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“IF YOU IS WHITE, YOU’S ALRIGHT. . . .”†
STORIES ABOUT COLORISM IN AMERICA

KIMBERLY JADE NORWOOD* 

I. INTRODUCTION

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

I am well into my fifties now and yet I can still remember vividly interactions with complete strangers, at a very early age. Whenever my mother and I were out in public together, I almost always felt that something was wrong with me. You see, I have the same skin color as the current First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Michelle Obama. My mother has the same skin color as the actress Halle Berry. My hair was very short and kinky, “nappy” some would say. My hair was so thick that it would literally break combs on occasion! My mother on the other hand, had long, straight, flowing hair. People would see us walking down the street together or on a bus, on a train, in a doctor’s office, in a retail store, and the eyes would flip back and forth from mother to daughter and back. By all accounts my mother was then (and still is) quite attractive. People who looked at my mother physically responded to her as if they were looking at a work of fine art. As the eyes rolled over and down to me, something would happen. The final landing gaze on me always stung. The eyes said—yes, they spoke!—“poor you” or “I’m sorry.” I could not put my fingers on what I was experiencing at the time, but I eventually came to understand that those looks of contempt and pity related to the color of my

† BIG BILL BROONZ, GET BACK (BLACK, BROWN, AND WHITE) (Polygram 2010).
* Kimberly Jade Norwood, Professor of Law, Washington University School of Law. Two key people deserve a very special thank you on this project. First, my husband Ronald Alan Norwood, Esquire, who continues to drop everything he is doing, read my work, and provide valuable comments. Second, I owe a most sincere thank you to my colleague, Leila Sadat, the Henry H. Oberschelp Professor of Law and Director, Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute, Washington University School of Law; Special Adviser on Crimes Against Humanity to the ICC Prosecutor. Professor Sadat came to me one day and expressed her sincere interest in my colorism work. She wanted to help me give this work a voice. Together we put together one of the best conferences our law school has ever hosted. Without Professor Sadat’s vision, support, and power, the Global Colorism Conference sponsored by the Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute would not have happened, and the world would have lost the opportunity to learn from the powerful works contained in this publication. Thank you Leila.


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skin. I cannot recall how many days—and there were many—that I spent looking in a mirror and wishing I looked like my mother (I actually favor my father). I wanted her skin color most certainly and also her hair! Long, straight, acceptable. If only I could have just those two things, I’d be beautiful and smiled at too. Like eleven-year old Pecola Breedlove in THE BLUEST EYE, I understood that things light and white were loved and valued. Who doesn’t want to be loved and valued?

Colorism, a term believed to be first coined in 1982 by Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker, was defined by her to mean the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.” It is not racism although there is a clear relationship. A clear example of racism would involve a business that refuses to hire black people. Colorism would not preclude the hiring of a black person, but there would be preference for a black person with a lighter skin tone than a darker skinned person. From this example one can see too that colorism can not only occur within same-raced peoples but also across races. Colorism also is often gendered. Because of its unique relationship to who and what is beautiful, it has a tendency, although not exclusively, to affect and infect women more than men.

Although my first experience with colorism occurred very early in life, it never went away or otherwise resolved itself. Rather, it grew with me. And in many ways, I grew to understand that the color hierarchy was simply the way of the world. I would eventually marry and have children of my own. And through those children, I would again see colorism grow and sting. I saw in my male children a preference for white over black. My girls watched boys make choices based on skin color and hair length and

2. Id.
4. It is necessary to lay out here that science has established that there is no such thing as biological race. The science demonstrates that the genetic markers between two black people, for example, could be greater than the difference between a black person and a white person. Race, then, is really more of a social construction than a biological one. See, e.g., Jefferson M. Fish, THE MYTH OF RACE, IN RACE AND INTELLIGENCE: SEPARATING SCIENCE FROM MYTH 114 (Jefferson M. Fish ed. 2002); See, e.g., JOY DEGREGU LEARY, POST-TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME: AMERICA’S LEGACY OF ENDURING INJURY AND HEALING 22–23 (2005); KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH & AMY GUTMANN, COLOR CONSCIOUS (1998); Anil Ananthaswamy, Under the Skin: Our DNA Says There’s No Such Thing as Race. So Why Do Doctors Still Think It Matters?, NEW SCIENTIST, Apr. 20, 2002, at 34; Ian Haney Lopez, The Social Construction of Race, 29 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 29 (1994). I use the term race here in that socially constructed sense because, as it turns out, while biological race might not be real, social constructed race absolutely is.
texture. I listened to their friends and observed the interplay in their social interactions. I watched school plays with Black children playing roles but almost never Black children with my skin color. I knew that, some day, one day when I had time, I would spend time discussing, highlighting and helping to eradicate colorism.

II. MY EXPERIENCE WITH COLORISM IN AFRICA

Women in Africa are economically dependent on men. . . . Women need men in their lives to survive.

If the general view is that light-skinned women are more attractive, then it’s an investment to try to lighten one’s skin. They are not just buying cream. They are buying a dream of a better life.”

