

WALLACE, LAWANDA, M., Ph.D. *Double Dutching in My Own Skin: An Autoethnography on Colorism*. (2013)  
Directed by Dr. Kathleen Casey. 139 pp.

The glamorized life of black women with light skin has caused division within the black community. This study investigates colorism, which is a form of internalized racism, from the perspective of a light skinned African American woman. Although there have been several studies that have sought to quantify and qualify the nature of black women as it relates to colorism (Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Wilder & Cain, 2010) missing from the literature is a different perspective on the subject matter. This dissertation offers another perspective. The social construction of race is used as the overarching theory to understand colorism. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) are also used as grounding frameworks for this research.

By engaging in an autoethnographic methodology (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bouchner, 2000; Poulas, 2009) this researcher shares intimate accounts of colorism from her own lived experience. This Reflexivity engages the researchers' explicit self awareness (Finlay, 2002) throughout the entire research process. Through a critical analysis of popular culture in movies, this study offers insight into the origination of inscribed identities of black women. The traditional roles of mammy, sapphire and jezebel are examined to further illustrate the perpetuation of colorism. As black women our identities are created by others.

Within our community we have reenacted what we have consumed. The context of this work should be understood as groundbreaking to the field of colorism.

DOUBLE DUTCHING IN MY OWN SKIN: AN  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON COLORISM

by

LaWanda M. Wallace

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2013

Approved by

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Committee Co-Chair

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Committee Co-Chair

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To Love & Lemonade:

May everyone have an abundance of both in their lifetime

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by LaWanda M. Wallace, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Co-Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have written this page a million times in my mind. This experience has shaped, humbled and strengthened me in ways unimaginable. I truly know that I will never be the same. My sense of community as family and family as community has been reaffirmed. It truly does take a village to gain a PhD. There are many to thank and acknowledge. I'll begin in no particular order.

I'd like to thank my committee, also known in my own world as the *DREAM TEAM*. Dr. Casey, my head coach, thank you for doing what a coach does. Even in days when I did not understand or agree with the game plan you pushed me to be better and when it was game time everything made sense. In the true fashion of coaching you prepared me. To Dr. Shapiro, my recruiter, you were the first person I spoke with in ELC. You embody ELC and it was an honor to begin and end my journey with you. To Dr. Cooper, my personal development coach, thank you for always treating me as you saw me in the future, a colleague. You never let me forget that being Dr. Wallace was only a step as to where my life is going. To Dr. Cureton, my position coach, plain and simple you made me better. Thank you for the countless time and energy that you invested in me. To Dr. Wagner, thank you for serving on my team when you were needed. Your contribution to my work and to me as a person will never be forgotten.

To my biological family, my Florida family and to my future in loves your presence in my life has shaped and molded me. There is not a day that goes

by that thoughts of your life don't consume me. For you I want God to give the world. I love you all beyond measure. Within in my family I must give a special acknowledgment to my nucleus, my mom, my auntie, my sister, my brother, my step dad and my nieces. To my Godchildren my prayers for you are numerous. I love each and every one of you to the end of time. To the parents who saw me fit to be their child's God mom I can't thank you enough for gifting me with this love.

To my college crew, my beautiful sorors, my church family, my gym family, my true friends (you know who you are), my old athletic family, my students (oh how I love thee), OMA, Sistah Dochtas, and my *DIVAS* thank you so much for your love, support, and for believing in me. Most of all thank you for allowing me to be who I am to you when I'm in your space. I appreciate not always having to wear the scholar hat.

Last but certainly not least I thank my partner in life for the love that we have shared. I never knew a love like this existed yet here you are. You arrived in my journey at just the right time. I am so excited about what our future holds. Your love and support means everything to me. I love you.

There have been countless others whose experiences have meshed with my experiences. Whether it was a smile on a rough day, kind words of encouragement, or a meal when I was hungry; for this I tell you thank you. I truly feel blessed because I have gotten favor in so many places and am loved by so many. I come from a legacy of women with PhD's and am honored to be the first one in my generation to gain one. Dr. Ellen Seabrook Alston (great

grandmother), Dr. Mozelle McKay (great aunt), Dr. Georgia Jones (great aunt), Dr. Gwendolyn Joyner (second cousin) and Dr. Patricia Shetlon (auntie) thank you for paving the way. I don't take it lightly and I count it all joy. With God I know all things are possible. I feel that I have gotten my wings now and I am truly ready to fly. Simply this thing that I am shall make me live. —William Shakespeare

## PREFACE

*Patiently I sat in his office. With my heart beating and hands trembling I took my first deep breath before I began sharing my work, my passion with my classmates and professor. As I start, I stumble over my words because my words are my thoughts and my thoughts are intimate to me. I'm nervous! Saying them out loud makes them real to me. Writing them down makes them a permanent document, something that other people can read. As I share with them what has been the story of my life my eyes swell with tears and my face begins to turn pink. I hate that my skin always shows all.*

*I wonder why everyone is silent. As they leave the classroom all my classmates pat me on my back. I'm not certain if the pat is saying, "job well done" or "hang in there", but never the less they all do it; every single one of them. The next day a classmate and dear friend called to check on me. She wanted to make sure that I was okay. I uncomfortably laughed at her and asked what did she think was wrong with me? She got so quiet. Her silence on the phone unnerved me. With a steady calm voice (like she was being gentle with me) she states "your eyes were red and swollen with tears last night." In my uncomfortable state I laugh it off. I tell her "oh that was just allergies." I knew my eyes had swollen with tears but I thought it was just a little bit. Who would really cry in class I said to her. I began talking about something else. Why is she in my personal space? Doesn't she know I am melting on the inside? I want her to*

*back off of me but I know her she is going to continue to push me. I wonder if she picked up on all the things that she said because she knows me well or was it just that obvious to everyone.*

*The next week one of my classmates approaches me before class got started. He wanted to make sure that I did not think that he was patronizing me by patting me on my back. I assured him that I had not put any more thought into it, which was partially untrue. I had thought about it but not necessarily in the way that he had believed that I had. I wondered if he too saw what my dear friend had seen. Apparently he had. I had no idea that my research topic was going to affect me like this. On our first day of class Dr. Shapiro said my dissertation should be an extension of me. He told me to write about the very thing that is important and deep in my soul. He said write about what I am passionate about and not to be bound by structure and tradition. So I took his advice not considering that in doing so it was going to affect me the way that it did last week.*

*I knew I had chosen the right topic but until sharing it with my classmates I felt that it was important to keep my personal life as far away from the research as possible. After all I am a light skinned black woman, who according to the world of colorism have been privileged by my skin. What voice could I really give to the situation? Furthermore who would care to listen?*

*Every person in the room, including my professor suggested that I do a personal narrative. I began to get very defensive. I'm thinking whom me, are these people crazy? They want me to talk about colorism from my perspective.*

*Are they really suggesting that I spend pages upon pages talking about the life of a light skinned black woman? No way! That is unheard of. Should my dissertation not give voice, freedom, even vengeance to those people who are darker than I? Are they not the ones who deserve to be heard? Through the constant back and forth conversation all I could think of is how badly I wanted that moment to end. Maybe then I would have time to come up with all the many reasons that they were wrong about my voice being important and I was right about remaining silent. Maybe I could possibly come up with all the ways in which I could convince them that approaching my research from another angle would perhaps be more scholarly. Yeah, that is it. Telling another person's story would be more scholarly!*

*Then the strangest thing happened between the first week of class and a couple of weeks later. I realized they were right. My voice could be heard. Maybe it should be heard. I felt the urgency to include my life. I felt that it is an essential piece to not only the ever-evolving development of my research, but also to myself. For the first time ever, I really began to embrace the idea of a personal narrative and the added benefit that it would give to my readers. As I thought about it even more I also thought about how much of a benefit it would be for me as a researcher, a student and a life long learner. I pondered a little longer on how I would map out my first literary masterpiece (in my mind at least).*

*The project is so big I don't know where to begin. I guess I'll do what I love and that is journal. Maybe it will lead me to something. I am going to write,*

*explore, discover and yes maybe even overcome my fears, complexities and anxieties about colorism. I want to do this all while creating a scholarly piece that will make me proud. Like any work of fine art I stare at the blank canvas and wonder what it will one day become. I know my work will be special to me. Not perfect but maybe perfect in my eyes. I know this is just the beginning. I can feel that. I have no idea what I am about to truly get myself into. I hope that it will touch the lives of those who read it. I hope it will touch my life as well. Here goes nothing and everything all wrapped up in one.*

Signed ME spring 2010

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**CHAPTER I**  
**DOWN WITH FRAGGLE ROCK:  
FRECKLES, RED HAIR, AND STONES**

**Introduction**

In this dissertation I explore the phenomenon of colorism from the perspective of being a light skinned African American woman. Colorism, which a form of internalized racism, is the belief that light skin provides privilege over dark skin within a set marginalized group (Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004; Russell et al., 1992). Although there have been several studies that have sought to quantify and qualify the nature of black women as it relates to colorism, missing from the literature is a different perspective on the subject matter. By using the theoretical lens of the social construction of race, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), I engage in an autoethnographic research project to explore this subject.

The engagement of autoethnography causes many personal experiences and memories to be shared. I understand that I have an obligation as the author of this work to provide accurate accounts of colorism as I have experienced it. I take this responsibility very seriously. Even being true I understand that there are memories in my life which include others whom because of the unambiguous role in my life were unable to be disguised. The use of pseudo names would not have changed their role in my stories. Whereas I do not find the stories to be offensive

or telling in an way that could embarrass them, I still offer my apologies to them in advance for sharing something that perhaps they may not have wanted shared and or did not know I processed it in the way that I did. I also offer assurance, if there is any doubt, that they are not a personal project to me. Their life experiences simply coincided with my life experiences.

### **Where It All Started**

*As I stand in the circle with one rock on my shoulder while looking at the rock on the girl's shoulder in front of me I am steaming on the inside. I cannot believe that I am standing "here" again. As the other kids chant "fight, fight, fight" I ball my fist up in anticipation of what seemed like a regular occurrence in my childhood, another fight. "Hit that yellow banana " or "Slap that rock off of that tar baby's shoulder" gets louder and louder before finally one of us get up enough courage to take the first swing. The fight starts, finishes and ends, only to happen again real soon. I can't tell you how many times this happened in my childhood, but what I can say is I won some and I lost some. Now that I am older I realize that even the ones that I won I really lost.*

If you would have asked either of us why we were really fighting I know that we could not have told you the truth. All I knew was I was angry because she was angry and equally so she was angry because I was angry. The sad part is we were fighting a fight that had begun many years before we were even born; yet we were both fighting as if our lives depended on it. I don't even remember the people that I fought, but I do remember the intensity that I felt when I was

doing it. I physically fought to stand my ground in my neighborhood, just to make it known that simply because I was light, high yellow, red or any other demeaning adjective they used to describe me, that I was still black and nobody could ever take that away from me. "Light-skinned black women face the challenge of not being accepted by others in their race as well as feeling guilty or shameful about the unfair advantages they are said to have" (Glenn, 2009, p. 34). As a child I would not have been able to articulate it in that way, but I knew what I was fighting for, I just did not really know why I was fighting for it. Although I was tired of the fights I welcomed them on every occasion because it gave me the opportunity to "prove" myself.

I would be foolish to think that all my fights steamed solely because of my complexion, however, from the comments that I heard before, during and after the altercations, I know that many of them did. I was able to grow up and learn how to ignore such comments as "you think you are cute because you are light skin" but unfortunately everyone does not get beyond these thoughts, or even beyond making the comments themselves for that matter. The need to prove your "blackness" was very real for me growing up as a child. I grew up during an era where to be black was to be beautiful. "The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice" was a common catch phrase during the 1980's. Those who were not so dark may not have always been esteemed as being sweet. This translated directly to how "black" they were. The lighter you were the less black people saw you as if to say that being black was an adjective versus a noun.

There was a popular movie by the name of *Living Large* that came out in 1991 that depicted what I am illustrating. As the main character in the movie a news anchor man, Dexter played by actor T. C. Carson, got more away from his black roots his skin began to get lighter. His hair texture, nose and other key features also changed. By the end of the movie he was unrecognizably black but decided that he wanted to go back to his roots, thus his Afrocentric features resurfaced. This movie was considered to have a happy ending. What happens to those black people who do not possess traditional Afrocentric features? Do their lives always have “happy endings”?

As a child I did not fully understand why kids could hate me because of my skin tone alone. I grew up just like them, middle class (probably more like poor) with lots of hopes and dreams and no clear vision to get where I wanted to go. My mother was a single mother, we moved just about every year of my life, we never had a car growing up, I wore my sister’s second hand clothes and at times my shoes had holes in them, but yet I was the center of most kid’s envy. For the life of me I could never understand why.

I vividly remember in the sixth grade being told in the bathroom by a girl that on the last day of school I better not come because I was going to get jumped. I was terrified and went home fearful and afraid to go back the next day. When I told my sister and now brother-in-law they told me that I better go and if I ran from that one threat that I would be running for the rest of my life. Even though I had gotten into many fights in my neighborhood something about a fight

at school seemed petrifying. This was probably because I had more to lose, because I was a cheerleader and on student council. I went to school. The advice they gave me was great because I got threatened many times in my life after that and much like the threat from sixth grade the people never came through, thank God. I remember timidly asking the girl why I would get jumped and the answer she gave was the one that I constantly heard “because you think you are cute because you are light skinned.” Although I did not have to physically fight that day in middle school the emotional fight left an everlasting scar on my life. So much so that I have chosen to do my dissertation work on this area. Growing up with light skin in the South taught me a valuable lesson; it doesn’t matter if your color is not seen as an asset to you, if others around you (peers) feel that it is, than it is possible that they may have deep feelings concerning it, and may retaliate accordingly.

