



The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality

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Abstract

Colorism is a persistent problem for people of color in the USA. Colorism, or skin color stratification, is a process that privileges light-skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market. This essay describes the experiences of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans with regard to skin color. Research demonstrates that light-skinned people have clear advantages in these areas, even when controlling for other background variables. However, dark-skinned people of color are typically regarded as more ethnically authentic or legitimate than light-skinned people. Colorism is directly related to the larger system of racism in the USA and around the world. The color complex is also exported around the globe, in part through US media images, and helps to sustain the multibillion-dollar skin bleaching and cosmetic surgery industries.

Racial discrimination is a pervasive problem in the USA. African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and other people of color are routinely denied access to resources and fair competition for jobs and schooling. Despite this pattern of exclusion, people of color have made great progress in combating persistent discrimination in housing, the labor market, and education. However, hidden within the process of racial discrimination is the often overlooked issue of colorism. Colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter 2005). Colorism is concerned with actual skin tone, as opposed to racial or ethnic identity. This is an important distinction because race is a social concept, not significantly tied to biology (Hirschman 2004). Lighter-skinned people of color enjoy substantial privileges that are still unattainable to their darker-skinned brothers and sisters. In fact, light-skinned people earn more money, complete more years of schooling, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people than darker-skinned people of the same race or ethnicity (Arce et al. 1987; Espino and Franz 2002; Hill 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 1998, 2005; Keith and Herring 1991; Murguia and Telles 1996; Rondilla and Spickard 2007).

How does colorism operate? Systems of racial discrimination operate on at least two levels: race and color. The first system of discrimination is the level of racial category, (i.e. black, Asian, Latino, etc.). Regardless of physical appearance, African Americans of all skin tones are subject to certain kinds of discrimination, denigration, and second-class citizenship, simply because they are African American. Racism in this form is systemic and has both ideological and material consequences (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2000). The second system of discrimination, what I am calling colorism, is at the level of skin tone: darker skin or lighter skin. Although all blacks experience discrimination as blacks, the intensity of that discrimination, the frequency, and the outcomes of that discrimination will differ dramatically by skin tone. Darker-skinned African Americans may earn less money than lighter-skinned African Americans, although both earn less than whites. These two systems of discrimination (race and color) work in concert. The two systems are distinct, but inextricably connected. For example, a light-skinned Mexican American may still experience racism, despite her light skin, and a dark-skinned Mexican American may experience racism and colorism simultaneously. Racism is a larger, systemic, social process and colorism is one manifestation of it.

Although many people believe that colorism is strictly a 'black or Latino problem', colorism is actually practiced by whites and people of color alike. Given the opportunity, many people will hire a light-skinned person before a dark-skinned person of the same race (Espino and Franz 2002; Hill 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Mason 2004; Telles and Murguía 1990), or choose to marry a lighter-skinned woman rather than a darker-skinned woman (Hunter 1998; Rondilla and Spickard 2007; Udry et al. 1971). Many people are unaware of their preferences for lighter skin because that dominant aesthetic is so deeply ingrained in our culture. In the USA, for example, we are bombarded with images of white and light skin and Anglo facial features. White beauty is the standard and the ideal (Kilbourne 1999).

Historical origins of colorism

Colorism has roots in the European colonial project (Jordan 1968), plantation life for enslaved African Americans (Stevenson 1996), and the early class hierarchies of Asia (Rondilla and Spickard 2007). Despite its disparate roots, today, colorism in the USA is broadly maintained by a system of white racism (Feagin et al. 2001). The maintenance of white supremacy (aesthetic, ideological, and material) is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority. White skin, and, thus, whiteness itself, is defined by the opposite: civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority. These contrasting definitions are the foundation for colorism.

Colorism for Latinos and African Americans has its roots in European colonialism and slavery in the Americas. Both systems operated as forms

of white domination that rewarded those who emulated whiteness culturally, ideologically, economically, and even aesthetically. Light-skinned people received privileges and resources that were otherwise unattainable to their darker-skinned counterparts. White elites ruling the colonies maintained white superiority and domination by enlisting the assistance of the 'colonial elite', often a small light-skinned class of colonized people (Fanon 1967). Although Mexico experienced a high degree of racial miscegenation, the color-caste system was firmly in place. Light-skinned Spaniards culled the most power and resources, while darker-skinned Indians were routinely oppressed, dispossessed of their land, and rendered powerless in the early colony. Vestiges of this history are still visible today in Mexico's color-class system.