The power of colorism struck me again during trips to the Motherland. My visits to Ghana, to South Africa, and to Zambia in the mid-2000s opened up a whole new world to me. Even there, in a world of Black and shades of brown, lighter was better. I am embarrassed to admit that this shocked me. I did not understand the continued hold and power that the legacy of colonization had on African communities, no longer under colonial rule. Judges in Ghana dressed in long black flowing robes, white shirts with long flowing ruffles and most importantly—and shockingly of all—donned white wigs with the big curls and long flowing hair. Fifty years after their independence from British rule. I was seeing deeply entrenched British culture thrive. I had many women share with me their dreams of lighter skin. I do not mean to cast this as the universal story in Africa or even for the few countries I visited. I am simply revealing something I experienced, an experience that left me reeling.

My experience in Africa comports with what other scholars have found. And many of those scholars have pinned contemporary African preferences for light skin on colonization. Others have offered evidence


that the preference for light skin had some hold prior to colonization. In some parts of precolonial Africa, light-brown, yellow, or reddish tints were the favored pigmentation for women. Yet, in precolonial Congo, dark skin was preferred to such an extent that babies were put in the sun to become darker.

Today many African countries continue to be affected by colonialist skin color ideologies. Evidence of this is reflected in the large percentage of women who use skin-whitening creams. For example, 77 percent of women in parts of Nigeria, 60 percent of Zambian women ages 30–39, 59 percent in Togo, 50–60 percent of adult Ghanaian women, 52 percent in Dakar, Senegal 50 percent of women in Barnako, Mali, and 35 percent in Pretoria, South Africa, report using skin-whitening products on a regular basis. Lighter-complexioned women in many parts of Africa are considered more beautiful. Light skin is believed to be necessary to attract, and even keep, a husband so many women in this vast land bleach their skin. The practice is so widespread that in some areas, the women are known as “the bleachers.” This dangerous practice risks cancer and mercury poisoning, among other ailments, but it is the price they are willing to pay for desirability, love, and economic stability.


9. Golden, *supra* note 6, at 166. Yaba Blay suggests that whiteness likely had negative connotations in traditional Ghanian culture because the word “white” is used both to describe color and someone with a sickly disposition. YABA AMGBORALE BLAY, *YELLOW FEVER: SKIN BLEACHING AND THE POLITICS OF SKIN COLOR IN GHANA* 334–35 (2007). Blay also suggests that because early European travelers frequently died of tropical diseases, whiteness was likely seen as a weakness. *Id.*


III. CHINA OPENED MY EYES YET AGAIN TO COLORISM

Data collected within the industry shows that 90 percent of the pistachios sold in the Chinese market have been bleached, said Fang Ming, dean of the food science and engineering department at the East China University of Science and Technology. Pistachios have become a major snack in China only within the past few years, Fang said. With no knowledge of the nuts’ natural look, most consumers mistake the white-shelled pistachios as the good ones. The bleaching is to cater to the mass consumer idea of “the brighter, the better,” which covers up quality flaws.16

My experience in Africa really opened my eyes to the power of colonization on how one valued, or not, their own skin in a country where the majority were ruled by people with brown skin. But it would take a trip to China a few years later to finally push me over the edge and force me to make time to study colorism. While teaching in China in 2010, I read an article in the China Daily titled “New Standards to Ban Bleaching of Pistachios.” According to the article, China was then the world’s largest consumer of pistachio nuts. Before making them available to the consuming public, however, the nuts are bleached. They are not bleached to clean them or to remove natural bacteria or contagions. Rather, they are bleached solely “to cater to the mass consumer idea of ‘the brighter, the better.’” The article shared the “mass perception” that brighter was better and that the lighter ones were the “the good ones.”

From that day on, I began to experience my surroundings while traveling in China through colored lenses. I began to notice the skin colors of the professionals—usually legal professionals as I found myself, invariably, at one law firm or another—and compared their skin tone with that of the working class. I noticed television commercials and programming, magazines, billboards, advertisements of all sorts. In virtually every case, the professionals were lighter in skin tone than the laborers, and the Chinese images portrayed in the media were of very fair Chinese people. Indeed, not only were models, particularly the women, very fair in skin tone, one could just barely spot any remnants of their “Asianness.” Eye shape, eyebrows, noses, mouths, looked strikingly

Caucasian. The Chinese are not Caucasian but yet they clamor for lighter and lighter skin.\(^{17}\) Even lighter nuts are better!

Of course, the preference for white food is neither new nor foreign. Consider flour, rice, and sugar, naturally brown, bleached for color.\(^{18}\) There is even evidence of a preference, or valuing differently, of the color white in animals. Consider the rare white bison, which when born, is glorified and cherished in some Native American communities as the rare jewel that not only is sign of prosperity from a prophet but also brings good things to all people in the world.\(^{19}\) In Spain, the famous white stallions, Lipizzaners, are not actually (or should I say naturally) white at all. Historically, they were black stallions but a line has known been bred to become white. The famous white stallions out of Spain today are cherished and revered but even now, despite the best science, the colts are still born black and dark brown. They do not turn white for several years. Once white, however, they are eligible for greatness.\(^{20}\) Lighter is better, the world says, in people, in food, and even in animals.

During my return trip home, I thought about my experience with colorism in China. I reflected on what I already knew about colorism in India and in Africa. These three areas are home to over fifty percent of the world population!\(^{21}\) What does this portend for the future if these people are not comfortable in their own skin? My promise to chip away at colorism began.