When young girls said that I thought I was cute because I was light skinned, or “when I first met you I thought you were stuck up because of your color but now that I know you I realize you are cool” (if I had a dollar for every time I heard this I would be rich), what I really heard them say was that they believed that I thought that I was better than them simply because of my skin tone. I never thought this. Unfortunately, this belief holds true for many people within minority communities.

Almost 20 years after my childhood fights I am left with the invisible scars of what my color meant to others as a child. Day by day I am becoming fully

aware in a scholarly context of why children made the comments that they made, and am ready to confront and challenge the ideas and mindsets that several people within the African American community hold when it comes to race and shades. When a person is discriminated against, treated differently, shunned or made to be an outcast because of the shade of their skin they are experiencing the brutal effects of intra-racism. As one might believe intra racism, also known as inter-racism, colorisms and internalized racism, is a subsidiary of racism, except it is found in totality among one particular race. Colorism is a systematic preference for lightness that stems from the larger and more potent system of racism. Many have internalized this racism so deeply, that they can no longer recognize colorism and racism for what they are, and instead see them simply as individual taste (Hunter, 2005) versus the chronic disorder that it truly is. In the medical world a chronic disorder is defined as a human health condition or disease that is persistent or otherwise long lasting in its effects. The term *chronic* is usually applied when the course of the disease lasts for more than three months (M. Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007). It is apparent to see that internalized racism has existed longer than this.

There have been several studies which discuss colorism, but most are from the perspective of darker skinned women. In her autobiographical piece *Don't Play in the Sun* author Marita Golden (2004) discussed her journey of being the *wrong color* (she was dark skinned) and how that shaped her life. It took me several months to get through this work. It is not because the work was

dense but rather her accounts of internalized racism struck a nerve with me. On one hand I was very sorry for what she felt and experienced growing up. On another hand I was in disbelief and frustrated that she could blame so much of what had gone wrong in her life on the complexion of another black woman's skin. In her eyes she literally stood back in the presence of light skinned women. This idea troubled me deeply.

It was this work that prompted what you will read in this dissertation. I offer a counter narrative of what it is like to have lighter skin while navigating through the color complex. Presumably I have the *right color*. Being true or not (my opinion is not) a different perspective in research is always meaningful and will add more insight on the subject matter.

Because I am a African American women who has been socialized in the black community in Greensboro, NC which is in the southern hemisphere of the United States of America I have chosen to focus my dissertation on the issue of colorism within my country. Choosing to focus solely on America does not imply that the affects of color stratification do not exist within other minority communities or countries. Nor does it imply that their experiences could not be comparable to people within the African American community here. I am simply speaking from the perspective that I understand.

### **Significance of the Study**

Most of the literature that has been written on colorism would lead one to believe that people who are black but have a lighter hue have better:

1. Spouses/partners
2. Children
3. Employment
4. Social organizations
5. Education (maybe even more)

Overall, the research suggests that a black person with light skin will have a better quality of life (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Budkelew, & Freeman, 2010; Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992; Wilder & Cain, 2010). This belief is systemic from the early influence of color preferences that originated during slavery (Henderson, 2002) and has been held as “truth” over time. The word “better” gives me grief, but never the less it is how light skinned women are spoken of.

The studies that have been done conclusively state that life would be better simply by having lighter skin. This information is typically formulated through narrative inquiry; where by both dark skinned and light skinned women have been interviewed. Also, quantitative research via surveys has also been used to capture this information (Glenn, 2009). Missing from the scholarly literature is an autobiographical study of a light skin black woman that could challenge these said norms.

I am certain that this type of research is missing for due cause. In the conundrum of internalized racism, intra-racism, colorism, a lighter complexion black person is supposed to benefit from having lighter skin, thus exploring the

idea and possibly learning that this may not be true would disrupt the idea of privilege that many argue factually comes with having a lighter complexion. There within lies the struggle, the relevance of such a study to be done and my contribution to the literature.

### **Research Goals**

My goals are very clear and simple. By examining the everyday narratives that have taken place around me before and throughout my process, I not only give my reaction to them but also what the research states about these beliefs. Viewing the literature through my personal perspective, as well as from the perspective of what the literature will present, will do this. Another source of content analysis will be movies. Because movies are very instrumental in how black women are viewed and perceived by society I will utilize them to discuss how they help form and perpetuate the master narrative concerning colorism.

My research is timely because since the first election of President Barak Obama in 2008, the idea of what it means to be one race while having different shades within is indeed becoming more popular and a hot topic for many around the country (Burton et al., 2010) Any document that will allow readers to gain a different perspective will be meaningful to the overall understanding of colorism.

Drawing upon the existing scholarly research on internalized racism I explore the variations of colorism as documented juxtaposed to my actual lived experiences as a light-skin African American woman. The overall study will be autobiographical, which in research is called autoethnography (Chang, 2008;

Denzin, 1997; Ellis, 2004). It is supported by the existing literature, but the most important component of the study is the researcher. This type of research pushes scholars to a new level of understanding and develops a depth in your soul that can only be created through experiencing the process. As Poulos (2009) offers, “There is something about getting lost, and then getting ‘un-lost,’ that changes you” (p. 52). Autoethnography certainly has the ability to change you.

This type of research examines the lived experience on the subject from the researcher’s perspective (Denzin, 1997). This form of scholarly inquiry is not new. It has been defined in many ways such as autobiography, autophenomenology, biography, oral history, case history, case study, life history, life story, self- story and personal experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Because this type of research is so personal there are clear guidelines that must be followed to maintain the integrity of the work. Ellis (2004) suggests the goals of autoethnography include:

- 1) Evoking emotional experiences in readers (celebrating emotions)
- 2) Giving voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry (being inclusive of all)
- 3) Producing writing of high literary/artistic quality (maintain balance between both) and
- 4) Improving participants, readers, and author’s lives (being open with your work) (p. 30)

It is important to emphasize that it is not completely autobiographical but rather a harmonious balance between research on internalized racism/intra-

racism/colorism, intertwined with my lived experience. Overall it is about how the researcher fits into the bigger context of the cultural issue.

### **Personal Investment**

With the increasing conversations and debates concerning race and shades of skin I feel that I am never able to separate myself from my work. We are what we become and we become what we are. It is this constant immersion and the ability to interchangeably penetrate circles that I have chosen to do a autoethnographic study for my dissertation.

My personal child hood experiences, my upbringing, my high school years, my college experience and now my adult life have all had traces of colorism, and will be discussed throughout my research. Not only am I constantly surrounded by the idea, but also I believe that everyone is, whether they recognize or choose to acknowledge it or not. While I fervently believe this, I am aware that not all black people hold the belief that colorism still exist. I often speak of this experience with sisters (other black women) who are a browner hue and to my surprise they usually do not understand nor are they fully aware that such division is taking place among black women. This is because those people who are either very light or very dark are the ones whom usually feel the effects of colorism; those in the middle tend to be “safe” (Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005). “It doesn’t matter if we are light or if we are dark, we all feel like we’re not enough or who we are because we are always being pursued, attacked, or rejected because of what we look like” (Golden, 2004, p. 108). Those who are in the

“middle” may be protected from the intra social effects of colorism, but are not protected by the inter effects of the social structure of skin tone stratification.

### **Overview of Dissertation**

Constructing a dissertation that is both meaningful and scholarly is important to me. I also feel it very important to create a document that makes sense to my project. Much like my advisor Dr. Kathleen Casey, who answered with her life, I have chosen to develop new meaning through lived experience and to answer with my own. In doing so however I share her sentiments “It took some time for me to realize that I could not have it ‘both ways,’ to really understand the consequences of my chosen methodology” (Casey, 1993, p. 18). Whereas I want to tell a story, one which I know is very important, at times I am paralyzed by the idea of a method that makes me so vulnerable and then there is the age-old fear of being shunned from it not being well received. Doing this type of dissertation comes with challenge and caveats. My identity will be unprotected. How much do I give without being completely exposed all while being transparent and authentic; doing that which has never been done before personally can be both invigorating and frightening.

My first chapter entitled *Down with Fraggie Rock: Freckles, Red Hair, and Stones*, which is what you are reading, gives an overview of my actual research project. This chapter also shows how the idea of colorism became an important part of my life. You should be very clear about my research goals, the reason my

dissertation is important, my personal investment and as you will continue to read the overall outline of my dissertation.

My second chapter entitled *There's Nobody New under the Sun: Some are Told They Can Play Outside and Some are Warned against It*, will be the review of the literature. In this chapter I discuss the social construction of race in America, which is extremely important as colorism, is systemic from race. I also discuss how Critical Race Theory (CRT) is important in understanding race and racism. Next, I define colorism and many of the major aspects of the phenomenon. Finally, I discuss the aspects that are most discussed in colorism. These include slavery, education, social elite clubs (Jack & Jill, Links, etc.), marriage, and family.

My third chapter entitled *There Has to Be a Method to this Madness: Autoethnography and the Value of Lived Experience* will discuss my decision to use a qualitative approach to research. Next, I discuss my chosen form of qualitative research, autoethnography. I do this by looking into its origins, major tenants of the work and other scholars who have researched in this way. I discuss my subjectivity, which some may perceive as being greater due to my research method. Next, I discuss the data collection and analysis of my study. I conclude with a discussion of the authenticity of my work.

My fourth chapter entitled *Skin Tone and Attitude: Color Stratification amongst Black Actresses* discusses the influence of media and popular culture on the overall perception of black women. I review the roles that black women

are traditionally casted in movies. I also discuss the roles that black women have been celebrated for over the years by the academy awards. I move my focus to how light skinned black women have been portrayed in movies over the years. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is the theory which guides me through this process.

My fifth chapter entitled *Light Skin, Natural Hair, I Do Care: An Everyday Narrative on Colorism* is the chapter that I consider the heart of my dissertation. This is the chapter which inspired me to do my work in an autoethnographical way. In this chapter I share some of the everyday stories that I collected over the years. It is not uncommon for meaningful and influential conversations to take happen in such places like the beauty and barbershops which are a couple of places that I frequent. In fact, most people see these as places that “arguably have the potential to serve as spaces in which pleasure and resistance coincide with oppression” (Scanlon, 2007, p. 309). It is in places like the beauty shop and barbershops where real, uncensored and unadulterated conversations and debates take place. It is in places such as this that I am most inspired to do the work that I am doing.

Almost every day of my life someone has a conversation with me or around me surrounding colorism. I don't think it is so much *me* as I believe it is this topic is so ubiquitous that most people talk about it without even thinking about it. Although I hear stories everyday this chapter will consist of those, which have had the biggest impact on me. The following is a list of the narratives that

are discussed. “Dad & Dolls,” “Why would I do *this* to my child,” “Not wanting to be an AKA,” “What are you,” “Even tanning can’t take the pain away,” “Pulpit portioning,” “How does it feel to have more color,” “She is a REAL sister,” “They like him better,” “Twins-PhD and Prison,” “I am light skin darn it,” and “hashtag-team light skin.” The importance of this chapter is not just the stories that were told, but also the historical context of them, as well as my reaction to them.

My final chapter entitled *You Can’t Stay in the Past So How Do we Move Forward—Education as a Form of Liberation* will give final thoughts on my research. In this chapter I will also discuss my overall experience of doing an autoethnographic dissertation on a topic that is so intimate to me. I also discuss ways I believe that liberation can take place to move beyond the repressiveness of colorism. A few in particular, community culturally relevant classrooms, media and intergroup dialogue I feel can be instrumental in this process. I end my chapter and my dissertation with my final thoughts.

### **Conclusion**

The titles of my chapters were influenced by the most evocative memories I had, either while writing the chapter or a memory I had which related to the chapter. For example, this first chapter, *Down with Fraggle Rock*, was a very popular television show when I was a young. Among the silly names that I was called that had to deal with me looking “yellow” I was also called names that had to deal with my features. As a child I had considerable tints of red in my hair, which I wished to go away, now I wish to come back. I also and had freckles on

my face, which I still have, which resembled the muppet red fraggle on the show. Because of this I was teased. Now that I look back on the show red fraggle was actually very cute, but during my childhood I never felt cute when I was called that name. Somehow I feel that when the kids and even some adults (maybe I can give them a pass) were not thinking of me as cute when they called me that.

I have graciously accepted the challenge of my advisor, my committee and my overall field of study, which is to be authentic to myself as well as the work that I am producing. Authenticity is acting in accordance with one's true self. It is in this way that one is being honest and sincere (Henry, Kernis, & Goldman, as cited in Fleeson & Wilt, 2010, p. 1354). In a world of confusion, chaos and lies being true to one's self, their work and their commitment to tell their truth is invaluable. Overall I plan to tell a story. One, which may not be completely unfamiliar or may be familiar to others, but one that I hope will ultimately generate new ideas, meanings and ways of knowing. I want my work to be a part of the everyday barber or beauty shop conversations. There are multiple and competing truths. This dissertation is simply my truth. My next chapter will review the literature that has been done on colorism.

## CHAPTER II

### THERE'S NOBODY NEW UNDER THE SUN: SOME ARE TOLD THEY CAN PLAY OUTSIDE AND SOME ARE WARNED AGAINST IT

#### Introduction

I was never told that I could not go outside and play in the sun. In fact, as a young child I was encouraged to do so. The only requirement that I had was to put sun screen on so that I would not burn, and yes, you guessed It, if you are a child of the 80's or before, to be back inside before the street lights came on. Being a child during that time on the surface was seemingly easy.