A similar color hierarchy developed in the USA during slavery and afterward. Slave owners typically used skin tone as a dimension of hierarchy on the plantation (Horowitz 1973). White slave owners sometimes gave lighter-skinned African slaves some additional privileges, such as working in the house as opposed to the fields, the occasional opportunity to learn to read, and the rare chance for manumission (Davis 1991). During slavery, a small, but elite class of freedmen was established. These disproportionately light-skinned men and women were early business leaders, clergy, teachers, and artisans, who became economic and community leaders in the early African American community (Edwards 1959; Frazier 1957; Gatewood 1990).

Colorism for Asian Americans seems to have a more varied history. For Asian Americans with a European colonial history, like Indians, Vietnamese, or Filipinos, light skin tone is valued because of the European values enforced by the colonial regime (Karnow 1989; Rafael 2000). Europeans themselves were regarded as high status, as were white skin, Anglo facial features, and the English, French, and Spanish languages, respectively. For other Asian American groups with an indirect relationship to Western culture, light skin tone was associated with the leisure class (Jones 2004; Rondilla and Spickard 2007). Only poor or working people would be dark because they had to work outside as manual laborers. Dark skin tone is therefore associated with poverty and 'backwardness' for many Asian immigrants and Asian Americans (Rondilla and Spickard 2007).

Ronald Hall (1994, 1995, 1997) suggests that 'the bleaching syndrome' the internalization of a white aesthetic ideal, is the result of the historic legacy of slavery and colonialism around the globe. He argues that many African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans have internalized the colonial and slavery value systems and learned to valorize light skin tones and Anglo facial features. He understands this deeply rooted cultural value as a cause of psychological distress and socioeconomic stratification.

In many former European colonies, there remains an overt legacy of Eurocentrism and white racism in the culture (Memmi 1965). Whites or

light-skinned elites continue to hold powerful positions in the economy, government, and educational sectors. Embedded in the leftover colonial structure is a strong and enduring value of white aesthetics (e.g. light hair, straight hair, light eyes, narrow noses, and light skin). This is evident in Latin American popular culture, for example, in the *telenovelas*, where almost all of the actors look white, unless they are the maids and are then light brown (Jones 2004). Movie stars and popular singers in the Philippines are often *mestizos*, half white, or extremely light-skinned with round eyes (Choy 2005; Rafael 2000). African American celebrities are typically light-skinned with Anglo features (Milkie 1999). They reinforce a beauty ideal based on white bodies (Kilbourne 1999).

Colorism is not just relevant to media images, however. A rising number of discrimination cases based on skin tone have found their way to the courts. In 2002, the EEOC sued the owners of a Mexican restaurant in San Antonio, Texas, for color-based discrimination. A white manager at the restaurant claimed that the owners directed him to hire only light-skinned staff to work in the dining room. The EEOC won the case and the restaurant was forced to pay \$100,000 in fines (Valbrun 2003). In 2003, a dark-skinned African American won \$40,000 from a national restaurant chain for color-based discrimination from a fellow black employee. The plaintiff argued that he suffered constant taunting and color-based epithets about his dark skin from lighter-skinned African American coworkers (Valbrun 2003). These are just two examples of how colorism affects people of color on a daily basis. Most people of color will not end up in court over color bias, but nearly all people of color have experienced or witnessed unfair treatment of others based on skin tone. Although both of these cases highlight co-ethnic perpetrators of skin-tone bias, whites are also engaged in discrimination by skin tone.

