa. “*The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism.*” *Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 469 (2005): 271–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.2005.0031>.

Laneri, Raquel. "How a Harlem Fashion Show Started the 'Black Is Beautiful' Movement." New York Post, n.d. Accessed February 5, 2018.

Maxwell, Bill. *The Paper Bag Test*. St. Petersburg Times, (Accessed May 6, 2020

Mills, Earl. *Dorothy Dandridge: An Intimate Biography*. United States: Holloway House, 1999.

Norwood, Kimberly Jade. *Color Matters Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Pfeiffer, Kathleen. *Race Passing and American Individualism*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.

R., Monroe Carla. *Race and Colorism in Education*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Raimon, Eve Allegra. *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction*. United Kingdom: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Rice, Anne. *The Feast of All Saints*. UK: Cornerstone, 2001.

Ruef, Martin. *Between Slavery and Capitalism: The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2016

Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Hall. *The Color Complex: the Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

Snowden, Frank M. *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983.

Sublette, Ned. *American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2016.

Thomas, Joyce Carol., and Floyd Cooper. *The Blacker the Berry*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009.

Walker, Susannah. *Style & Status Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975*. Lexington (Mass.): The University Press of Kentucky, 2007.

Warner, Kristen J. *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

White, Deborah G. *Arn't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: Norton, 1999.

Wilder, JeffriAnne. *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015.

Woodard, Jennifer Bailey, and Teresa Mastin. "Black Womanhood: Essence and Its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women." *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 2 (November 2005): 264–81. doi:10.1177/0021934704273152.