Even with that being true, from as early as I can remember my complexion has always been a topic of discussion. From child hood fights, to middle school arguments, high school popularity contest of who was least liked (I was ranked in the top three along with two other light skinned girls) to college and adult years; I can truly say that I do not have a memory in my life where my complexion has not been on the forefront of most discussions.

This underlying force to talk about my complexion is not because of whom I am or what my shade of color is, but rather is part of the oppressive nature of colorism. Colorism, which is the belief and practice that light skin, provides privilege over dark skin within a set marginalized group (Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004, Hunter, 2005, Russell et al., 1992) has been a destructive force within minority communities around the world. Dormant beneath the struggles of people

of color is a deeper issue that torments their existence. Colorism is considered one of the most deeply rooted secrets amongst African Americans and other minority groups that destroy communities. It positions people within the same race against each other based off the shade of their skin. This internal fight is both pointless and harmful. No matter how great the difference of shade, the people fighting are still minorities, and are treated and seen as such by those who choose to use their power as oppressors. Someone once said to me that things are only oppressive if you allow them to be. I think that's part truth, more wishful thinking.

The belief that one group of people is better than another group of people solely based on skin tone is the core value of racism (Gallagher, 2009; Graves, 2005). This idea has served as the root of much self-hatred, loathing and division amongst many marginalized populations. In this chapter I explain colorism. I trace its evolution through race and racism in America. I identify the key components of the phenomenon by comprehensively defining its meaning and identifying the many names it is called according to the leading scholars in the field. I also discuss who is affected by it and finally how it has plagued the African American community.

Before I examine colorism however, I must discuss the social construction of race and racism in America. Without either of the two, colorism would not exist.

## Race

On April 4, 1968 America was changed forever. One of the most influential black leaders of our time was gunned down and killed in Memphis Tennessee while simply standing on Lorraine Motel balcony with his colleagues. Prior to this day King gave one of his most electrifying speeches, which eerily talked, about his final days on earth (Dyson, 2008). The man who took Dr. King's life, James Earl Ray, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. Immediately after being sentenced Ray retracted his earlier confession of killing Dr. King and spent the remainder of his life unsuccessfully trying to prove his innocence. Many people believe that Ray was not Dr. King's assassin. In fact, King's own family agreed with this theory. There are multiple conspiracy theories surrounding Dr. King's death, but most would agree that he died for, in the name of and because of race.

Race in America has defined the way in which we move breathe and exist in our western culture. Oxford American Dictionary (2011) very simply defines race as a group of persons of common origin. Race is everything that we see, but is truly everything that we are not. In this modern time, many people try to define race according to whom they believe they are, but the truth of the matter is race has been and is defined both those whom have power. It does not matter how we see ourselves when it comes to race, it is how others perceive and receive us. Although race is very simply defined as people having common origin and is socially constructed, the effects of it, especially speaking historically, are very

real. Thinking about how race came to exist in America is truly complicated. Race means something completely different in other parts of the world.

### **Biological Origins**

There is no biological evidence which justifies how we classify people in races yet “most Americans still believe in the concept of race the way they believe in the law of gravity -they believe in it without even knowing what it is they believe in” (Graves, 2005, p. xxv). In this country we look at a person’s skin, hair, nose, eyes, language and body to identify them. By looking at features we are supposed to automatically understand who they are and how we should respond to them. Furthermore, our lived experiences inform us on how we should act according to the visual characteristics that may be similar to that of another person with the same characteristics. This notion of identifying individuals by gazing at them leads to a shallow and meaningless way of categorizing individuals. It does not take into account the socio economic status, the religious views, the personal sexual orientation, the educational background and on a simple level the personal beliefs of individuals. In trying to discern who a person truly is race is the last social identifier that anyone should ever view.

Unfortunately our American history has taught us that it is the first way and in many instances the only way that people identify and are identified.

Race is very real and dominant in America. Simplistic notions of “social construction” do not equal or balance out the everlasting effects that it has on society. Race is so deeply ingrained that it will take twice as many years to

undue the deflating value that it has placed on human life as it took to create the lawful hierarchy. Race is complicated. It is very real. In the ever-true words of Cornell West, "Race Matters" (2001), and while many Americans believe that everyone has "equal" access and the abilities to live the same lives, many others understand the falsehood in this idea.

Race originated as a way to classify humankind. In the matter of race, all persons who are not white are considered to be the "other" and are therefore classified as inferior. In some cases consequently their lives are considered as such.

Scholars have noted that race was and continues to be a social construction wielded by White Europeans and Americans to establish social demarcations, elevate the White race, and justify the oppression and exploitation of certain ethnic groups who were presumed to be inferior in intelligence, physicality, morality and culture. (C. Thompson & Carter, 1997, p. 3)

The interest of the dominant culture to perpetuate the false construction of race lies within economic and political benefits from the issues. It is not just the dominant culture however that perpetuates the divide and the nuisances of race, which ultimately leads to racism. Hegemony, which is the belief that the dominant culture's ways benefit "you" when in actuality they do not and were never intended to, has been the root of perpetuation of many racial ideas among minority people. Aufderheide and Kampmeir (2008) define minority as a group of people who have less power than the dominant group.

## **Time Overview**

Trying to pin point an exact date when race relations began is very difficult. From the deadly and heart wrenching middle passage, the slave trade, plantation life, share cropping, industrial times, the civil rights movement, the postmodern era and finally to today's society, we understand that race has been around for at least a century. During World War I (1914–1918) noted scholar W. E. B. Dubois wrote “the discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing” (Holt, 1998, p. 71). It was this discovery which ultimately led to racism.

Race became of value when labor markets were unfulfilled. “The West African slave trade and Southern auction blocks treated both Black women's and men's bodies as objects for sale” (Collins, 2005, p. 30). Traders kidnapped Africans and sold them into slavery. History books date back to as early as 1619 to note the first Africans being sold into slavery and 1641 as Massachusetts being the first state to legalize slavery (Finkelman, 2010). By 1863 approximately 10–12 million human beings had been sold into slavery when President Abraham Lincoln passed the Emancipation Proclamation, which was intended to abolish slavery. Although slavery was illegal it still was very present in the lives of whites and blacks.

This declaration to end slavery accelerated the movement to minimize black value and to propel whiteness as significance. I would be remised if I did not mention that from 1863 to our current day matters black Americans (now

typically classified as African Americans) have been exploited, exposed, devalued, humiliated and mistreated. All of this stems from the social construction of race. "Race has historically been and may still be a significant factor in determining the life chances of Blacks" (Cureton, 2011, p. 49) and although a person's class does shield some African Americans from this harsh historical reality when it truly matters a person's race will always overshadow anything else.

Race is about dominance and wealth. Race is about whiteness and all that is not that. Whiteness is everywhere in American culture, but it is very hard to see. As Richard Dyer (1988) argues, "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" (p. 44). The lack of biological evidence has failed to relinquish the power dynamic of race. The social construction of race illuminates what is real, what is different, what is equal and what is not. Combined together we understand the dynamics of the social component of racism.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is one of the theories which help us understand the social construction of race and racism in American history. Originally beginning as a movement of legal studies in the early 1970's, it examines race, law, power and the intersection of each. Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado are noted as the fathers of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Other contributing scholars are Patricia Williams, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and

Mari Mastuda. Critical race theorists assess social systems and groups. The core ideas suggests that:

- (a) Race is a central component of social organizations and systems, including families
- (b) Racism is institutionalized-it is an ingrained feature of racialized social systems
- (c) Everyone within racialized social systems may contribute to the end reproduction of these systems through social practices and
- (d) Racial and ethnic identities, in addition to “the rules, practices, and assignments of prestige power” associated with them, are not fixed entities, but rather they are socially constructed phenomena that are continually being revised on the basis of a group’s own self-interests. (Delgado, as cited in Burton et al., 2010, p. 442)

The core principles of CRT illuminate the ways in which race has and continues to be fluid within the American legal and social system. “Derrick Bell argued that civil right advances for blacks always coincided with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite whites” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 18). CRT focuses on mainstream whiteness and how it continues to play a role in our lives. At the core, it deals with the oppressive nature of racism in America.

### **Racism**

The evolution of race ultimately led to the unforgiving system of racialized oppression, commonly known as racism. Although racism is the personal, individual expression of prejudice (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993), it is situated within a larger context of biases that have become the social norm. This normalcy is created so that the white race remains dominant within the American

culture. “The entire white identity model is organized around individuals getting to feel good about being white in a nonracist way” (A. Thompson, 2010, p. 15).

Racism has been around for many years within our American culture. Because of the progression that has been made concerning race over the years some like to think that racism does not exist anymore. In fact, some naïve people believe that racism would go away if people would simply stop talking about it. “I think that, I don’t know—they live too much in the past, if you ask me. Some of ’em do. You know, I think blacks are more prejudiced against whites than whites are against Blacks” (as cited in Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 65) This type of belief is what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes as color-blind racism, racism without race.

In this modern day racism ethnic biases are believed to be the norm, racism is not bad because it is better than it was in the past, everyone is believed to have the same opportunities in life and worse of all people do not see color they simply see people. This type of racism has especially been pervasive since the first election of President Barack Obama. Unfortunately, since his re-election it has been documented that many interracial couples are still denied the opportunity to legally marry in some areas of the United States, racial profiling of African Americans by White police officers is still prevalent and Mexican immigrants are still discriminated against in violent ways (Burton et al., 2010). This shows that race and racism are still ubiquitous today as it has been in prior years. Speight (2006) accounts:

No one has to call me a derogatory name for me to understand that as an African American I am devalued in this society. Actually, the fact that I have not been called the “N word” (to my face) in 20 years has heightened my awareness of the many other subtle ways that I am demeaned, diminished, constrained, and objectified in our society because of my group identities. (p. 130)

Even with all the evidence and so many personal accounts, heard and unheard, many people claim to not see race anymore. Even worse if they do see it they claim that it no longer matters in today’s society.

Much of how people view race depends greatly upon where they are situated within the racial framework. Whites have the most interest in race because they benefit from it the most. “Since actors racialized as “white”—or as members of the dominant race- receive material benefits from the racial order, they struggle (or passively receive the manifold wages of whiteness) to maintain their privileges” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 9). Despite this being true the dominance of race cannot be enacted without all races buying into the idea, thus one of the core principles of CRT.

Members of the non-majority race are key actors in the institution of race. By internalizing stereotypes and images that certain societal elements have constructed members of minority groups help to maintain the power of the majority race (Ladson-Billings, 2010). This internalization is known as hegemony as well as cultural imperialism (Adams et al., 2000; Speight, 2006; Young, 2000). When this type of internalization happens instead of questioning stereotypes members of the minority race accept them as the truth.

Being part of a marginalized group causes you to look at life in different ways than a dominant group may not have to. At times this way possibly will cause you to not only focus on yourself, but also others who may *look* like you. Because the negative images of minority groups are reinforced in everyday life and language unless you are very socially and culturally aware you will be susceptible to internalizing what is around you. Even in being socially aware “it is possible to overlook something that’s in plain view if we don’t expect to see it” (Schwalbe, 2008, p. 120). Since negative ideas about marginalized groups are taken for granted and as common knowledge we do not expect to see anything else. This lack for difference can make it difficult to see that which is before us thus subconsciously embracing it. Furthermore, Gainor (2008) adds that “when the prejudices and misinformation about one’s group have been internalized, then spending time with others like oneself can stimulate one’s own self-loathing and lead people of the same oppressed group to be suspicious of each other” (p. 236). This type of suspicion can lead to internal turmoil which serves as the root of intra (within) racial issues.

### **Internalized Racism**

Without the evolution of race, there would be no racism. Racism serves as one form of oppression, which many minorities have internalized, thus owning its harmful effects. “Internalized racism has been referred to as a disease that infects communities of color” (Asanti, as cited in Hipolito-Delgado, 2010, p. 319). Colorism is certainly a form of internalized racism. Speight (2006) explores five

forms of oppression, citing the internalization of race as being connected to one of the five areas. She makes a very strong argument which positions this form of internalized oppression to perhaps be the most damaging of them all. The effects of internalized racism have yet to fully be examined. Speight (2006) along with Burton et al. (2010) express the sense of urgency in learning more about this phenomenon. This internalization within the African American community usually manifests itself through colorism. The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to discussing this concept.

### **Colorism**

The complexity of race being socially constructed further confounds the idea of colorism, which is the belief and practice that light skin provides privilege over dark skin within a set marginalized group (Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992). Race is an area that is discussed within scholarly literature but “seldom discussed are issues on the basis of skin color” (Hall, 2005) within the African American community. Most recently there has been more literature on the idea, but there is still so much that has been left untouched. I am sure that this is due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Since skin color bias historically has roots within slavery (Hill, 2002; Russell et al., 1992) discussing it is not something that is always welcomed.

In 1946 Charles Parrish published an article entitled *Color Names and Color Notions* which described the shades of black people. The names that emerged were, “Half-White, Yaller, High Yellow, Fair, Bright, Yellow, Light, Dirty

Yellow, High Brown, Olive, Light Brown, Teasing Brown, Creole Brown, Medium Brown, Brown, Brownskin, Tan, Dark Brown, Chocolate brown, Dark, Black, Rusty Black, Ink Spot, Blue Black and Tar Baby” (p. 14). Each of these names encompasses the dynamic of colorism. Parrish placed into words the various names that black people utilized to describe one another by shade. This recognition of each other by skin tone is the impetus of colorism.