The economics of light skin privilege

The vast majority of social science research on skin-tone discrimination focuses on the employment experiences of African Americans and Latinos (Allen et al. 2000; Arce et al. 1987; Espino and Franz 2002; Gomez 2000; Hill 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2002; Keith and Herring 1991; Mason 2004; Murguia and Telles 1996; Telles and Murguia 1990). Latinos are a particularly interesting case to study because social scientists typically treat 'Latino' or 'Hispanic' as a separate category from race. Consequently there are Latinos who identify as white, black, Indian, and others. There are strong variations by national group as to which of those options Latinos choose (Mexicans are most likely to choose 'other race' and Cubans are most likely to choose 'white', for example) (Rodriguez 2000). Some researchers use the racial self-designations of Latinos as proxies for skin color when an actual skin-tone variable is not available (Alba et al. 2000).

In 2003, social science researchers found that Latinos who identified as white earned about \$5000 more per year than Latinos who identified as black, and about \$2500 more per year than Latinos who identified as 'some other race' (Fears 2003). A clear hierarchy is evident among Latinos with white Latinos at the top, 'others' in the middle, and black Latinos at the bottom. White Latinos also had lower unemployment rates and lower poverty rates than black Latinos (Fears 2003). Their findings are consistent with other work in this area (Montalvo 1987). Dark skin costs for Latinos, in terms of income (Telles and Murguia 1990) and occupational prestige (Espino and Franz 2002).

Other researchers found that lighter-skinned Mexican Americans and African Americans earn more money than their darker-skinned counterparts (Allen et al. 2000; Arce et al. 1987). Even when researchers account for differences in family background, occupation, and education levels, skin-color differences persist. This shows that skin-color stratification cannot be explained away with other variables such as class or family history. In addition to being a historical system, color bias is also a contemporary system that can result in differences of thousands of dollars in yearly income for darker and lighter people that are otherwise similar. Most darker-skinned people would not willingly give up thousands of dollars in income every year, and most light-skinned people would not want to admit that a part of their income may be attributed to skin-color status and not merit. Keith and Herring (1991) suggest that color discrimination operates after the civil rights movement much the way it did before the movement. 'Virtually all of our findings parallel those that occurred before the civil rights movement. These facts suggest that the effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America' (Keith and Herring 1991, 777).

It can be difficult to imagine how colorism operates on a day-to-day basis. Colorism, like racism, consists of both overt and covert actions, outright acts of discrimination and subtle cues of disfavor. In employment, negotiations over salary and benefits may be tainted by colorism (Etcoff 2000; Webster and Driskell 1983). How much a new employee is 'worth' and the assessed value of her skills may be affected by her appearance (Thompson and Keith 2001). We know from research on physical attractiveness that people who are considered more attractive are also viewed as smarter and friendlier (Etcoff 2000; Hatfield and Sprecher 1986; Wade and Bielitz 2005). 'Attractiveness' is a cultural construct influenced by racial aesthetics (Hill 2002), among other things, so lighter-skinned job applicants will likely benefit from a halo effect of physical attractiveness (Dion et al. 1972; Mulford et al. 1998).

The relationship between skin color and perceptions of attractiveness may be particularly important for women on the job (Hunter 2002). Many feminist scholars have argued that beauty matters for women in

much the same way that 'brains' matter for men (Freedman 1986; Lakoff and Scherr 1984; Wolf 1991). Of course, women's job-related skills are crucial for a successful career, but cultural critic Naomi Wolf (1991) has suggested that 'beauty' has become an additional, unspoken job requirement for women in many professions, even when physical attractiveness is irrelevant for job performance. If this is the case, then in 'front office appearance jobs', like restaurant hostess or office receptionist, beauty, and therefore skin color, must matter even more.

In 2002, Rodolfo Espino and Michael Franz compared the employment experiences of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans in the USA. They found, 'that darker-skinned Mexicans and Cubans face significantly lower occupational prestige scores than their lighter-skinned counterparts even when controlling for factors that influence performance in the labor market' (2002, 612). Dark-skinned Puerto Ricans did not face this disadvantage in the labor market. This means that lighter-skinned Mexicans and Cubans have a better chance at attaining a high status occupation than their darker counterparts who are similar in other ways.