\(^{17}\) See, e.g., JOANNE L. BONDILLA & PAUL SPICKARD, IS LIGHTER BETTER?: SKIN-TONE DISCRIMINATION AMONG ASIAN AMERICANS (2007). Of course, as with other nations, there is also another layer of colorism within China. So, for example, while the Chinese have skin color preferences among themselves, as a group, there is also a dislike of African and Black. This is not true of all Chinese; indeed, one can hope that it is not even true of most But there is evidence to suggest that Chinese racial attitudes towards African and Blacks are negative. See generally M. DUJUON JOHNSON, RACE & RACISM IN THE CHINAS: CHINESE RACIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD AFRICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS (2011).

\(^{18}\) There is even a color preference for chicken: white meat costs more than dark meat, allegedly because the demand for white meat is greater than that for dark. Ironically, that is the same conclusion we reach when we are talking about people.


\(^{20}\) Legendary White Stallions, PBS (2013).

IV. COLORISM IN THE UNITED STATES

If you is white, You’s alright,
If you’s brown, Stick around,
But if you’s black, oh, brother, Get back, get back, get back.22

My work in the United States on colorism resulted in a book, COLOR MATTERS: SKIN TONE BIAS AND THE MYTH OF A POST-RACIAL AMERICA, published in 2014.23 That book, which contained a chapter on colorism globally, turned into the first international colorism conference on U.S. soil. It was hosted by Washington University and sponsored by the Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute at Washington University School of Law. The heart of the book focused on colorism as it exists within the United States between Black and Brown people on the one hand and non-Black and Brown people on the other. I discuss both forms briefly below.

A. Blacks in White America & Colorism

In their book, Game Change, about the election of then-Senator Obama to the U.S. presidency, journalists Mark Halperin and John Heilemann write that Senator Reid, while pushing Obama to run for the presidency, privately described him as a “light-skinned African American” “with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one,” someone who would appeal to white voters. Reid’s comment seems to confirm a long-held suspicion of many black Americans that some whites prefer “light-skinned” blacks over their dark-skinned counterparts.24

 Turns out that the land of the free and the home of the brave is no different from most other places in the world. Colorism exists in the United States. Below is a look at some experiences with Black people in White America.

22. BROONZ, supra note †.
Colonialism of the New World played a pivotal role in the centuries-old preference we see in the United States today for white and light skin. In the United States this preference was a mixture of the culture carried to the New World by the colonists and the unique institution of enslavement of dark-skinned peoples here. Of course, slavery was not invented in the New World, but it did take on a life of its own and became so connected with dark skin that it was almost impossible to separate the two. Specifically, faced with the need for a controllable and cheap labor force to harvest tobacco, which was the chief source of wealth and very labor intensive, colonists began to pass laws that increasingly restricted Africans and their offspring permanently as servants and later as slaves, as well as established and harbored differential treatment of freed servants with European ancestry. In early years of American slavery, African slaves in the Virginia and Carolina colonies could be released from bondage if they converted to Christianity, but after 1667 this loophole was eliminated and the legal status of Africans became tied to skin color. Indeed, by the late 1600s white skin came to be synonymous with freedom and black skin with slavery.

Over the next few hundred years, a coalescence of needs, beliefs, justifications, and practices had the effect of placing white skin at a premium and dehumanizing black skin. It was during these times, as well, that colorism took root. The sexual unions between whites and blacks—and largely between enslaved African women and their white male captors—produced children, half black, half white, then commonly called mulattoes. Mulattoes were often lighter than Africans in skin color. Eventually the lighter-skinned mulattoes were preferred by white society over their darker-skin brethren because the lighter-skin blacks
were considered more aesthetically appealing and intellectually superior to pure Africans.\textsuperscript{31}

These beliefs and preferences hold true today. The closer one’s skin color is to white, the closer one is to being treated with an elevated status: that of an “honorary white person” a term Professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has popularized.\textsuperscript{32} Focusing on current ways in which skin color impacts the lives of Blacks in America today, for example, consider the following:

- To the extent Blacks are represented in the most powerful positions in the United States, most in those leadership roles (CEOs and other corporate executives; government officials; the executive, legislative and judicial branches; and governors and mayors) are light in skin tone.
- Tenured and tenure-track professors at universities throughout America, particularly elite ones, are more likely to be light in skin tone.
- Not only are darker-skinned Blacks arrested and incarcerated at higher percentages, but they receive longer prison sentences for comparable offenses than lighter-skinned Blacks and are more likely to be on death row for comparable offenses than lighter-skin Blacks. Moreover, the “blacker” one’s features (skin color, hair, lips), the greater the penalty.\textsuperscript{33}
- Darker skinned children are much more likely to be disciplined in school, including suspension;\textsuperscript{34} indeed, the penalty is even harsher for dark-skinned girls.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{33} \textit{See, e.g.}, Eberhardt et al., \textit{Looking Deathworthy: Perceived Stereotypicality of Black Defendants Predicts Capital-Sentencing Outcomes} 383, 385 (2006). (Study finds, even when controls are made for a variety of racial factors that influence sentencing, the more stereotypically black features a criminal defendant has [i.e., darker skin tone, broad nose, thick lips], not only is the sentence given by judges longer, but the chances of receiving a death sentence, particularly in cases involving white victims, more than doubles).