While most people use the term colorism, it can also be found in scholarly and unscholarly literature as; Color complex (Golden, 2004), Color struck (Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992), Color consciousness (Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004; Wilder & Cain, 2010), Color socialization (Wilder & Cain, 2010), Colorist ideology (Wilder & Cain, 2010), Colorist tragedy (Golden, 2004), Internalized skin tone bias (Wilder & Cain, 2010), Intragroup racism (Burton et al., 2010), Normative colorism (Wilder & Cain, 2010), Pigmentocracy (Golden, 2004), Racial stratification (Burton et al., 2010), Skin Color Bias (Glenn, 2009), Skin color socialization (Hunter, 2005; Wilder & Cain, 2010) and Skin tone stratification (Wilder & Cain, 2010). Each of these names will be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of this dissertation with the understanding that they mean the same thing. I am certain that there are many other names by which this phenomenon is known; these are the descriptions that I found in the most prevalent works on the subject matter.

## Early Stages of Colorism

Skin tone variances began because of miscegenation, which is the mixing of races (Russell et al., 1992). In alignment with the rapes that took place during the middle passage (Byfield, Denzer, & Morrison, 2010) masters of slaves victimized black women by using them as their outlet for sexual pleasure (Hunter, 2005). As a result many shades of blackness were derived. This new hybrid breed of black people were considered *mulatto's*, meaning child of black and white decent (Forbes, 1993). Many people believe that the master and his family treated these children better because he was their father, thus these children are said to have had easier labor, many times resulting in house work over field work (Russell et al., 1992). This phenomenon helped to coin the term “field negro” and “house negro.” Many blacks attribute this to root of colorism, and still make reference to it when talking about the phenomenon.

This is documented in so many books and articles, that the information is overwhelming. There are few who believe that this account of history may not actually be true. During earlier years, Parrish (1946) argued that very dark or black Negroes were preferred to lighter shades. His view was supported by referencing the image of the ‘Black Mammy.’ He called attention to the tradition of advertisements that almost invariably depicted Negroes as dark or black. It is not difficult for me to follow Parrish’s thought process because understanding the complexity of slavery it is hard to imagine that any slave, especially one who was a lighter complexioned because their mother was a product of rape, was given

preferential treatment. It would be more conceivable to think that they were outcasted from the master's family because they were a constant reminder of the indiscretions that the husband had committed. Unfortunately, the [white] master narrative within the African American community states otherwise, thus it is the one that is most believed. Because the victimization of black women being raped, over the years black people became lighter. Once freed from slavery those who could pass did so.

### **Passing**

Passing for white meant that a person did not have to endure the belligerence of being a person of color during this era. It is noted that to keep the "asset" of lightness so that others could pass a blue vein society was formulated (Russell et al., 1992). There are many historians, which document the passing of white and the inner turmoil it caused the person who lived the life of passing. To know that one's total identity is based on false pretense generated by the desire to have privilege and access is, as one can imagine, a life filled with fear and unquestionable truths that can never be uncovered, yet if people had the ability to pass for white they did.

A very dear friend of mine told me a story about her cousins, one male and two females, who could pass for white during the early 1900s. In order to completely be accepted however they had to move away from their southern home to a northern state and start over. Each sibling married and never publicly acknowledged each other when out because of the fear of someone making a

connection of their past. One day the brother and his white wife had a child that came out very dark complexioned. The newborn child uncovered the man's dark secret, and because of it the man nearly lost his life, after the men of town beat him to what they thought was his death. Fortunately, the man survived but had to return back to the south for his safety. After hearing of this incident the sisters quickly retreated to their southern home to get "fixed" to not be able to have children, all so that they could return back to their northern "white" lives. This story is one of many of these types of occurrences that happened during our history (Kawash, 1996). Unfortunately, this passing went on for decades along with the slow evolution of blacks freedom from slaver. By the early 1900's with the early rise of the civil rights movement, colorism began to take on a new face.

### **Too Light . . . Too Dark**

During the civil rights era what it meant to be black began to take on a new face. Keith and Herring (1991) state "a surge of black nationalism proclaimed that 'black is beautiful,' and skin tone declined in importance as a basis of prestige within the black community" (p. 761). Although true, the literature notes a very specific division deepening between variances of shades within the black community. Lighter skinned people are said to have begun using the paper bag test which allowed or denied entry and acceptance into many social organizations, churches and schools (Golden, 2004; Russell et al., 1992). "People who submitted to the paper bag test would often literally have a brown paper bag held up close to their face, and if they were darker than the bag would

not be admitted to parties, sororities, and even some churches” (Golden, 2004, p. 23). Colleges & universities and sororities & fraternities are noted in their literature as the main perpetrators of the paper bag test (Maddox, 2004; Russell et al., 1992). In reminiscing about his personal experience with this during his tenure at Yale during the 1960s, Gates Jr. (1996) notes that the paper bag test was put to a stop immediately at Yale but was replaced by an opposite measure whereby those who were deemed not black enough were shunned. Being too light automatically placed you in this category.

This inner turmoil of being too much of one color and not enough of one color was divisive. It began to create a culture of what Cooper-Lewter (1999) describes as “soul drive-bys” (p. 30). A soul drive-by is characterized by black people being divisive and hurtful to one another due to grief. In this instance grief for being too light or grief from being too dark caused animosity and turmoil within the black community.

People experiencing black grief contemplate following suit rather than continuing to repress their gut desires. Self-hate (acceptance of the dominant culture’s view of us) thus makes violent black-on-black drive-bys attractive. The fact that the dominant culture may secretly approve, makes the consequences of our self-murder less costly. (p. 31)

The divisiveness based on skin tone was not rooted in just being black but rather who was closer to white and who was not and what that meant during this time. The esthetic theme ‘black is beautiful’ most clearly came to mean that whiteness was an unacceptable skin color (Goering, as cited in Hill, 2002) and anyone who

resembled white was not black enough. In contrast, “whiteness became identified with all that is civilized, virtuous, and beautiful; blackness, in opposition, with all that is lowly, sinful, and ugly” (Hill, 2002, p. 77). So during this time there were two very different experiences that could have been happening. There were too very different narratives being created. Ultimately the ideology of race created the social construct of soul drive-bys.

### **Which Black is Beautiful**

With this division emerged the idea of beauty and who is actually the most beautiful within the race. That is what colorism is truly about. Most people try not to simplify it to aesthetics but the catalyst for it is skin. With that comes, features, hair, nose and any other feature that can be compared to the idea of standard [white] beauty. Because beauty is a word used to describe the prototypical woman, in contrast masculine describes the ideal male. Colorism is usually associated with women. Tate (2007) notes that “the influence of whiteness as a yardstick for beauty has a history which extends back to slavery” (p. 301), which is exactly when the phenomenon began.

Men are affected by colorism but in a different way. Writer Itabari Njeri writes a story in Essence magazine entitled “Who is Black,” which tells a different story. “Jeffrey, who looked like singer Ricky Nelson wanted to be ‘the baddest nigger on the block.’ Jeffrey died young on the streets trying to prove that he was not the enemy” (as cited in Russell et al., 1992, p. 66). Jeffrey was too light, and therefore was not deemed as not being *black enough*. This idea can be all too

common for some black people who were not born with a darker hue. Hill (2002) offers that the differences in the sexes in colorism can be noted as *gendered colorism*.

With the idea of colorism being rooted in beauty, it is evident to see that the next step that people would discuss in our heteronormative society is marriage. Marriage is documented as one of the most common benchmarks by which to measure the advantages and disadvantages of being lighter or darker (Golden, 2004; Glenn, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992). Some authors factually note that a light person marrying a light person was the only way the marriage equation should work, while other authors write that a dark person and a light person should marry but never two light people and never two dark people (Glenn, 2009; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992). This method of mixing shades was to ensure that the “right” shade of a child would be produced. Even with people knowing that the shade of the parent alone does not determine the shade of the child many people believed in the proper mixing of genes to form the perfect complexion. This is one of many contradictions found within colorism.

My personal experience has been the latter of the two. In fact, one of the initial questions that my girlfriends ask me when they find out that I may have a new love interest is “what complexion is he.” Anytime I have dated a lighter complexion man I can vividly see the disappointment in their face which is usually followed by jokes of how bright our children would be if we ever had any. Likewise, any man who has been darker complexion, especially those who would

be classified as “very dark” have been accepted with ease, with a follow up conversation of how beautiful our children would be if were to ever pro create. I tell this story not as a way to make this about me but to show how common the ideals and beliefs learned many years ago, whether true or not, have seeped in our psyches and have become a part of everyday conversation.

### **Family**

Although there is dearth of scholarly research on colorism, so far the points which I have highlighted are what I have found to be the foundational tenants of the idea. Most authors who have written about this phenomenon, especially those that are most cited such as Glenn (2009), Golden (2004), Hunter (2005), and Russell et al. (1992) have all discussed these areas in different ways. Additionally, Wilder and Cain (2010) also noted these four areas in their work. What they do however is take it a step further by exploring the influence that families have on the formation and perpetuation of the color complex.

In their most recent collaborative study, they explore the color complex and its original formulation amongst family members, more specifically women. Through narrative inquiry they were able to more intimately connect the beginning as well as the continued cycle of the phenomenon. Although many of the responses captured during the focus groups were a typical and biased in nature, they did come to a conclusion that normative colorism begins with the family. This is an important finding because it gives insight into one of the ways that colorism still exists today.

Wilder and Cain (2010) were also successful at defining key moments, in the development of colorism, which are reaffirming and transformative.

Reaffirming are the times in women's lives where ideals and beliefs they hold true are validated. Transformative are the times in their lives that are most critical and helped to form who they are. Both aid in the viscous cycle in the lives of women of color.

Golden (2004) titled her book *Don't Play in the Sun* to mimic the words she often heard from her own mother in an effort to shield her from the complexities of colorism. Her accounts of her formative years and her mother and father's influence on her belief in her shade were shown on every page of her book. Even in growing older she never got away from what she heard and felt as a child. In one instance she talked about her son and his friends and their disdained emotions on dating darker complexioned girls. Even as a mother of an adult child, the very mention of her son and his friends having the conversation about dark skinned girls and light skinned girls took Golden back to early days in her life where colorism ruled her complete identity. She told her son, "Dark-skinned Black girls better have attitude. That's the only thing that saves them in a world that pretends they're not there or tries to erase them" (p. 58). This account, and many others in her well-chronicled book, is just one example which validates the work done by Wilder and Cain (2010). Golden even wrote, "it is within our families that we learn to support, encourage, believe in, or deny the color complex" (Golden, 2004, p. 39). I agree with them all.

While Burton et al. (2010) also discuss the ideology of colorism and the family influence they do so with the intention that it is one of the many tenants of critical race theory, which states that “everyone within racialized social systems may contribute to the reproduction of these systems through social practices” (p. 442). Their belief is that colorism is a part of the overall infrastructure of racism; therefore they examine it in conjunction with critical race theory as opposed as a separate entity. Because family is a strong part of who we become, learning about colorism within the family infrastructure can be dangerous.

You probably have noticed that I have delegated colorism to light and dark. This is because research has shown that women of hues in between those shades are protected by the *intra* turmoil of colorism. In most research done browner hue is desired as the most common shade (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2005; Wilder & Cain, 2010). I must admit as a child this was the color I desired to be as well. It just seemed “safe.” Golden (2004) asserts that women who are either very dark or very light are the ones who are tormented by the color complex.

Although Golden’s work is autobiographical, with no reference to any scholarly literature, it is one of the most quoted works within the body of work on colorism. This is because her story confirms the master narrative that suggests that dark is bad and light is good. It tells a familiar story. There within lies the complexity of the issue. Concurrently, in their conclusion Wilder and Cain (2010) acknowledge that many girls did not share in the sentiments that light was better and dark was bad, but still chose to highlight those stories that reaffirm that

stereotype. Although much more research intensive, Russell et al. (1992) also makes several claims concerning colorism and the preference for light over dark that, at times, are not supported with documentation but often taken for face value. Here again the master narrative is taken for the absolute truth.

### **Conclusion**

Writing about a subject in a way that is familiar is more easily accepted because it reaffirms what people believe. I am a light skinned African American woman. In every instance I have been in, I have always been classified as that. Because of this I have found it difficult to read work especially that which is not always actual research, but shows up in scholarly literature, that makes definitive claims about what it means to be light. I even have problems with scholarly text that reaffirm one "truth." If I believed everything that I read then I am supposed to be living in a better world than those around me who do not share my same hue. This has not been my experience therefore it is not my reality. Concurrently, I know many others who would share this same belief. Thankfully I have been given the platform to take my experiences and thread them interchangeably using scholarly language to create a counter narrative to the current master narrative. This counter narrative questions the said norms with the full intent to explore them from a different perspective. Colorism is a topic that deserves this type of attention in research because it is a topic that is talked about in everyday conversations. The next chapter will discuss the methodology I have chosen for this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THERE HAS TO BE A METHOD TO THIS MADNESS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE**

#### **Introduction**

Our perspective in life guides every choice and decision that we make. This perspective is formed and reshaped by the many experiences that we have. Such factors as how and where we were raised, our race, gender and socioeconomic status all help create the sum total of that which we are. Every experience from our past and present (both good and bad) help shape our future. From the school you attend (if you even attend at all), to the type of car you drive, who you befriend, where you live to even the clothes that you put on your back, are all undoubtedly influenced by how we view the world. Deciding on your dissertation topic and your research method is no different. By now you should have a clear understanding of the phenomenon of colorism. This chapter discusses how the researcher intends to explore this idea throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

#### **Qualitative Inquiry**

When people in the academy talk about research they do so with such a vengeance. One of the very first questions that arise is not what your area of research is, but rather are you doing a qualitative study or a quantitative study. In fact, many people identify with their research method as much as they do with

their actual research agenda. It is almost as if the method that they choose will forever shape and define who they are as a researcher.