In this same vein, Mark Hill (2000), in his study of African American men, found that light-skinned black men retained a significant advantage in the labor market and that skin tone accounted for more differences in social status than family background did. Hill developed a very creative research methodology that clarified the *ongoing* nature of skin-color bias and challenged the oft-made assertion that light skin benefits are simply remnants of a historical color-caste system. In the labor market, dark skin tone is consistently penalized in terms of income (Allen et al. 2000; Keith and Herring 1991; Mason 2004), unemployment rates, and even occupational prestige (Espino and Franz 2002; Hill 2000).

Light-skinned or white Latinos have clear and significant advantages in income and wealth relative to their darker or black-identified counterparts (Telles and Murguia 1990). Richard Alba, John Logan, and Brian Stults studied housing access, ownership, and segregation. They found that, 'Hispanics who describe themselves as black are in substantially poorer and less white neighborhoods than their compatriots who describe themselves as white. The penalty they absorb in neighborhood affluence varies between \$3500 and \$6000 and thus places them in neighborhoods comparable to those occupied by African Americans' (2000, 9). Alba, Logan, and Stults' study of immigrant adaptation and spatial-assimilation theory reveals that despite their immigrant status and identity as Latinos, black Latinos' housing experience more closely resembles that of native-born African Americans than that of other Latinos. That is, black Latinos live in more racially segregated neighborhoods with less exposure to non-Hispanic whites and lower property values (Relethford et al. 1983; South et al. 2005). This not only socially isolates, but also stunts the opportunity for accumulation of wealth through home ownership (Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

Colorism in schools

Do schools practice skin-color stratification? Schools do not exist in a vacuum and researchers find the same patterns of inequalities inside schools that exist outside schools (Anderson and Cromwell 1977; Murguia and Telles 1996; Robinson and Ward 1995). In fact, in their groundbreaking study, Hughes and Hertel (1990) found that the education gap between whites and blacks was nearly identical to the education gap between light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks. Consequently, they suggest that colorism plays as significant a role in the lives of African Americans as race does.

The skin-color effect on education has also been shown for Mexican Americans. Murguia and Telles (1996) demonstrated that lighter-skinned Mexican Americans complete more years of schooling than darker-skinned Mexican Americans even when their family backgrounds are similar. This is a particularly important finding in relation to the steady stream of immigration from Mexico. New immigrants who come here face not only racial/ethnic discrimination, but discrimination by phenotype or skin color (Alba et al. 2000). Arce et al. (1987) even included a variable on facial features in their analysis of skin color and education. They found that dark skin color coupled with Indian facial features (as opposed to Anglo) produced a significant depression of educational attainment.

How does skin-color stratification operate in schools? Skin-color hierarchies reflect deeply held cultural beliefs about civility, modernity, sophistication, backwardness, beauty, and virtue (Ernst 1980; Morrison 1992; Smedley 2007). In Western culture, light skin and European facial features have been equated with the positive characteristics mentioned above (Drake 1987). In English and in Spanish, the terms 'fair' and 'la güera' mean both 'light' and 'pretty'. The conflation of these meanings is just one example of a deeply held cultural value that European or white bodies are superior to others (Feagin and McKinney 2002). This gets translated in the classroom in particular ways. Teacher expectations exert a powerful influence on student achievement. If teachers, of any race, expect their light-skinned students of color to be smarter, more academically prepared, from better families, and better behaved than their darker-skinned classmates, the students may rise and fall to meet those racialized expectations (Murguia and Telles 1996). Teachers and principals may respond more positively to light-skinned or white parents of children in their classrooms. We know that school counselors encourage white students to attend college more often than equally talented African American students (Oakes 1987). It is possible that school counselors may also encourage lighter-skinned students of color to go to college more often than they encourage darker-skinned students. Students in the classroom also express these cultural values. Students of color often valorize their lighter-skinned peers in terms of beauty, brains, and social status, even if they also shun

them in terms of ethnic authenticity (Craig 2002; Leeds 1994; Robinson and Ward 1995; Torres 2006). There are many ways that skin-color bias may operate in schools, but the bottom line is that the lighter kids benefit and the darker kids pay the price.