• Dark-skinned Blacks are more likely to be the victims of racial discrimination than lighter-skin Blacks. 36

• In the employment context, lighter-skinned blacks are both more employable and employed. Data on interviews and call backs even demonstrate that lighter skin is preferred over academic credentials 37

• Lighter-skinned blacks are more prevalent in all forms of advertising (store advertisements, magazines, and billboards) and on television: as news anchors, 38 as cast members in television shows, as dancers and love interests in music videos and as models in commercials. 39

• Hollywood has long expressed its preference for light-skin women of color, and even today, it is rare to find a dark-skin woman in a positive leading role or as a love interest. 40


40. Common leading ladies of color in Hollywood today include Halle Berry, Zoe Saldana, Paula Patton, Thandie Newton, and Jada Pinkett-Smith. Consider casting in movies such as Precious, where sad, pitiful, and downright evil characters were played by dark-skinned actors, good characters by white or biracial actors. BURRELL, BRAINWASHED, at 179. This is a small example to highlight that women are much more often the victims of skin color discrimination. So, for example, while one can point to many famous and/or powerful black men who are dark in complexion—take athletes, for example—black women are not so lucky and indeed are sometimes even pitted against one another. Consider the dialogue within the black community over the casting of Zoe Saldano, the café au lait–colored Latina, to play Nina Simone, a dark chocolate woman who wore her African features prominently and proudly. See Tanzina Vega, Stir Builds Over Actress to Portray Nina Simone, THE N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 9, 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/movies/should-zoe-saldana-play-nina-simone-some-say-no.html?
Many of today’s successful entertainers—actors and actresses, singers and musicians—tend to be lighter, rather than darker, in skin tone.

Lighter-skinned blacks are often better educated, have higher occupational status (better jobs, careers, higher incomes), earn more money, have more overall wealth, tend to marry higher on the socioeconomic ladder, and are perceived as being more competent than darker-skinned blacks.  

Lighter-skinned blacks, particularly females, are more likely to be married than darker-skinned blacks.

In nationwide beauty pageants, such as the Miss America Pageant, the rare black contestant and even rarer black winner, have almost always been women with European features: light skin tone, keen features, and long, straight flowing hair.

In the adoption market, race and color combine to create another preference hierarchy: white children are preferred over nonwhite. When African American children are considered, the data suggest there is a preference for light skin and biracial children over dark-skinned children. There is also a price

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43. See, e.g., Katie Stam, Miss America, accessed May 09, 2013, http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/2000/2009.aspx. International adoptions, from primarily Asia, Russia and Guatemala are the next highest ranking. Id. See also There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant (Elwood Watson & Darcy Martin eds., 2004). The black women who have light skin and European features or attributes are the most sought-after black women, whether in business, modeling, marriage, or beauty pageants.


45. See, e.g., Zanita E. Fenton, In a World Not Their Own: The Adoption of Black Children, 10 Harv. BlackLetter L.J. 39, 54 (1993). Of course, family blending has been raised as an issue that comes up in this area. See generally Elizabeth Bartholet, Family Bonds: Adoption, Infertility, and the New World of Child Production 87 (1993). In fact, that is the number one response when adopting parents are asked about how they came about their skin tone preferences. Only the adopting parent knows if the child’s skin color preference was based on this reason. It is important to remember, however, the role implicit bias plays in this. Data clearly demonstrates that people discriminate based on color without even realizing it and even when believing that they do not. See, e.g., Jerry Kang, Trojan Horses of Race, 118 Harv. L. Rev. 1489, 1512 (2005). Moreover, it
hierarchy based on demand, with white children commanding top dollar, biracial children half as much, and black children being the cheapest.\(^{46}\)

- Parents have been known to request light-skinned child-care providers for their children.\(^{47}\)

- Even in cases where the media has taken a lead role in exposing colorism, it paradoxically continues to broadcast its own preference for light skin tones. CNN, for example, has recently run a series of shows with such provocative titles as “Who is Black in America” Or “The State of Black America.” Ironically, although these dealt with the skin color biases affecting black Americans, they were narrated by the very fair Soledad O’Brien. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the newsmen and women of color visible on CNN—Soledad O’Brien, Suzanne Malveaux, Tony Harris, T. J. Holmes, Don Lemon, and Fredricka Whitfield—are all very fair in skin complexion. Aside from the occasional appearances by the beautiful Donna Brazile or former appearances by Roland Martin, they simply do not have regular reporters, anchors or broadcasters who are dark in skin color.

- Twenty-first century doll tests, where white and black preschool and elementary school children, asked various questions about a color palette of faces placed in front of them, revealed an overwhelming preference for positive relationships with the light skin images and negative associations with dark skin images.\(^{48}\)

\(^{46}\) See generally Barbara Fedders, Race and Market Values in Domestic Infant Adoption, 88 N.C.L. REV. 1687 (2010).


\(^{48}\) Consider the black and Latino people anchoring news on CNN. This should tell us something the kind of complexion that makes white people feel most comfortable.” See, e.g., Perry, supra note 5, at 608.
Today, the preference for light skin over dark skin is completely sown into the American fabric. 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. The data for darker-skin blacks is not only the polar opposite in these categories, but darker skin blacks also suffer at greater percentages in the criminal justice system and even in health.


49. Lighter hair is apparently better as well. See, e.g., Carole Jahme, Why Do Men Find Blonde Women So Very Attractive?, THE GUARDIAN, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/jun/04/men-blonde-women-attractive. The benefits of being blonde have even taken some already successful women of color by storm. Beyoncé, one of the most famous singers in the world, recently appeared on the cover of her 2012 album demonstrably lighter in skin tone and blonde. See Julee Wilson, Beyoncé Accused of Skin Lightening in New Album Promo Ad, HUFFINGTON POST, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/17/beyonce-skin-ligthening-ad_n_1210377.html.