I have been trained to do qualitative inquiry, but I cannot affirmatively state that I will forever do research in this way. As a young scholar my lens on life is forever changing, as such I believe my ideas and perspectives on how to conduct research will too evolve. I do have an undying passion for understanding people and or a phenomenon by actually checking the pulse of the people involved or affected by it, but I do understand the value in researchers who may do that in a way that is different than my own approach.

Qualitative research is considered a more organic way of collecting data. Its techniques include life histories, participant observation, grounded theory, phenomenology, interviews, narratives, ethnography, consensual data, discourse analysis and intuitive inquiry (Ellis, 2004; Greener, 2011; Orcher, 2005; Wertz et al., 2011). Qualitative researchers typically guide themselves by an inductive process, whereby the researcher formulates the theory as the data are being collected. This building process is known as grounded theory (Greener, 2011; Holliday, 2002). Qualitative researchers usually use their lives and situations around them to study. Even if they are not the key subjects in the research, they usually have some type of connection with the subject matter. "More and more people are doing qualitative research in connection with their daily life, work situations or the social issues with which they are concerned" (Holliday, 2002, p. 24). This is why reflexivity, which is a process by which a qualitative researcher

exposes herself in relationship to the subject, is so important in qualitative inquiry (Etherington, 2004; Four Arrows, 2008).

Reflexivity is twofold. First it exposes the subjectivity of the researcher and secondly it allows the researcher to evolve, as they are continuously involved in the study. I believe Holloway and Jefferson (2000) give a brilliant explanation of this entanglement of the researched and the researcher.

We intend to argue for the need to posit research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and whose experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world. (p. 4)

Understanding that a person's inner being is dually connected with how they perceive themselves and others around them is essential in understanding the research process. Moreover, understanding this same dichotomy as a researcher helps to authenticate one's work.

A qualitative researcher usually does not come into the research process trying to prove or disprove an idea. The theories and understanding happens while the process is taking place (Greener, 2011; Holliday, 2002; Wertz et al., 2011). In qualitative inquiry, researchers are typically creating the story as the story is being told. There is no true blueprint for this process. Each researcher can interpret the same methodology different, as well as the same work differently. This speaks to the organic nature of qualitative inquiry and is truly in alignment with how one lives her life; we are creating our stories as we are living

them. The goal is never to prove anything. In fact the opposite is true. Qualitative researchers exist because there is proof that not much “truth” lies in that which is “proven.”

Although there are a multitude of methods, most people tend to focus on a select few offered under the qualitative umbrella. These are usually narrative (interviews), life histories, focus groups, grounded theories and ethnographies (Ellis, 2004; Holliday, 2002). Of these approaches “interviewing is the most common method of qualitative research used in the social science area” (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 1). Autoethnographies, phenomenological studies, personal narratives and performative research, just to name a few, are other forms of qualitative inquiry that are often over looked.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography is one of the more popular forms of qualitative research. Its origins stem back to earlier years when researchers went in to study a culture and acted more as both the expert from outside the culture versus the person who was learning about it. This was due to colonization (Heider, 2006; Richardson, 2000). In 1997 Denzin referred to the evolution of ethnographies as the “sixth moment” of inquiry (p. xvii). He collapsed a list of what scholars were saying and doing during this moment in time. The following table, which I have created, illustrates this.

Table 1. Ethnography

Description of Ethnography	Scholars	Year of Publication
Messy Text	Marcus	1994
Experiments in Autoethnography	Okley & Callaway	1992
Ethnographic poetics	Marcus & Fischer	1986
Anthropological and Sociological Poetry	Benson; Brady; Diamond; Hymes; Prattis; Richardson; Rose	1993, 1991, 1982, 1985, 1993, 1991
Evocative and layered accounts	Ellis; Ronai	1994, 1995
Short stories	Ellis	1993
New Journalism	Marcus & Fisher; Wolfe & Johnson	1986, 1973
Performance text	McCall & Becker; Paget; Richardson	1990, 1990, 1993
Plays	Grindal & Shephard; Richardson & Lockridge	1993, 1991
Ethnographic fictions & novels	Marcus & Fischer	1986
Narratives of self	Ellis; Ellis & Flaherty; Van Maanen	1995, 1992, 1995

Over the years ethnographies have evolved. There are many researchers who enter the ethnographical study to learn about a culture and in doing so become so intimately involved with the people associated with it that what originally started off as a study of one's culture begins to include the study of the self in that culture. They even begin to self-identify with their participants. The ways in which they choose to write their data is heavily influenced by the

interpersonal connection that were built over the course of time. Because of this connection, many ethnographers note in their work that they wish they had more time to spend with their participants.

Of the collective ways of doing ethnographies that are listed above I am doing an autoethnographic study. As the late Buddy Goodall observed, “you don’t really choose ethnography; it chooses you” (Ellis, 2004, p. 26). I agree with him completely. This was not my first chose but because I am so deeply invested in my research topic it yielded to be my best choice. It chose me.

### **Autoethnography**

#### **Defined**

In simple terms auto means from one’s own perspective. Thus an autobiography is a piece of work that is written from and about the perspective of the person whom is writing. “*Ethno* means people or culture; *graphy* means writing or describing. *Ethnography* then means writing about or describing people and culture, using firsthand observation and participation in a setting or situation” (Ellis, 2004, p. 26). If you add auto to the word ethnography you then have autoethnography which is to write about the culture of one’s self. Ellis (2004) said it this way, “autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to the culture” (p. 37). This type of writing has been around for many years and has given new meaning to what it means to do research in a scholarly context.

Autoethnography is rooted in ethnographic research. “Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang, 2008, p. 43). Anthropologist Karl Heider is noted as the first to introduce this concept in 1975. His original meaning however had intentions of the term “self” to mean the informant rather than the researcher (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004), but through the years “self” in autoethnography has grown to be associated with the actual researcher. This is noted in the history to be attributed to David Hayano who studied his own people (Ellis, 2004). Today, most autoethnographic researches follow Ellis’s model, which places the focus on the researcher as the main participant.

With the increasing popularity of autoethnographies there is beginning to be a divide between the ways in which it is used as a methodology. Because of this, Chang (2008) cautions researchers to state their position of the method up front as to not cause confusion to the reader. I have chosen to model the format widely used by Ellis (2004) in *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. In an ingenious way she shapes the process of autoethnographies for the reader, all while actively engaging in the process herself by teaching her students. Her approach suggests that the reader study the self in relationship to the larger culture in which she exists (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004). In this approach the “self” is I, the informant is my surroundings, and the crux of the work is my response to how I fit into all of it.

Because there are hegemonic forces everywhere, their presence too exists in the academy. Scholarly inquiry is plagued with traditionalists who feel that the standard ways of knowing is the only ways of knowing. Chang (2008) gives autoethnographic researches cautionary tips to help maintain the integrity of this research method and also to silence the traditionalist.

He warns to avoid:

- (1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others;
- (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation;
- (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source;
- (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and
- (5) inappropriate application of the label "autoethnography." (p. 57)

Although being different I am certain that every method of research has its warning signs as well as critics who disbelieve in the chosen method. Originally Ellis (2004) felt the pressure of the critics of autoethnography and noted that she thought she had to start every article with a justification of the legitimacy of her work, but she was able to let those inhibitions go once she realized the love she had for what she was writing, but more so the responses of the people who read her work. "I can count on one hand how many people ever wrote to me about my more orthodox social science work, but I have gotten hundreds of responses to my autoethnographic stories" (Ellis, 2004, p. 35). Because of those who have paved the way for me I do not feel the need to apologize for writing in a way that

is as familiar to my soul as the freckles on my face. My gratitude goes to Heewon Chang, Deborah Reed-Danahay, Carolyn Ellis, Norman Denzin, H. L. Goodall, Judith Okely, Helen Callaway, and last but certainly not least, Chris Poulas. I am certain that there are many others who have paved and are paving the way. I will forever be grateful to them for that.

### **Myself as an Autoethnographic Researcher**

The subject of an autoethnography is my experience. It is my voice in relationship to my culture. I was first introduced to phenomenology, autophenomenology and autoethnography during my proposal phase of my doctoral studies. Although I had come through a program that was liberal in every sense and had been repeatedly told that there is not one standard way to write a dissertation I continuously struggled with the idea of not doing my research through “traditional” narrative inquiry. Narratives have become so popular within my field that interviewing people has become a standard way by which all qualitative research is conducted. It is funny how in the academy the very thing that we fight against (traditionalist thinking) often times becomes the very thing that over takes us and becomes a part of our being. Although I’ve always had a desire to tell a story, I was not quite sure that my dissertation was the platform to do so, nor did I want to tell a story that was so intimate to my life.

It was not until I began to get beyond my traditional ways of thinking, and dissolve my thoughts into what was always present around me, did I fully understand that I have always been telling my story, and the dissertation was the

perfect place to do so in a scholarly way. What better time than the present time. Every element of what I needed already surrounded me. The only thing or person who was stopping me from cultivating this natural desire in me was I. The literature had been written. The method had been proven. The very thing that I had been running from I had also been running to. Afraid of what people may think, I had been trying to shut down what was very natural to me, but as I began my journey to learn more about my chosen method I discovered a community of scholars just like me: ones who chose to tell a story in an autobiographical way, all while studying the culture around them. Ones who were honest and brave enough to place their own lives on the forefront of their scholarship, which is really what most researchers, do in the first place. Some however hide behind their participants to tell the story that they want to tell. I would challenge anyone who would say otherwise.

### **Subject (ivity) and Object (ivity)**

The biggest issue that I gather from the scholarly literature about qualitative inquiry, especially with a kind such as this that deals with life stories is the “subjectivity” of it all. To be “subjective” implies that one is able to acknowledge her thoughts and perhaps even her biases about a subject matter. In qualitative research acknowledging one’s subjectivity is vital in the research process. Because you are working with data that are fluid it is important to recognize what you choose to report, how you choose to report it and most importantly what you may even leave out of your study. Every researcher must

take ownership of her own work and must be sure to be inclusive of evidence with supports and denies her claim.

Every speaker-as-writer has an obligation to develop a personal style that brings meaning and morality into discourse. This will be done through innovation, inflection, pacing and word choice. This style is political and conflictual. It refers to how something is morally expressed. A text should show, not tell. (Denzin, 1997, p. 40)

Although to be “objective” is usually situated in a posture that seeing or speaking in this way is factual, that is not always the case. When it comes to standard ideas that we all believe in, such as the law of gravity, objectivity is easy to prove. There are other times, such as points in history when one may also argue that objectivity is factual and non-debatable.

History as a discipline is objective in the sense that it accepts the existence of an external reality that is recorded in archives, the records of which can be corroborated by other sources to produce, as near as we are able, observer-independent facts about the social world, such as dates of birth, dates of events, sequences of events on particular days (as near as we are able), dates when figures died, and so on. (Greener, 2011, p. 139)

In this instance facts and dates are used to corroborate the objective stance.

There are other points in history; however, that some people may not agree on thus the objectivity in these instances could be flawed. For example, when pictures of slaves were printed in historical times the photographer made the slaves look happy as if they enjoyed being enslaved by another human being. Although the evidence of the picture would validate this belief (the picture being

the objective point) many would argue that history is truly "*his story*" and therefore unrepresentative of a true objective stance.

Viewing research in terms of subject and object (the root of subjectivity and objectivity) is problematic in itself for people are neither subjects nor objects. When we gaze upon someone they might be seen as objects. But when we listen to them we understand that they are human beings that have more value and worth than any object could ever possess. I have been treated as an object but I receive myself as a subject; the actual not the suspected; the noun not the verb. We must always be mindful that we can never truly divorce ourselves from whom we are, nor can we truly view people as objects thereby making their thoughts objective.

### **My Subjectivity**

Our lens on life may change; our framework however will always remain the same. For example, I will always see the world from the perspective of being a black woman; this is my framework. Currently my lens is from the perspective of being a black woman who is a student that lives in the South. If I move to another region of the country for a full time position, Indiana for example, my lens (perspective) will be very different. I must point out that although my framework may not change, the ways in which society sees and receives me just might. What it means to be a black woman in 2013 is very different from what it meant to be a black woman in the 1960s and even what it will mean to be a black woman in the future. One can only hope that future black women will not

experience life in the same way that is has been experienced in the past, but one thing that we can be certain of, is they will be black and they will be woman. Even with the racial and gender lines becoming blurred I believe this will be true.

Much of my perspective on the ideology of colorism has not changed over the years. This is because my framework has always been that of a light skin black woman. Even with summer tans this has always been true. In the same vein that Peshkin (1988) states, "one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed" (p. 17), I profess that one's shade is like an outer layering which positions you in a social hierarchy that can never be escaped. This view comes in large from the experiences that I encountered growing up. The constant fighting, name-calling and the need to justify that I was as a black person over the years has propelled me to research colorism. The true belief that my story of being taunted and not always praised and adorned for having lighter skin is not just my story but I believe many others as well. This is why I chose to write about colorism from a personal perspective. This is why I am so passionate about this topic.