Skin color and ethnic identity

The economic and social advantages of light skin are clear. In societies where resources are divided by race and color, light-skinned people get a disproportionate amount of the benefits. However, light skin may be viewed as a disadvantage with regard to ethnic legitimacy or authenticity. In many ethnic communities, people view darker-skin tones as more ethnically authentic. For example, light-skinned and biracial people often report feeling left out or pushed out of co-ethnic groups. They report other people's perceptions of their racial identity as a common source of conflict or discomfort (Brunsmas and Rockquemore 2001).

The task of 'proving' oneself to be a legitimate or authentic member of an ethnic community is a significant burden for the light-skinned in Latino, African American, and Asian American communities. For some people of color, authenticity is the vehicle through which darker-skinned people take back their power from lighter-skinned people (Hunter 2005). For example, a dark-skinned African American woman remarked,

In terms of female–female relationships, I think color affects how we treat each other. Like if you're lighter and I think you're better, and I think the guys want you, then I won't treat you nicely. I'll take every opportunity to ignore you, or not tell you something, or keep you out of my little group of friends, because really I feel threatened, so I want to punish you because you have it better than me. (Hunter 2005, 72)

In this example, the darker-skinned interviewee describes feeling 'threatened' by the high status of light-skinned African American women. She responded by using her social power and friendship networks.

Light-skinned Mexican Americans are often viewed as more assimilated and less identified with the Mexican American community (Mason 2004). Mexicans report using Spanish language ability as a way to re-establish their Mexican identity when light skin casts doubt on it (Jimenez 2004). Suggestions of not being black enough, or authentically ethnic enough, in any ethnic community, is a serious insult to many. This tactic has particular power against those lighter-skinned people who are from racially mixed backgrounds (Rockquemore 2002). It implies that they do not identify with their fellow ethnics, that they do not care about them, that they think they are better than their co-ethnics, or, in extreme cases, that they wish they were white (Bowman et al. 2004; Ono 2002; Vazquez et al. 1997).

Charges of ethnic illegitimacy are already at work in the 2008 US presidential campaign. Political commentators have charged both Barack

Obama and Bill Richardson of not being 'ethnic enough'. These charges may seem inconsequential to the casual observer, but accusations of ethnic illegitimacy can be quite significant. Major media outlets, such as *Time* magazine and the *Los Angeles Times*, ran stories titled, 'Is Obama Black Enough?' (Coates 2007) and 'Obama Not "Black Enough"?' (Huston 2007). Richardson must simultaneously remind people that he is Latino, and downplay his Latino identity in order to navigate the dangerous waters of race, immigration, and assimilation. Researchers have found that voters pay close attention to racial cues and framing in election campaigns. A candidate's skin tone and ethnic identity can be crucial determinants in many elections (Caliendo and McIlwain 2006; Terkildsen 1993).

Darker skin color, as evidenced in the above example, is associated with more race-conscious views and higher levels of perceived discrimination (Allen et al. 2000; Edwards 1973; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Ono 2002; Ransford 1970). Among Latinos, skin color is also closely associated with language, where dark skin and Spanish language ability are key identifiers of Chicano and Mexican identity (Lopez 1982). Conversely, light skin and English monolingualism are typically identified with Anglo assimilation and thus devalued by some in Mexican American communities (Ortiz and Arce 1984). Herein lies the contradiction: on one hand, dark skin is associated with being Indian or African and therefore backward, ugly, and low status. On the other hand, dark skin is evidence of being Indian or African and therefore, of being truly or authentically Mexican American or African American (Hunter 2005). This contradiction is exemplified in the previous example of Obama and Richardson's presidential candidacies. Their light skin tones, among other factors, are a source of trouble because they represent Anglo assimilation and ethnic illegitimacy, but their political success is also attributable in part to their light skin tones and their perceived high levels of Anglo assimilation. This is the conundrum of colorism.