B. Colorism within Black America: Is That a Thing?

There is no mystery as to why after all these years of black resistance to white racism, skin-color politics continues to be a negative force in our lives. White-supremacist thinking about color is so embedded in every aspect of contemporary life that we are daily bombarded in the mass media with images that suggest blackness is not beautiful.\(^{51}\)

As mentioned earlier, the children born of the sexual unions between whites and blacks—and largely between enslaved African women and their white male captors—produced children, half black, half white, then commonly called mulattoes.\(^{52}\) Because of the frequent lighter skin complexion of these children, they commonly held a different status relative to their nonmixed race and/or darker-skinned counterparts. There is evidence that these lighter-skinned individuals, who also often had hair closer in texture to the hair of whites—often called good” hair\(^ {53}\)—were valued more by whites for example, higher prices were paid for them on the auction blocks than for the darker-skinned counterparts. The lighter-skin slaves often had a better quality of life.\(^ {54}\) Because they often worked inside the home of the slave owners, they were more familiar with, and thus comfortable around, the language, the speech, the culture and religious practices of the slave owners. Additionally, many were taught to read and write, taught trades and hired out as craftsmen. Many were even freed by their slave-owning fathers and/or left property upon the father’s death—property that in some cases included slaves of their own.\(^ {55}\)

Mulattoes ultimately became a buffer class between whites and blacks, and whites preferred to deal with them, believing them to be more intelligent and culturally refined than Africans.\(^ {56}\) Many Africans, too, came to see mulattoes not only as their connection to white America, but

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52. BLACK BOURGEOISIE, supra note 30.
53. “Good” hair is hair that is the same texture as Caucasian hair and the straighter the better. See AYANA D. BYRD & LORI L. THARP, HAIR STORY: UNTANGLING THE ROOTS OF BLACK HAIR IN AMERICA 19 (2001). No chemicals needed. No kinks, no naps, no excessive tight curls, no resemblance to African hair in its natural state. It is “real to the roots” as some rap lyrics suggest.
54. See, e.g., POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME, supra note 4, at 140. There is some evidence, too, that lighter skinned enslaved women were more sexually exploited than their darker skinned sisters. See THE COLOR COMPLEX, supra note 41, at 18.
55. Id. at 15, 18; see also RONALD E. HALL, AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF SKIN COLOR DISCRIMINATION IN AMERICA: VICTIMISM AMONG VICTIM GROUP POPULATIONS 112 (2010).
better than them. This created tension, hatred and disunity in the enslaved community. And, indeed, some mulattoes actually did come to believe themselves better than their dark-skin counterparts, but of course, not all did. Many dedicated their lives to the advancement of all blacks, skin color notwithstanding.

Interestingly, however, slavery’s end highlighted the differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks. Indeed, many, if not most, mulattoes were already free by the end of the Civil War. That group entered Reconstruction with more property, wealth, education, employment skills, and knowledge of the etiquette and culture of the white slave-owning class than their darker-skin slaves. Even mulattoes who were not free by the end of the Civil War often entered Reconstruction with skills like the ability to read, to write, to cook, to drive, to do carpentry work, and other valuable skills) and more knowledge and understanding of white life and culture than darker-skinned enslaved people not granted the same access to white life. All of these benefits, combined with the attributes of light skin and straight hair, became valuable capital for the mulatto class. Whites were more comfortable around them and thus they were preferable to darker-skinned blacks. Skills and knowledge of white culture led to employment, access to housing, and ultimately income and assets that were passed down to children and grandchildren. Status, skin color, and superior education helped mulattoes become the elite of the black classes. Who’s Who in Colored America, 1918, for example, was comprised light-skin mulattoes. Even Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois’ Talented Tenth, who he hoped would uplift the masses of black people were, with one exception, all mulattoes.

57. The Color Complex, supra note 41, at 15.
58. An Historical Analysis of Skin Color Discrimination, supra note 55, at 112–13; Lawrence Otis Graham, Our Kind of People: Inside America’s Black Upper Class 7 (1999). There is evidence that some of this thinking still exists among light-skin blacks in the twenty-first century.
59. An Historical Analysis of Skin Color Discrimination, supra note 55, at 125.
60. Black Bourgeoisie, supra note 30, at 14. “In 1850, mulattoes or mixed-bloods constituted 37 per cent of the free Negro population but only 8 per cent of the slave population. Id.
61. Id. Our Kind of People, supra note 58, at 9.
62. An Historical Analysis of Skin Color Discrimination, supra note 55, at 113. Dark-skinned blacks were rarely eligible for consideration to be included in Who’s Who in Colored America. Such recognition was possible but only in circumstances where they performed some extraordinary feat. Id.
By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was clear in Black America that the lighter one’s skin, the greater the societal and communal bestowed/received/obtained benefits. As during slavery, life after slavery was better for light-skin black people. The elevation in success and status based on white blood was so clear, so unequivocal, so profound that the mulatto group almost always socialized and married people whose skin tone matched their own or was lighter. Aside from actual assimilation via the phenomenon of “passing,” mulattoes who elected not to pass often created their own communities, separate and distinct from their darker-skinned brethren. This included living in separate neighborhoods, marrying other mulattoes, establishing and attending separate churches, and establishing separate schools. Duke Law Professor Trina Jones has documented that not only were there separate schools based on color, but even the curricula differed: mulattoes were exposed to a border liberal arts curriculum while darker-skinned blacks received the lower paying vocational education tracks. The self-segregation included invitation-only social networks that required invitees to pass the ruler test or brown paper bag test—your skin had to be lighter than a ruler or lighter than a brown paper bag for admission—or one had to be able to show clearly visible blue veins under pale skin as required by the so-called “blue vein societies.” The segregation here was a smaller version of larger Jim Crow practice.

64. AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF SKIN COLOR DISCRIMINATION, supra note 55, at 119–24; see also SHIRLEE TAYLOR HAZLIP, THE SWEETER THE JUICE: A FAMILY MEMOIR IN BLACK AND WHITE (1994) (story of family, some of whom passed for white and lived white lives for all of their lives and the other side of the family who elected not to pass).

65. Shades of Brown, supra note 56, at 1515–16. See also AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF SKIN COLOR DISCRIMINATION, supra note 55, at 113.

66. Shades of Brown, supra note 56, at 1516. Of course, historically, black schools often showed preferences for light-skin students. Even the great HBCU, Howard University, had a reputation for admitting more light-skin applicants than darker-skinned applicants into its university; photographs required as part of the application package assured such results. AUDREY ELISA KERR, THE PAPER BAG PRINCIPLE: CLASS, COLORISM, AND RUMOR AND THE CASE OF BLACK WASHINGTON, D.C. 89–94 (2006). Some of the best black high schools also screened children based on skin color. Id. at 82–87.


As is true in society at large, the benefits of lighter skin within black America are undeniable and clear. Consider the following:

- Within black family members, it is not uncommon to have family members, including elderly family members, who not only favor the lighter children in the family over the darker siblings but who also visibly discriminate against the darker-skin children because of their skin color. This, of course, also causes the darker-skin children to despise the lighter-skin children and creates all kinds of hatred, stress, and familial dissention.

- Dark-skin blacks have been vilified by other blacks for their dark skin with names such as buckwheat, jiggaboo, darkie, blackie, tar baby, burnt, baboon, and skillet blonde. It is not unheard of even today to hear kids joke: “Yo mama so black, she . . . .” “Get your black ass over here!” “Shut up ’fore I beat the black off you!” “Sit your black ass down!” Nappy hair makes the hatred even more intense! Naturally wooly hair, also referred to as kinky or nappy hair, is often looked upon with hatred, ridicule, and scorn. Even at some historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), black hair in its natural state, despite cleanliness and neatness, is considered unacceptable, unprofessional, and unwelcomed.

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70. THE COLOR COMPLEX, supra note 41, at 95–96.

71. See, e.g., A Question of Color, supra note 69.

72. Listen up at playgrounds, schoolyards, bus stops, train stops, malls, supermarkets, barber shops, and beauty shops just to name a few. This is happening in 2013. See also THE COLOR COMPLEX, supra note 41, at 95.

73. See GOOD HAIR (Chris Rock Productions 2009); see also Ayana Byrd & Lori Tharps, HAIR STORY: UNTANGLING THE ROOTS OF BLACK HAIR IN AMERICA (2002).

74. In 2012, Hampton University famously banded braids and locs for men in certain business school programs. See Julee Wilson, Hampton University’s Cornrows And Dreadlock Ban: Is It Right?, HUFFINGTON POST, Aug. 23, 2012, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/23/hampton-university-cornrows-dreadlock-ban_n_1826349.html. This issue of black hair in its natural, nonchemicalized state also plagues campus queens at HBCUs. See, e.g., Chandra R. Thomas, Scarred Straight: At some HBCUs, Administrators and Campus Queens are Clashing Over Natural Hair, 40 ESSENCE MAGAZINE 126 (Nov. 2009). In the winter of 2012, a news meteorologist, Rhonda Lee, was fired for responding to a viewer about her decision to wear her hair in a short “afro.” The viewer’s comments, wondering if Ms. Lee’s hair was so short because she was a cancer survivor, wondered if the station could make her wear a wig “or grow some more hair.” Ms. Lee responded to the viewer’s concern: “I’m sorry you don’t like my ethnic hair. And no I don’t have cancer. . . . I am very proud of my African-American ancestry which includes my hair.” She was promptly fired by the news station.
Some black parents tell their black boys not to bring home “dark girls” and to marry light in order to lighten up the race.”

Some black mothers have been heard thanking God that their newborn babies are not dark skinned.

When seeking to adopt, many black women “come in and ask for . . . a ‘Cadillac’ description: Light-skinned, gray-green eyes, good hair, musically inclined.”

Young black girls are told that they are “pretty to be so black.” Or “she’s dark but she’s pretty.”

Little girls in showers try to wash the black off of their skins. In public pools groups of black girls have been caught trying to “scrub the black off” of dark-skinned children in the pool.

Little light-skin girls have told their darker sisters to stay away from them for fear of the black taint rubbing off on them.