This passion I have, especially in doing an autoethnography, is something that I must identify and own. It will affect the way I approach my work, and it will also make me hypersensitive to what I am reading and feeling. Feelings are important in subjectivity. Peshkin (1988) describes the feeling of knowing your subjectivity exists and pursuing it as engaging your subjectivity. Seeking one's subjectivity is an active process throughout the research process. He writes, "I

wanted to be aware of it in process, mindful of its enabling and disabling potential while the data were still coming in, not after the fact” (p. 18). Because my data are the sum total of experiences over a set period of time I must be aware of my subjectivity as I am analyzing it at the end of my process. This leads me to the idea of, to tell or not to tell.

### **To Tell or Not to Tell**

Anytime a person tells a story she will focus on some material; of necessity she will leave out some information or glaze over ideas facts that may not always add up. Casey (1993) describes this process as selectivity, silencing and slippage. Selectivity is what the person decides to tell you. Although you may ask one question the research participant will always give you the answer that they want you to hear. Silencing is something that a researcher will never even know about a participant. This part of their life will never be revealed. Finally, slippage is when a participant will briefly bring up a point and then talk about something else leaving the researcher feeling that there had to be more to that portion of the story. They may even tell you parts of their life that are not cohesive with one another. As the researcher you do not have authority over what a person chooses to tell. You must stay true to what they say even if you feel that there is more to their story.

In autoethnography selectivity, silencing and slippage comes at the hand of the researcher herself. Since everything around you is the context by which the data are collected, the questions remains as to what stories will you actually

select and why? What will you silence? What things will slip out regardless of all of this? Because of years and time our lives are seemingly linear but our experiences in life are not always so. We find new meanings each day for our experiences. Writing in an autobiographical way allows researchers to explore their multiple and intersecting identities which ultimately yields to be a complex understanding of self (Sharp, Riera, & Jones, 2012). It is not an easy process; in fact many researchers find it difficult (Ellis, 2004; Etherington, 2004; Four Arrows, 2008). The reward of producing something that is authentic to the author for many is worth the struggle.

### **Model of Inquiry**

My second chapter, which serves as the review of the literature, is crucial in my research process. In it I discuss a few major themes that emerged from the literature on colorism. These are family, friends, marriage, income and social organizations. My goal is to use these areas as frameworks by which to categorize my personal narratives in the end. I also utilize the literature to illustrate how the identity of light skinned black women has been constructed through popular culture over time. The following questions helped to guide me through this process

1. What ways are all black women portrayed in film?
2. What ways are light skinned black women portrayed in film?
3. How does this affect the collective social identity of light skin black women?

Burke (2006) asserts “social identity theory is a social psychological analysis of the role of self-conception in group membership, group processes and intergroup relations” (p.111). The master narrative says that women with lighter skin will have a *better* opportunity to get married, children (because they have the potential to be light), jobs (making more money) and join social organizations (Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al., 1992). It does not discuss the ways light skinned women may not experience this, or ways in which she may be isolated, objectified and even victimized.

The master [white] narrative also does not take into consideration intersectionality, which is the multiple ways that cultural categories [race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation] intersects with oppression [racism, sexism, ageism, classism, anti-Semitism etc.] (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Pellar, & Thomas, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2010). The master narrative is not to be questioned; even when you know it may not be the “truth.” In this dissertation I question it. It is important that we all do.

### **Data Collection**

Even before I was fully invested in the idea of doing an autoethnography I began to journal my experiences. Over a period of approximately two years I wrote down stories, both in an actual notebook and on my computer, of experiences and conversations that dealt with colorism that occurred around me. Because this idea is so prevalent within the black community, and this is the community in which I have been socialized and am almost constantly immersed,

these conversations were plentiful. Some stories and experiences I journaled, others I did not. I would like to say it was due to the interesting nature of the story, or lack thereof, but going through this process I know that it most likely has to do with my subjectivity.

Although I was journaling I was bound by the idea that my stories could one day become a part of my academic writing, thus I was cautious in the language that I used to describe what was happening around me. Often times if the experience was very rich I tried to write it down at the conclusion of the night while the ideas were extremely fresh. Other times I opted to wait in an effort to write a story the best way it happened without including my feelings or opinion in it. My chair constantly encouraged me to step outside of my context to see what was happening around me but I found this idea to be quite difficult. Like a fish that swims in a school I am constantly engrossed in my study. Even when I am able to break away from everyone I am still in the “water.” Be it so I did try.

### **Data Analysis**

I believe that analyzing data as an autoethnographer happens in two layers. First, it happens in the moment in which you are taking in the information. Second, it happens after all the information is written and you return to it after a period of time. Between those two layers however there is an internal process that takes place. This leads to conversations that you have with others about the experiences that you had, which also serves as way to authenticate your work.

I wish I could tell you the many times (too numerous to remember) that I have had an experience that I shared with others. This sharing brought out another experience from my past that I never even thought to journal. I know without fail that I have had a moment of slippage when the person I am speaking with asks “Did you write that in your dissertation?” My answer has always been “no” with their follow up question of “why not?” It is the final question which echoes in my mind and caused me to dig deeper in this process. These multiple layers most often allowed me to see my selectivity and silencing of experiences.

After all the stories have been written it is important to step away from them for several months. I believe the space and time is important because it allows you to come back and retroactively look at your experience and to truly research the literature to possibly gain a better insight as to why the experiences happened or even why you perceived them to happen in that way. I am not suggesting that I will be able to do both, but the space in time gives the opportunity.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) inform autoethnographers that analyzing past personal experiences is important to the process. This framework helped me to formulate the questions that I will use once I look back over my stories. The questions are as follows:

1. How did the story make me feel when it happened? Do I even remember?
2. Do I receive the story in the same way that I did when I experienced it?

3. How is colorism enacted in this story?
4. Why did I choose to tell this story?
5. Are there other stories that I experienced that should have been a part of my work? (Counter narratives for example)

These questions will remain on the forefront of my mind as I read back over my journal. Because I have such a vivid memory I anticipate that I will relive many of the stories and that some might make me smile, others cry, a few may make me angry and some I may want to omit. Above all these emotions however I know that I will mainly wonder how others will receive my work.

### **Authenticity**

So how can you “trust” that what is being said in autoethnography is “true” since the researcher is the subject and the subject is the researcher? Is it even possible to do so? The answer is yes. Ellis (1995) states that a story could be considered scholarly if it makes the reader believe it is true. I am the author of my work therefore I can truly speak with authority about my experience as a light skin black woman. In research you are taught to utilize what will yield the most powerful results. Who can yield more authentic work about a black woman with light skin than a black woman with light skin?

I also use movies as a secondary source to authenticate my work.

Whereas films may highlight only a couple of the areas that I discuss it is used as a vehicle which influences the minds of many and therefore cannot be ignored. The premise of autoethnography is to study yourself in relationship to your

environment. Movies shape the reality of our culture. Culture cannot be replicated or tested because it is observed for only a finite amount of time (Bishop, 1999). But it is important for me as an author to not only share my personal experiences but also give readers experiences that they can have themselves in their own space and time. By providing the data (the movies) readers can do that.

### **Conclusion**

How black women view themselves is often overlooked. There is a constant push to tell us who we are according to others as opposed to who we are according to ourselves. Autoethnography allows a space where I can tell my story as a light skinned black woman as I see it. By telling my stories I have the opportunity to challenge master narratives by evaluating my lived experience through the social and cultural context in which I exist. Because of the constant entanglement with my work I often feel that I am going in and out of consciousness; double dutching in my own skin. There are times when I feel very present with my culture and other times very present with my work. These two do not always mesh together. It is the constant movements between feelings within the same space that make this autoethnographic process a very meaningful experience.

When I get up enough courage to say what I know as my truth, at times, the master narrative pushes me back into myself and makes me afraid to challenge it. Resisting this push back is part of the process. Understanding that

experiences do not happen in one space but blend throughout every part of my life is a challenge. The entanglement is what gives me grief. Accepting that which is seen, as truth and writing about it regardless of it validates or denies what I believe is my goal.

As an autoethnographic researcher I challenge you to not think of my work in a conventional way. Do not think of it in an unconventional way either, but rather I would like for you to think about it for what it is; a sociological piece that examines the lived experience of the researcher in her natural environment; unpacking that which is taken for granted while evolving not only as a scholar but also as an individual. This is the premise that autoethnographers desire. By giving a piece of me I hope to gain a piece of you. The next chapter discusses how media and popular culture have created this imagery of the majestic light skinned black woman.

## CHAPTER IV

### SKIN TONE AND ATTITUDE: COLOR STRATIFICATION AMONGST BLACK ACTRESSES

She is desired and yet she is disliked. What she has others want, but she is not even sure that she wants what she has herself. She is told what she is and many times in her silence she accepts it. Images are being portrayed of her being one way, but what if she is not that way. She is told that she hurts others and that she discriminates against people who share her same race. Her skin apparently causes hurt and for that again she is silenced. Men want her but this doesn't give her worth. She wants to feel respected. She is isolated by the dominant race for being black and then she is isolated by the black race for being too light. Where does she fit in? Does anyone even care? She is discussed but the way in which she is always says the same thing, and it is never what she wants to hear. She is me and while I cannot speak for every light skinned black woman I am frustrated as to how we have been spoken for through the years. Furthermore I am perplexed that this voice is one that others desire.

#### Introduction

No matter where I go or who I perceive myself to be, the American society will always see me as a black woman. Social identifiers are placed on us from the time we are born to help us distinguish one from another. Race and gender are the two most visible and therefore dominant social identifiers that are with us from birth. What is next to come, religion, socioeconomic status (class) and physical and mental ability are also quickly attached to our lives. Anderson and Collins (1998) state it this way, "Race is far from being the only significant marker of group difference-class, gender, sexuality, religion, and citizenship status all matter greatly in the United States" (as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 23). The ways in

which we live, breath and move are influenced by the multiple ways we self-identify and moreover, are identified by others. "We are each born into a specific set of *social identities* . . . and these social identities predispose us to unequal *roles* in the dynamic system of oppression" (Harro, 2000, p. 15). Not every identity that we possess is oppressive, but every identity that we possess does have some type of social capital.

Some social values are considered to be negative, while others are considered to be positive. Two that I possess and embrace are being black and being a woman; everything I see and feel is experienced existentially through this lens on life. Being a black woman is a point of pride and strength for me and although I cannot speak for every black woman, I concur with the sentiments of Patricia Hill Collins who said that "although racial segregation is now organized differently than in prior eras, being Black and female in the United States continues to expose African-American women to certain common experiences" (Collins, 2000, p. 23). Black women themselves can only truly understand these experiences.

Arguably, even with our shared experiences there are numerous possible configurations of our identities and multiple ways in which what it means to be black and concurrently a woman are shaped and reshaped many times, many ways and by many different forces. One area where this is most evident is how black women have been situated within popular culture. Popular culture is the collection of ideas, beliefs and attitudes that are created and reproduced by mass

media. In order for popular culture to be as its first word suggests, popular, there must be shared “buy- in” to the ideas and images that are being portrayed (Ashby, 2006; Storey, 2006). Popular culture and media help to perpetuate stereotypes which promote the idea that images that are seen are true representations of reality (West, 1995).

In this chapter I discuss the influence that media and popular culture have on the overall perception of black women. I review the roles that black women have been traditionally casted in as well as the roles that have been celebrated by the academy over the years. I specifically discuss the skin tone that is associated with each stereotypical role. I move my focus to the character that light skinned black actresses have been portrayed in movies. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is the theory which guides me through this process. It assumes that:

1. Racism, sexism, and classism are interlocking systems of oppression.
2. We must maintain a humanist vision that will not accept any amount of human expression.
3. We must define ourselves and give voice to the everyday Black woman and everyday experiences.
4. We must operate from the standpoint that Black women are unique and our experiences are unique. (Collins, as cited in Woodard & Mastin, 2005, p. 267)

Utilizing this theory helps me to maintain the overall thread of the social construction of race in America.

## Film Industry

In 2012, the film industry grossed \$10.8 billion in sales. The average cost of a movie ticket ranges anywhere from six to twelve dollars per person. With this astronomical amount of money made, one must pause to think about how many people attended the movie theaters last year alone. Because of this, it is impossible to ignore the influence that movies have on our lives. Historically films on the big screen have been used to depict fairy tale ideas that majority of people dream becomes their reality. However,

When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. (hooks, 2003, p. 95)

The time that we spend investing our energy in movie images is the time that we spend being shaped and shaping images of our self and others. Considering that “almost every time we have a choice about what to do with our lives, we choose to stare into a screen” (Dill, 2009, p. 39), this idea is daunting. Just as much as anything else films have shaped the way in which society views black women.

There is an entire industry dedicated to heightening the received idea of women of color. Ladson-Billings (2009b) states, “stereotypes of Black women as Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels originated in American slavery and continue in the postmodern era” (p. 88). These roles have shaped the collective identity of black women. “Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s

oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought" (Collins, 2000, p. 69).

### **Mammy, Sapphire, & Jezebel**

#### **Mammy**

Traditionally the character of a mammy has been used as a controlling figure to depict black women. It is one of the most pervasive images which originated during slavery (West, 1995). Through the years the mammy has been portrayed as a large, dark skinned black woman whose sole purpose in life was to take care of her master's needs. Although she experienced comforts of living in the master's house, she was always on duty and expected to tend to the wishes of the first family (White, 1999). Because the mammy was usually considerably overweight she usually draped herself in clothes large enough to cover a room (Harris, 1982; West, 1995). The mammy image depicted strength, loyalty and tradition according to the [white] master narrative. Almost always this character is depicted as a dark skinned woman.

In 1939 Hattie McDaniel made history by being the first black woman to receive an academy award for best supporting actress for her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. Her role reinforced the stereotype of black women as submissive servants. On the night of winning her award Ms. McDaniel was the only black person present who was not a maid or an attendant. The NAACP was displeased with the movie and the role that she played. They were not the only ones. Many other black people were upset of her portrayal in the film, which

depicted a role from which black women as a whole were trying to distance themselves.