Research on Asian Americans revealed a similar ambivalence about skin tone (Rondilla and Spickard 2007). In one study, most Asian American respondents agreed that their communities demonstrated strong preferences for light skin, but there were notable exceptions (Rondilla and Spickard 2007). The researchers asked people to look at three different pictures of Asian American young women, one light skinned, one medium, and one dark and to create a story of each of their lives. This very creative process yielded fascinating results. Participants wrote the most positive narratives about the woman with the medium complexion. Respondents characterized the lightest-skinned woman as 'troubled', 'torn between one culture to the next', and 'she wants to shed her Oriental roots by becoming blond' (Rondilla and Spickard, 2007, 67–68). In contrast, when describing the darkest-skinned woman, respondents created stories that centered on her ethnic authenticity. They described her as a recent immigrant, close to her family, responsible for younger brothers and sisters, with limited English

skills, and as the least 'American' of the three women pictured (Rondilla and Spickard 2007). The woman of medium skin tone was described as 'all-American', as a good student, good friend, smart, successful, and as an ideal choice for a daughter-in-law. Rondilla and Spickard's (2007) research reveals the complexity of skin color, status, and identity.

It is tempting to characterize the problem of colorism as equally difficult for both light-skinned people and dark. Dark-skinned people lack the social and economic capital that light skin provides, and are therefore disadvantaged in education, employment, and housing (Alba et al. 2000; Arce et al. 1987; Keith and Herring 1991). Additionally, dark skin is generally not regarded as beautiful, so dark-skinned women often lose out in the dating and marriage markets (Hunter 1998; Sahay and Piran 1997). On the other side, light-skinned men and women are typically not regarded as legitimate members of their ethnic communities. They may be excluded from, or made to feel unwelcome in, community events and organizations (Hunter 2005). At first glance, it may seem that there are equal advantages and disadvantages to both sides of the color line. Upon closer examination, this proves to be untrue. Although exclusion from some community organizations may be uncomfortable psychologically or emotionally for light-skinned people of color, it rarely has significant material effects. More specifically, emotional turmoil about ethnic identity does not have significant economic consequences. However, the systematic discrimination against dark-skinned people of color in the labor market, educational institutions, and marriage market create marked economic disadvantages (Allen et al. 2000; Hill 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Mason 2004). Without minimizing the psychological trauma of exclusion from ethnic communities, it is important to clarify that the disadvantages of dark skin still far outweigh the disadvantages of light.

When compared in this way, it is not simply a case of 'the grass is always greener on the other side'. Although there are downsides to both ends of the color spectrum, the penalties are more common and more severe for dark skin than for light. This is evidenced in Hunter's (2005) interviews with Mexican American and African American women. Nearly all of the dark-skinned women interviewed wanted to be lighter at some time in their lives in order to accrue some of the privileges of light skin. In contrast, despite their painful stories of exclusion, none of the light-skinned women interviewed ever reported wanting to be dark (Hunter 2005). This significant difference points to the enduring and substantial privilege of light skin.

Gender, beauty, and the global color complex

Although colorism affects both men and women, women experience discrimination based on skin tone in particular ways. Skin tone is an important characteristic in defining beauty and beauty is an important resource for women (Hunter 2002; Wolf 1991). Beauty provides women

with status that can lead to advances in employment, education, and even the marriage market (Hunter 2005). Light skin color, as an indicator of beauty, can operate as a form of social capital for women (Hunter 2002). This social capital can be transformed into other forms of capital and used to gain status in jobs, housing, schools, and social networks. Social networks can increase capital in a wide variety of ways, and one of the most important is through one's spouse. Light-skinned people of color are not more likely to be married than their darker-skinned counterparts, but light-skinned women, particularly African Americans, are likely to marry higher status spouses (Hunter 1998; Udry et al. 1971). Study after study has shown that light-skinned African American women marry spouses with higher levels of education, higher incomes, or higher levels of occupational prestige, than their darker-skinned counterparts (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 1998; Keith and Herring 1991; Udry et al. 1971). This phenomenon allows light-skinned people to 'marry up' and essentially exchange the high status of their skin tone for the high status of education, income, or occupation in their spouse (Elder 1969; Webster and Driskell 1983).

Interviews published by Rondilla and Spickard (2007) reveal this social exchange theory or 'marrying up' practice at work. A Filipina interviewee said, 'My father suggested I have children with my White ex-boyfriend so he could have mestizo grandchildren. I think years of this colonial way of thinking and all the American propaganda has made it so that my father (and most other Filipinos) think that everything "American" – White American – is superior' (Rondilla and Spickard 2007, 55). This example illustrates that marrying a lighter-skinned partner is not just a practice that gives the spouse access to more social and economic capital, but it is also a practice that could allow one's children to have a higher status by being lighter-skinned themselves.