Leaders of black political and social organizations, including governors, mayors, federal and state legislatures, those in the Obama inner circle, the NAACP, the Urban League, fraternities and particularly sororities, black social organizations like the Links, Jack & Jill of America, 100 Black Men, 100 Black

See Julee Wilson, Rhonda Lee Fired: TV Station Responds to Meteorologist’s Claim She Was Fired For Facebook Comments About Her Natural Hair, HUFFINGTON POST, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/11/rhonda-lee-fired-natural-hair-comments_n_2279950.html. Although there is some dispute in the Lee case concerning the reasons why the station fired her, it is not out of the question for one to consider whether honoring customer preferences played some role in the decision. Vogue magazine editor Anna Wintour once observed: when it comes to fashion magazines, “it is a fact of life that the color of a model’s skin (or hair for that matter) dramatically affects newsstand sales.” ROBERT M. ENTMAN & ANDREW ROJECKI, THE BLACK IMAGE IN THE WHITE MIND: MEDIA AND RACE IN AMERICA 179 (2000).

75. See, e.g., A Question of Color, supra note 69.


78. Adrienne P. Samuels, Two Sides: Do Light-Skinned Black People Have an Advantage? Yes. They are likely to Get Hired First and May Earn More Money, EBONY 165 (Feb. 2008); see also A Question of Color, supra note 69.

79. Interview with Elaine Lee, program director of Girls, Inc., in St. Louis, July 30, 2012. Ms. Lee also told me stories of beautiful dark skin black girls who hated looking at their dark skin in the mirror and who refused to even play with dark skin dolls.

80. Two Sides, supra note 78, at 165.
Women, and past and current presidents at HBCUs, are often fair in skin tone. The preference for light over dark has been expressed even when the darker-skinned person held degrees from different Ivy League institutions.\textsuperscript{81} Light-skin females are the preferred mates of successful black males of any skin color\textsuperscript{82} and are more likely to be married.\textsuperscript{83} Those who also have European facial features and good hair are more valued.\textsuperscript{84}

81. Dr. Benjamin Payton, Tuskegee University’s fifth black president (1981–2010), was shunned by blacks in Tuskegee, Alabama, when he was being courted as the famous university’s next president because his skin was “too dark to be a President.” While Dr. Payton not only became the first dark-skinned president of Tuskegee, but he was also the first president to have a dark-skinned wife. See A Question of Color, supra note 69.

82. For an example of the preference of successful black males for light skin partners, see, e.g., http://www.ballerwives.com; see also http://www.afieldnegro.com. A substantial percentage of the black men in the images are paired with white women. Recent data suggests that although the number of interracial marriages in the United States is slowing down, blacks were much more likely than any other group to marry whites. See Interracial Marriages in US Slow Down, THE SHANGHAI DAILY, May 27, 2010, at A11. Moreover, black men are more likely to marry white women than black women are to marry white men. Ralph Richard Banks, IS MARRIAGE FOR WHITE PEOPLE? HOW THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGE DECLINE AFFECTS EVERYONE 117 (2011). “From 1970 to 2000, black men increased their rate of marrying white women almost six fold, so that by 2007, nearly 6% of black men were married to white women. Fewer than half as many—approximately 2.9% of—black women were married to white men.” Elizabeth F. Emens, Intimate Discrimination: The State’s Role in the Accidents of Sex and Love, 112 HARYARD LAW REVIEW 1307, 1320 (2009) (footnotes omitted). Many consider light skin the next best thing to white skin, particularly if the person does not want to cross racial barriers. See, e.g., A Question of Color, supra note 69.


84. For excellent commentary on good hair, see GOOD HAIR, supra note 73. The next best thing to good hair is hair straighten from chemical processing, i.e., a permanent. While the correlation between light skin and good hair is quite high, some black men have expressed a willingness to date a dark-skinned black woman if she had long, straight hair. See, e.g., A Question of Color, supra note 69. The infatuation many black Americans, male and female, have with good hair and with straight hair is beyond the scope of this work. Because of the strong correlation between good hair and light skin, however, the topic cannot be avoided. Even Olympic gold medalist gymnast Gabby Douglas was scolded by black women for her nappy (and thus embarrassing hair during her Olympic debut. See Dahleen Glanton, Our Hair-brained Obsession, CHICAGO TRIB., Aug. 25, 2012, available at http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-08-25/news/ct-perspec-0826-hair-20120825_1_hair-black-women-african-american-women. Douglas now sports a long, straight weave. See Gabby Douglas Graces the December Issue of ESSENCE, ESSENCE, available at http://www.essence.com/2012/11/02/gabby-douglas-graces-december-issue-essence/.

Even black women who purport to value black hair in its natural state sometimes get weaved into the good hair trap. Consider the interview of Chris Rock’s wife on why her husband decided to make the film: GOOD HAIR. While donning an 18-inch weave, she explained to an audience why it was important for her and her husband to make a film that exposed the roots of the good hair myth so that
Light-skin females are more likely to appear in and be the love interest in music videos of famous black music artists. So, while Dr. Nancy Etcoff, a Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital psychologist, recently stated that “[o]ur standards of beauty are changing and ethnic women are at the forefront today. It emulates our growing sense of cultural awareness,” the data show otherwise. Not only are dark-skin women shunned generally, but in the music industry, they are rarely considered for music video roles unless they offer something more than their pretty faces. Exotic and ethnic beauty has a visible place in the media, to be sure, but the ethnic beauties who are paraded in front of us are rarely dark skinned or have woolly, kinky, nappy hair.