Hattie McDaniel's stereotypical role illuminates how forms of racism are enacted in society through film. As an entirety black women are not the controllers of our images, therefore are unable to decide what pictures represent who we are. Mammy was one of the first controlling images applied to black women's identity (Collins, 2000) and has been used as the benchmark by which to describe and characterize strength of a black woman. The image of mammy has been accepted by white main stream America as a "symbol of patriarchal tradition" (White, 1999, p. 58) so much so that through the years three of the six black actresses who won academy awards did so for playing this role. After Hattie McDaniel there was Whoopi Goldberg for her role as a modern day mammy in *Ghost* in 1990 and Octavia Spencer for her role in *The Help* in 2009.



Figure 1. From left to right: Hattie McDaniel (1939) as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*; Whoopi Goldberg (1990) as Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost*; Octavia Spencer (2012) as Minnie Jackson in the *Help*. Notice that McDaniel and Spencer have the same facial expression.

“The mammy image has appeared to impact the psychological functioning of black women” (West, 1995). Although accepted by white mainstream America overall the image of mammy is not something that has been embraced by the black community.

### **Sapphire**

The next stereotypical role, the sapphire, also known as the “angry black woman” and/or the super-bitch (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009b; West, 1995) originated from a character on the radio show Amos ‘n Andy. Sapphire Stevens frequently berated her husband on the program. Women in these roles are known to be sassy, rude, arrogant and disruptive to the family structure. Although not being the first role that black women were recognized for, this show was popular during the time that *Gone With the Wind* first premiered, which means that this role has been around just as long as the mammy role. The longevity of both is alarming.

In 2006 Jennifer Hudson won an academy award for her character as Effie Melody in *Dream Girls*. A few years later, in 2008 Monique Lyles-James also won an academy award for her role as Mary in *Precious*. Both women can be categorized as sapphires. The complexion of a woman playing a sapphire is typically brown skinned (see Figure 2). Although this role is mainly associated with brown skinned black women, the sassiness that is associated with being a sapphire has almost become synonymous with being a black woman. As if to say if you are black and you have some type of attitude then you must be angry.



Figure 2. From left to right: Jennifer Hudson (2006) as Effie Melody in *Dream Girls*; Monique Imes-James (2009) as Mary in *Precious*

### **Jezebel**

The final stereotypical role that black women have been casted in is the role of a jezebel. A jezebel is considered to be the antithesis of the mammy character. Whereas the mammy is considered to be undesirable the jezebel is the complete opposite. The name has historical roots to an evil queen in the bible. She is known as a very promiscuous woman who uses sex to gain what she wants. Much like the other stereotypical characters this role can be tricky because it leads to further discussion about double standards between men and women and black and white.

The image of the jezebel has been in movies for almost a century now. The first woman to play this role was Nina Mae McKinney in the film *Hallelujah* in 1929. In this role she was described as a sexy, seductive chic (Howard, 1996). When actresses such as herself and Lena Horne “appeared in mainstream cinema most white viewers were not aware that they were looking at black females unless the film was specifically coded as being all blacks” (hooks, 2003,

p. 97). Because *Hallelujah* was an all-black cast it was easy to see that McKinney was black, as such she was casted as a jezebel.

The role of jezebel reinforces the stereotype of the “tragic mulatto whom historically have been portrayed as a sexually attractive, light skinned woman of African American heritage who could pass for white” (Pilgrim, as cited in Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 152). This character is not the whole of who she is, but rather she exists in relationship to another; a man.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... For him she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the essential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other. (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 1)

Women in general are seen in this way in movies and in life, but the emphasis is that much more when you are a black woman, especially one with lighter skin. So was the case with Halle Berry in *Monster's Ball*.

In 2001, Halle Berry made history by becoming the first black women to receive an Academy Award for best leading actress. Her character Leticia Musgrove was married to a black man on death row. After the death of her husband Leticia became the object of affection of a white man named Hank Grotowski played by Billy Bob Thornton. A scene in the movie where Hank bent Leticia over a chair and began to penetrate her is what many believe won Berry the award. Berry's character portrayed the often duplicated image of a black woman as a jezebel and for this she was awarded. “As cathartic as the narrative

renders it, their sexual relationship still stands out as a contrived plot point and one of the most implausible aspects of *Monster's Ball*" (Mask, 2009, p. 230). The movie's runtime is one hundred eleven minutes, but two minutes is all that most people remember or even care to talk about.



Figure 3. Halle Berry (2001) as Leticia Musgrove in *Monster's Ball*

Don't believe me; ask a people about the movie and get their response. This scene caused much conversation among critics and members of the African American community. Although black women's roles in film can be traced back to as early as the 1900s no black woman had ever received an Oscar for best actress until Berry did so. "*Monster's Ball* reveals the relationship between race, gender, and class" (Mask, 2009, p. 230). There is no coincidence that a sexually explosive scene which depicted Berry as an over sexed woman was attached to this award.

Unsurprisingly Denzel Washington received his first Oscar the same year Halle Berry did for his role as a crooked, dope dealing, killer cop in *Training Day*. Although he played many other roles prior to and after the one he never received

another Oscar for leading actor, which is surprising to many especially since he had a groundbreaking performance in the movie *Malcolm X* where he played the civil right activist himself.

Of all the roles that Berry played before this movie and the many roles she has played thereafter none have ever been talked about the way this one was. To date, Berry's role in *Monster's Ball* has been her most notable role.

### **Tri-nary Thinking**

Although there are multiple and competing ways of being a black woman Hollywood has portrayed, casted and celebrated black women in the three specific roles discussed in the previous section. Mammy, Sapphire and Jezebel are the images of who we are on the big screen (Bogle, 2001, 2007; Collins, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Actresses in movies are used as an avenue to objectify black women. In these roles they are placed into categories and it is in these three categories that have been accepted by mainstream America. Black Feminist Theory would question this given voice. Also, It would debunk the binary thinking, in this case I would call it "tri-nary" thinking which causes you to look at people or ideas in terms of either or, Harris (1982) contends that "the Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother, and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself" (p. 4). The image that has been portrayed in film is not a clear representation of who we are.

Black Feminist Thought petitions for voices of women of color collectively, especially those who may otherwise go unheard. It contends “that there can be no separation of ideas from experience and that Black feminism is not a set of abstract principles, but it is a set of ideas that come directly from the historical and contemporary experience of Black women” (Woodard & Mastin, 2005, p. 268). These experiences should be in alignment with what is being portrayed in film, but they are not.

Because people of color in general are not the main players in Hollywood we do not have the opportunity to speak with a voice or voices, which could serve as a better representation of black women. The images that the academy have accepted and celebrated as the “controlling images of black womanhood” (Collins, as cited in M. Williams, 2006, p. 203) symbolize the voice that they have chosen for us. I must note that I chose the academy award as the point of reference for success because it is the oldest and perceived highest award that any actor or actress can receive. Because black women are all interconnected; our past has a strong influence on our present, which has an undeniable amount of authority on our future which is what I saw in examining these roles. The same characters that were portrayed in the early 1900s are the same characters that are portrayed today. This is evidenced in the first Oscar given to Hattie McDaniel and the most recent Oscar given to Octavia Spencer. The characters that black women have been recognized for by the organization further illustrate the complexity of race, sexuality and the influence that imagery has on reality.

### **Stereotypes and Reality**

Although my dissertation is an autoethnography I felt it important to discuss the presence of black women in movies for two reasons. First, black women do not exist in isolation of each other and secondly, the stereotypes that are noted in film are the ones that are believed about women according to their shades. Each character that black women have been known for over the years has and continues to have persons casted into the roles based on skin tone. Mammies have been dark skinned, sapphires have been brown skinned and jezebels have been light skinned (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000). No image is worth embracing yet the image of light skin is the one that is adorned.

If movies were just forms of entertainment and not what actually becomes reality, then seeing black women in these roles would not be an issue; unfortunately this is not the case. "From an evolutionary or biological perspective we are supposed to believe what we see, not doubt it" (Dill, 2009, p. 150) which means we are supposed to believe the stereotypes about black women that we see are real. Movies influence our psyche and "visual imagery plays an important role in socialization, specifically in how we extract and apply meaning from everyday experience, and therefore in how we construct social realities" (Dill, 2009, p. 96). These realities guide our consciousness and become the blueprint by which we live our lives.

There are many stereotypes beyond the ones that are depicted in movies that are associated with skin tone, but the ones from movies are the ones that

are most discussed, remembered and enacted in social conversations. Michelle Obama has been publically criticized by the media for being “too” strong. She is forced to defend herself and is told whom she is. Without saying it she is portrayed as the “angry black woman” the sapphire. In fact, some public figures such as Rush Limbaugh and Jody Kantor have gone as far as saying she is such. This image of her being an angry black woman was enacted in film many years before she was born, but because she is a brown skinned black woman this stereotype has been associated with her life.

Beyoncé, on the other hand, has not been portrayed as an “angry black woman” or a mammy, but rather a sex symbol, something to be desired. Her imagery was created on the big screen many years ago and she enacts it every time she performs. Although her image is the stereotypical jezebel which is associated with being a light skinned woman, it is not something that she ever has to defend. This is because to be desired by a man is to be validated for he is supposed to be the gauge by which a woman’s worth is confirmed. Although the imagery of a jezebel is fictitious, it becomes real and easy to accept in true life because of its presence on the big screen.

### **Light Skinned Objects**

Contrary to popular belief being light is not always what it is imagined to be. M. Williams (2009) had this to say about Lena Horne, a famous light skinned black actress whose career began as early as 1939.

Although Horne's skin tone and Anglicized features allowed for her success as Hollywood film star and glamour girl, the singer/actresses' skin color and physiognomy created issues for Horne among other African Americans. During her childhood, peers teased Horne regarding her skin color; at this young age Horne realized that, in the minds of some African Americans, "light color is far from being a status symbol." (p. 4)

There is a constant portrayal of beauty, sexuality and in many cases a snobbish or stuck up attitude that is associated with having lighter skin (Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005). Historically light skinned women have been casted into jezebel roles. In turn they were usually seen as sex symbols or something to be desired. This symbol helped to further inscribe the collective identity of light skinned black women as objects. Certainly it would be presumptions to assume that all light skinned women are jezebels, or brown skinned women are sapphires or dark skinned women are mammies, but these are the images that have been portrayed over the years. Black actresses have won Oscars for roles that depicted them as "isolated African American characters as beholden to beneficence of white philanthropy, or at least, humbled by the moral rectitude of white paternalism" (Mask, 2009). These roles and images give people the model by which to receive others.

### **My Fantasy & Reality**

One of the six black women who won the academy award, Whoopi Goldberg (1991) graciously thanked the audience on the night she won. She said, *"Ever since I was a little kid I wanted to do this. You don't know . . . I want to thank everybody who makes movies. I come from New York as a little kid. I lived*

*in the projects and you're the people I watched.*" What she saw on the big screen became her reality. Much like Whoopi I too watched movies as a young child and was heavily influenced by what I saw. This could not have been truer than when I was a young girl watching *School Daze* by Spike Lee for the very first time.

### **School Daze**

In 1989 Spike Lee made a film entitled *School Daze*, which depicted the lives of students at a Historically Black College. Watching this movie for the very first time truly changed my life. I was too young to understand how much so, or what he was really trying to say in his movie, but I knew I was forever changed. The movie's main character, Half Pint, played by Spike Lee, was on a mission to become a member of a fraternity called Gamma Phi Gamma. Through his glorified pledging process Half Pint became increasingly popular and was able to cross paths with members of the sister sorority the Gama Rays also known as the Wannabe's. The other group of women on campus was not classified as being in a sorority or organized group. They were known as the Jiggaboos. In the film the Wannabees were the light skinned girls, who wore contacts and had what was considered "good hair." The Jiggaboos were darker skinned girls with "kinky hair" who were proud of their African heritage.

As I later learned, each organization, including the fraternity that Half Pint was trying to join, was supposed to be a depiction of three black Greek letter organizations that actually exist. The Gamma Rays were supposed to represent the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (AKA). The group of women who were

organized but were not considered a sorority were supposed to represent Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (DST). The fraternity that Half Pint was trying to join was supposed represent Alpha Phi Alpha, Fraternity, Inc. (A-Phi-A; Lee & Jones, 1988). Dissecting *School Daze* to find traces of colorism is not necessary because they are obvious.

No scene in *School Daze* showed that more the one that took place in the beauty salon. It was here that the rising tension between the two sororities erupted in an argument where slurs such as “Pickanniny, Barbie Doll, High Yellow Heffa, Tar Baby, Wanna- be-White, Jiggaboo” were exchanged. As they sang “go on and swear; see if I care; good and bad hair” the two groups battled out their differences. The song also repeatedly said “you’re just a jigaboo trying to find something to do; well, you’re a wannabe, wannabe better than me.” As a child I sang along with the songs and was conflicted as to which sorority I fit with. Ascetically I knew that I looked like the Gamma Rays (minus the hair) but based on the factor of being down to earth I thought I was a part of the other group. Why is this important? Again, what we see on the big screen becomes our reality. Spike Lee made it a strong part of his script to pit the women against each other. If you were watching it you felt that you had to choose a side. Even as a young child I felt that pressure. I felt I had to be a part of either of the sororities. It never crossed my mind that I could be both or better yet neither. I felt that I had to choose. The movie also discussed class stratification as well as the

underground process of pledging, which some say resemble the process of slavery.