The Philippines is a good example of the intersection of internalized colonial values and the cult of the new global beauty. Like many other former European or American colonies, the Philippines' contemporary culture valorizes American culture and white beauty (Rafael 2000). Through globalization, multinational media conglomerates export US cultural products and cultural imperialism. Part of this structure of domination is the exportation of cultural images, including images of race (Choy 2005). The USA exports images of the good life, of white beauty, white affluence, white heroes, and brown and black entertainers/criminals. As many people in other countries yearn for the 'good life' offered in the USA, they also yearn for the dominant aesthetic of the USA: light skin, blond hair, and Anglo facial features (Fraser 2003). Women in Korea, surrounded by other Koreans, pay high sums of money to have double eyelid surgery that Westernizes their eyes. 'In Asian countries like South Korea, Japan and China, double eyelid surgery is a way of life. In fact, because so many people in South Korea have undergone eyelid surgery,

the country has the highest percentage of people with plastic surgery in the world' (King and Yun 2005). Women in Saudi Arabia, Uganda, and Brazil are using toxic skin bleaching creams to try and achieve a lighter complexion (Chisholm 2002; Mire 2001; Siyachitema 2002). One of the most common high school graduation presents among the elite in Mexico City is a nose job with the plastic surgeon (Taylor 2002). Each of these choices may sound extreme or pathological, but it is actually quite rational in a context of global racism and US domination. Unfortunately new eyelids, lighter skin, and new noses are likely to offer their owners better opportunities in a competitive global marketplace (Davis 1995; Kaw 1998; Morgan 1998; Sullivan 2001).

The new global racism transcends national borders and infiltrates cultures and families all over the world. It draws on historical ideologies of colonialism and internalized racism buttressed with visions of a new world order. Images associated with white America are highly valued and emulated in the global marketplace. This is part of what makes colorism and racism so hard to battle: the images supporting these systems are everywhere and the rewards for whiteness are real. In addition to wrestling with the values of their colonial pasts, many Third World nations are also contending with the onslaught of US-produced cultural images valorizing whiteness and especially white femininity (and the occasional version of light brown femininity). Television, film, Internet, and print ads all feature white women with blond hair as not only the cultural ideal, but the cultural imperative. White and light-skinned people are rewarded accordingly.

Women and men of color have ever-increasing opportunities to alter their bodies toward whiteness. They can purchase lighter-colored contact lenses for their eyes; they can straighten kinky or curly hair; they can have cosmetic surgeries on their lips, noses, or eyes. But one of the oldest traditions of this sort is skin bleaching. There are lots of old wives' tales recipes for skin bleaching, including baking soda, bleach, toothpaste, or even lye. In the USA, overt skin bleaching with the stated intention of whitening one's skin fell out of favor in many communities after the Civil Rights movements and cultural pride movements of the 1960s and 1970s. However, outside of the USA and in many postcolonial nations of the Global South, skin bleaching is reaching new heights.

Skin-bleaching creams go by many names: skin lighteners, skin whiteners, skin-toning creams, skin evening creams, skin-fading gels, etc. Essentially, they are creams regularly applied to the face or body that purport to 'lighten', 'brighten', or 'whiten' the skin. They are marketed as beauty products available to women to increase their beauty, by increasing their whiteness. The skin bleaching industry is thriving around the globe, particularly in Third World, postcolonial countries (Mire 2001). Skin lighteners are commonly used in places including Mexico, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jamaica, the Philippines, Japan, India, Tanzania, Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, and less so, but also USA (Charles 2003; Chisholm

2002; Easton 1998; Kovaleski 1999; Mahe et al. 2004; Schuler 1999). These products are everywhere and easy to get, from the Asian market on the corner, to major cosmetic retailers online. Drugstore.com, an online beauty and drugstore retailer, offers links to categories of products including 'skin lighteners' and 'skin whiteners'. Here, the consumer may purchase 'pH Advantage' a 'pigmentation fader', which sells for \$55 for one ounce, or 'Skin Doctor's Dermabrite Brightening Crème', which retails for \$35 for 1.7 ounces (see www.drugstore.com and www.beauty.com). There are dozens of products available with prices to match any budget.