In twenty-first century doll tests, young black girls almost unanimously attach positive associations with light-skin images; similarly, they almost unanimously attach negative feelings to the images of children with dark skin. See their own daughter would begin to love her own natural hair. See Tom Burrell, Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority 79 (2010).


87. As one in the music industry recently shared with JoyDaily.TV:
Light skin women, the way the light hit they face, the way they show up from far away, the way they look from far away, you could see the prettiness in their face, you could see how they face shaped, you could see their facial expressions a lot better. When a dark skin woman try to do it from far away, it’s kinda hard to get her expressions and the faces that she making and the (interviewee starts moving to imaginary music) so that’s why they tend to focus on the dark skin’s woman’s body. That’s why a dark skin woman, when she gets in the video, she gotta have a crazy fat ass or some titties busting out or something that stick out so they can focus on that [as] opposed to her face.

See Complexion Obsession, film by http://www.joydaily.tv [on file with author].

Dark-skin women in the twenty-first century continue to be shameful of their skin color. Dark-skin males complain of discrimination against them in favor of their lighter-skin counterparts as well. Yet, because beauty is gendered, dark-skin women feel the brunt of rejection in ways that dark skinned males do not. Indeed, it is not uncommon for darker-skinned males to find love in the arms of much lighter mates; the same is not as true for darker-skinned women. The seeds of colonization have grown and thrive, playing a role here too, in the black consciousness of what is beautiful, what is worthy, what is successful, what is valuable. This perfect storm informs what valued black women look like. Glance at the centerfolds and covers of many black magazines—Black Enterprise, Ebony, Essence, Jet. Pictures don’t lie as the saying goes and as you will quickly conclude “[i]n the eyes of many, including black people, beauty is to be seen only in women who have an infusion of Caucasian blood.”

Indeed, beauty itself in America is defined by European ideals. Dark-skinned women continue to tell stories of rejection based on their skin color. Dark-skinned males continue to tell stories of rejection based on their skin color. Light-skinned parties and “battle of the complexions” contests still take place in black nightclubs across America.

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93. See, e.g., Dark Girls, supra note 76.

94. THE BEAUTY BIAS, supra note 92, at 30; *Buying White Beauty, supra note 5, at 579. See also RALPH BANKS, *IS MARRIAGE FOR WHITE PEOPLE?: HOW THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGE DECLINE AFFECTS EVERYONE* (2012).

95. Trellie Jefferis, *The Black, Black Woman and the Black Middle Class,* 12 THE BLACK SCHOLAR 48 (1981). Light skin is a beauty marker for women. This issue, then, clearly affects women.
black girls, with tears in their eyes, beg God to wash their black skin away. They got and get the same messages I did decades ago that society and even one’s own community might (and often does) value you based on the color of your skin.

V. CONCLUSION

What happens when white video game players see themselves as black characters in a violent game?

A new study suggest some disturbing answers: It makes the white players act more aggressively after the game is over, have stronger explicit negative attitudes toward blacks and display stronger implicit attitudes linking blacks to weapons.

We make choices—consciously in some cases and unconsciously in others—based on skin color every day. Yet American society pretends it is colorblind. Of course, we cannot help but see color, despite verbal assertions to the contrary. Even babies see color. By and large, however, the colorblind rhetoric continues.

This refusal to see this elephant in the room comes at a high price: it results in a divisive society that continues to pit one color against another.

more than men. Shedding "Light," supra note 42, at 30–50; Margaret L. Hunter, If You’re Light You’re Alright": Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color, 16 GENDER & SOC. 178 (Apr. 2002); Buying White Beauty, supra note 5, at 579.

96. See generally Hunter, supra note 95.

97. Playing as Black: Avatar Race Affects White Video Game Players: Whites Act More Aggressively After They Play as Black Avatars, Ohio State University (Mar. 21, 2014) http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/raceavatar.htm. Color matters even in uniform colors! In a study involving uniform colors and the NHL, teams that wore the color black racked up penalties at much higher rates than any other color. See Ronald Hall, Dark Skin, Black Men, and Colorism in Missouri: Murder vis-à-vis Psychological Icons of Western Masculinity, 3 SPECTRUM: A JOURNAL ON BLACK MEN 31–32 (2015).


100. PO BRONSON & ASHLEY MERMAN, NURTURESHOCK: NEW THINKING ABOUT CHILDREN (2009).
It reeks havoc within families. It challenges friendships. This is not only is not blind, but it actually feeds stereotypes, tensions, bigotry and hate. The purported blindness to color hurts; it harms; it kills. We cannot begin to detangle this problem if we won’t recognize it. With Black and Brown people expected to be a majority in America by 2043, now more than ever, is the time to grapple with this ism. Failure to act will only entrench racism, in the form of colorism and it will come back with a vengeance.

101. Drexel University Professor and author Yaba Blay, is also similar in skin tone to Michelle Obama, maybe slightly darker. In a recently written piece on Beyonce’s “Formation” video, Professor Blay shares the following:

I’ve had my own painful personal experiences with this. For example, two years prior to conducting this research, I was excluded from the wedding of a Creole-identifying colleague whom I considered a friend. Thinking she had made a mistake, I asked her, “Girl, where is my invitation?” And she responded, very matter-of-factly, “Oh girl, my mama and ‘nem would pass out if you came to my wedding.”