For many people around the world, skin bleaching seems like one of the few ways to get a piece of the pie in a highly racialized society. Skin-lightening products constitute a multibillion dollar industry. These products usually contain one of three harmful ingredients: mercury, hydroquinone, or corticosteroids (sometimes used in combination). Many skin-bleaching products are made outside of North America and Europe, in Mexico and Nigeria, but often under the auspices of larger US and European cosmetics firms (Mire 2001). The products may not be made in the USA, but US women also use them.

In fact, the pursuit of light skin color can be so important it can prove fatal. A Harvard medical school researcher found outbreaks of mercury poisoning in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Tanzania. He came to learn that the mercury poisoning, found almost exclusively in women, was caused by the widespread use of skin-bleaching creams containing toxic levels of mercury (Counter 2003). Even children were suffering the effects of mercury poisoning, either from *in utero* absorption during pregnancy, or from mothers who put the bleaching cream on their children eager for them to have the benefits of light skin. These stories may seem to be only far away, but they also happen in the USA. The same team of Harvard researchers found outbreaks of mercury poisoning in the southwestern USA where thousands of Mexican American women use skin-bleaching creams to try to achieve a lighter and more valued complexion. In Latin America, Africa, and many parts of Asia, whiteness is such an important commodity that many women overlook what they perceive to be minor risks in order to attain for themselves or their children the benefits of light skin. Skin whiteners are increasingly used by men, as well. India's best-selling 'Fair and Lovely' lightening soaps and creams launched a new line for men in 2005, appropriately branded, 'Fair and Handsome' (Perry 2005).

Skin color continues to shape our lives in powerful ways in the USA and around the globe. The cultural messages that give meaning and value to different skin tones are both deeply historical and actively contemporary. People of color with dark skin tones continue to pay a price for their color, and the light skinned continue to benefit from their association with whiteness. Only a slow dismantling of the larger system of white racism, in the USA and around the globe, will initiate a change in the

color hierarchy it has created. But this is not to say it will be easy. Talking about colorism and internalized racism can be challenging. Most white Americans believe that racism is on the wane, and that any talk about racial discrimination does more harm than good (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Brown et al. 2003). This phenomenon is referred to by many social scientists as 'colorblind racism'. Colorblind racism makes racism invisible while actively perpetuating it. But white Americans are not the only ones who do not want to talk about colorism. Many African Americans feel that discussions of colorism 'air our dirty laundry' for all to see and judge (Breland 1997). Others feel that talking about colorism distracts from the larger and more significant problem of racism in the USA. Most people of color agree that colorism is an 'in house' issue, a personal one that is a tragedy within communities of color (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). It is at minimum, embarrassing, and at its worst, a sign of racial self-hatred (Hall 2006).

Discussing colorism is not a 'distraction' from the important issue of racial discrimination. In fact, understanding colorism helps us better understand how racism works in our contemporary society. Colorism is one manifestation of a larger 'racial project' that communicates meaning and status about race in the USA (Omi and Winant 1994). Studies on skin-color stratification support the contention that racial discrimination is alive and well (Keith and Herring 1991; Mason 2004), and so insidious that communities of color themselves are divided into quasi-racial hierarchies (Alba et al. 2000; Hunter 2005; Seltzer and Smith 1991). As long as the structure of white racism remains intact, colorism will continue to operate.

Short Biography

Margaret Hunter is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Mills College in Oakland, California. Her research areas include comparative racial and ethnic relations, skin color politics, feminist theory, and the sociology of gender. Her recent book, *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone* (Routledge, 2005) compares the experiences of African American and Mexican American women with skin color discrimination. Her research on skin tone has been published in several journals including *Gender & Society* (2002) and *Sociological Inquiry* (1998). 'Rethinking Epistemology, Methodology, and Racism: or, Is White Sociology Really Dead?' (*Race & Society* 5 (2002)) is Hunter's contribution to the debate about racism and knowledge construction in the discipline of sociology. She is currently working on an interview study analyzing the public use of colorblind racial discourse.

Note

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