Figure 4. From left to right: Wannabes and Jiggaboos in *School Daze* (1988)

As a young girl I noticed that Jane Toussaint played by Tisha Campbell was “friendly” with the men. In one of the final scenes of the movie she was prompted by her boyfriend Julian to sleep with Half Pint and with little reservation she did it. Again I was too young to truly conceptualize what happened in that scene but I knew that I did not want to be a wannabe because of that. Unfortunately all my friends thought that is who I should be because of my skin tone.

Almost in the same way that an artist draws a caricature that calls attention to one’s biggest or most distinct feature, Spike Lee used this movie to call attention to the nuisances of skin tone stratification. Lee is considered to be a controversial screenwriter, director and producer because of the type of messages that he depicts. *School Daze* was greeted with mixed reviews due to its sensitive nature.

Although very stereotypical the characters that Spike Lee portrayed are in alignment with those that are portrayed in all movies, which cast black women. As discussed with each role comes a shade or color that is associated with the character. Over the years light skinned women have been portrayed as the ones to be and for those who desire this perhaps that is something to be thrilled about, but what happens if that is not your desire? What happens if that is what you think people see when they see you?

I was heavily influenced by what I saw in *School Daze*. Once I learned that the “Wannabes” were emulating AKA’s I did not want to be a part of that group at all. Ironically (or not) I ended up joining this very sorority. I’ll talk more about this in my next chapter. As I type this as a researcher I had to pause and think about just how much we are influenced in our formative years. Although *School Daze* reproduced stereotypical images it was made to speak to the consciousness of black people. Spike Lee was critiquing the ways in which black people have internalized skin tone stratification. Not many movies do this. I have young nieces who share my complexion and I am troubled by the images that they are looking at now which are supposed to reflect who they are to become when they are adults.

### **Conclusion**

The same images of black women have been depicted for over a century. These images have become a part of our psyche. “When people imagine a picture, they come to believe that they have actually seen that picture more often.

. . . if this occurs, people are providing their own imagined confirmation of their previously established stereotypes” (Dill, 2009, p. 97). Through the years Hollywood has enacted color stratification of black women right before our very eyes. The dominance of race and racism are so deeply rooted in who have become that even with the constant bombarding of visual imagery it is difficult to see. The roles that black women have been casted in over the years do nothing to resolve our already wounded souls. Each stereotypical role is associated with a complexion. For the mammy role there is the darker skinned woman, for the sapphire there is a brown skinned woman and for the jezebel there is a light skinned woman. One role is no better than the other, but there is a misperception that being light skinned is the role that you want to have.

When people see these images they believe they are what they are supposed to believe about black women. Seeing a woman who aesthetically resembles who I am and knowing that she is being portrayed as jezebel or something to be desired does not make me proud. In fact it makes me feel the complete opposite. When I walk into a room of people, especially rooms that are filled with men, in many people’s mind I assume the role of what they have seen in movies. I am mortified by this thought. Unfortunately, my fears have been validated over the years with the comments that have been made by men. Am I really supposed to be excited because I am the object of someone’s desire?

In this chapter I examined the three roles that African American women have been casted in over the years. I focused my work with one of the roles, the

jezebel, in an attempt to illustrate how light skinned African American women have been portrayed over time. Understanding that fantasy becomes reality seeing women in these roles has constructed the idea of what it means to be a light skinned black woman according to popular culture.

My concern continues to be how all this shapes the identities of those who watch the films and how they later respond to what they have seen on the big screen. From watching films we form our social identities, which inform us on how we should exist, and how we should perceive others existence in this world. The next chapter will discuss my personal experiences of being a light skinned black woman during this current time period.

## CHAPTER V

### LIGHT SKIN, NATURAL HAIR, I DO CARE: EVERYDAY NARRATIVES ON COLORISM

#### Introduction

The wound of race and racism in America has become such a deep part of who we are as a country that most people accept it as “just is.” Much like an actual scar that needs time to heal so is the case with racism. People are hurt by it and as the old saying goes hurt people hurt other people. In the presence of this pain it is easy for people to develop a sense of hopelessness. West (2001) affirms “black existential *angst* derives from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture” (p. 27).

From racism stems other forms of oppressions that can be internalized and enacted. This is especially true, within communities of color. As you have read throughout this dissertation, colorism is one of these forms. Because we are all a part of the same social order having shared skin and even gender can cause one group of people to be connected in interlocking oppressions. Within this shared community, uncensored conversations often take place in what is considered a safe space. Because I am so intrinsically connected to black people, especially black women, I’m able to be involved in these types of conversations.

In the scope of my dissertation I have discussed race, racism and colorism. My personal wounds from the three lead me to this chapter. Journaling through the years and placing these stories in my work has given me the chance, as Grason (2005) says, to “jump off a few cliffs and reveal myself to another human being” (p. xii). Because of these emotions this chapter has been the most difficult to construct. In fact, even coding my stories to find the common themes and threads was difficult. I found myself wanting to rewrite some of the stories because I was angry, sad or frustrated, but in the true nature of researching I left them as is.

In my fullness I share some moments that I haven’t talked about in years; moments that I realized throughout this process I have never truly dealt with myself. This is where my *herstory* meets my educational knowledge and my feelings meet my reality. This process has unraveled me in ways that quite honestly I have not always welcomed. But as you might remember from my third chapter, my greatest desire is to be authentic with my work and experiences, which is why I share this with you.

At the beginning of my dissertation I named five areas which the literature states as being influenced by having lighter skin. These areas are spouses, children, employment, social organizations and education. Overall the literature suggest that having black skin that is lighter will give you a better quality of life. After reading through my narratives I found that some of these themes emerged, but more commonly more robust categories were formulated. I strongly believe

that this variance in what I read and what I actually experienced and heard is due to the type of study. Most of the other studies on colorism have been quantitative.

The following list outlines the common themes that derived.

1. Family
2. Children
3. Church
4. Social Organizations & Status
5. Men
6. Popular Culture & Self Perception
7. Self-Actualization

The remainder of this chapter will discuss these areas through the use of narratives.

## **Family**

### **Dad & Dolls**

Most people learn about colorism through the socialization of their family (Wilder & Cain, 2010). I never thought that was the case until having a conversation with my Aunt most recently. After talking for almost an hour I learned that I did in fact learn about colorism in my family and that my family too had been blinded by the social affects that colorism has on individuals. It was the language that she used in the conversation with led me to this conclusion, but nothing reaffirmed this thought more than when my mother and I were at a funeral of a very close loved one. My sister had not arrived yet so my mom

continued to look back in the audience to see when my sister would come in. She whispered to me *"I know I'll be able to see her because she so much brighter than everyone else in here."* She laughed about the comment, as she always does. I know that she meant it in the most endearing way but due to my sensitivity to the subject I did not find it funny. If that comment was not enough she and my significant other began to compare their hands against one another to see who was actually lighter and who was darker. In that very moment I suddenly became keenly aware that I did learn about colorism in my household and through my family. I always thought I had learned it at school, which I am not sure, is a better place to have experienced it. Besides being saddened by saying goodbye to my loved one, I also had to say goodbye to the idea that colorism did not exist in my family. My internal scar began uncovering.

As a child most of my nicknames originated because of my complexion. My mom called me a version of Winnie the Pooh because I was a "yellow" kid. Other names I was called was tweety bird (I actually embraced this name), Big Bird, Hiawatha, Pac Girl, the Black Annie, and my all-time disliked one, a Yellow Banana. I knew early on that my complexion gave me a lot of attention; the type of attention that I did not like. I wanted to be brown so bad and only wished that I could be my mother's complexion. I honestly felt her brown skin saved her from ridicule. I recognized as a child that being any darker than her would not have shielded me from name calling because I too heard the names that people with a darker hue were being called. I must admit that at times I may have felt

vindicated because of the way they tormented me. I had a hard time embracing the nicknames because I felt they were given to me because of something that I could not control; my complexion.

I did not know my father as a child. He was murdered at a young age. My only memories of him are what I was told and the pictures that I saw. I remember seeing pictures of his college identification card and other pictures where he had a browner hue. One day I saw a picture of he and my mother when they were a bit younger and he was very light skinned. I was so confused as to whom the man was in the picture because in all of his other pictures he was brown. Once my mother told me it was my father and that he became browner over the years because he worked out in the sun I was convinced I was going to be a brown person as an adult. I truly was excited!

In the spirit of embracing my complexion, and the new color that I thought I was going to be, I would take my white cabbage patch dolls and run them through the dirt so that they could look like me. Jolene was my favorite because she was the oldest and the dirtiest. I did not have the capacity to understand which color doll was the most beautiful between a white doll and a black doll, I just knew that I wanted my baby doll to look like me and neither of the two did.

### **Dating, Marrying, & Kids**

#### **Why Would I Do *This* to My Child?**

Of all the things that baffle me about colorism, it is this belief that having light skin will give you a better chance at a relationship and children. The next

journal entry took place after talking with a student on campus who organized a program about colorism.

*I was so glad that I ran into Tammy today. I wasn't able to attend the session that her organization put on concerning colorism so I couldn't wait to speak with her. Actually I didn't know she was the president of the group I just knew she was active with the group. When I asked her how the program went she floored me with all the details.*

First she told me that the students did an exercise where they had to break off into groups based on shade. She told me that although this was meant to simply be an icebreaker things quickly got interesting as people were “denied” access to a group while others were sent to another group because they did not fit in where they were standing. She told me that this happened with all the groups. Although she never said which groups they had she did say it was three which led me to believe that they were brown skinned, dark skinned and light skinned. I did not ask her, but I was very curious to know which group had the most issues in terms of turning people away. She later told me that the discussions they had were very heated and that it was very divided by complexions of people. Tammy, the young lady who I was speaking too, considers herself to be light skin. I'm sure most would agree with her. She said that one of the biggest arguments that she had was “why would I want to have a child. Why would I want them to experience this”? She said that she would not

want to give her child her skin because she wouldn't want her to go through what she had gone through.

If we were in a different setting and had more time I would have asked her to tell me more but unfortunately both of us were running late to get to our next commitment. I knew what she meant. I too have had those same thoughts in the past.

The teasing, the picking, the belief that people think you believe you are better than them because you are light skinned can be hard to bear. Although I wanted to ask her more, I knew exactly what she was saying. It was the same belief that always led me to believe that I would marry and pro create with a man of darker complexion to simply give my children a chance at peace beyond their skin tone. I have since moved past those thoughts, but listening to this young, yet mature college student, I knew that she had not, and wondered how many other college students felt the same way.

*After reading this story I became sad. I remembered the day like it was yesterday although it took place about a year ago. Now deeper into my research and more connected with the nuisances of colorism this moment hit me much differently. I had hoped that the organization would put on another program such as this one during this semester but I have not seen any flyers. I remember Tammy saying that it was so much more that they could have discussed but ran out of time. I often wonder are people discussing "facts" or "myths" when they discuss colorism. I also wonder do they leave the space feeling more together or*

*more divided. My guess is the later of the two. It is these kinds of moments and thoughts which make me want to continue to construct new ideas which can lead to the healing process of this phenomenon.*

### **Social Organizations & Status**

#### ***Not Wanting to be an AKA***

In my last chapter I began a discussion about the movie *School Daze* and the impact that it has had on my childhood. Once I realized that the organizations in the movies were imitating real sororities I knew which one that I did not want to join and that was AKA. I thought if I joined an organization than maybe I would be a Delta because I was told they were down to earth.

The teenage years are so formative in a young person's life, especially with young ladies. It is here when the early division of spectator and participant truly begins. It is also here when girls are most self-conscious about their appearance and when they begin to divide based on whatever silly differences they believe they have. So was the case in my middle school years. Because there are no members of Greek letter organizations in my immediate family I actually learned about sororities from my peers at school and *School Daze*. I constantly heard that I was going to be an AKA when I grew up. I was mortified by this thought because those were the ones in the film who were conceited. Suddenly the characters in *School Daze* seemed so very real. Whereas I still never decided if I wanted to be a "Jiggaboo" or a "Wannabe" my peers were choosing for me. I did not like that feeling nor did I embrace it.

Internally I was baffled by the thought that anyone would think I was stuck up. I lived in the same neighborhood they did. If not I felt that we at least went to the same school so how could they think this of me? My only comeback was “*No way, I’m not going to be an AKA I’m going to be a Delta because they are down to earth and so am I.*” I had this stance until I got to college and cared enough to actually research all the organizations. Turns out, AKA was a better fit for me and not because I’m light skin, pretty and or stuck up (all but one of these given attributes can be debatable) but rather because they stood for high scholastic achievement, unity, friendship and service to all mankind, which was important to me. I thought long and hard about being a Delta. Everyone I knew growing up was one, and all my friends wanted to join them, but it just was not a good fit for me. If my only motivator was to prove everyone wrong I knew that was not enough for me. I found peace in knowing that the values I believed in so did the women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. I was also old enough to know that the stereotypes that I heard over the years simply were not true for either sororities.

Because of the type of work that I do I always have to be up front about being in this organization and discussing what this means to the people that I am talking or working with. Although I know, and most people do too, that the stereotypes about the sorority are not true it is still a conversation that I have to have. Quite honestly the conversation makes me uncomfortable but I know it is necessary. After teaching a class session on colorism I wrote:

*I was so nervous today in front of the students. I tried to distance myself from the subject matter and I knew they sensed it. Looking out at the class I could not help but feel that many of them were thinking “how can she tell us about this?” I made it a point to not pull out my laptop (which is pink and green) and made sure that I had nothing on my key ring which would give away my sorority. Normally I would not think that a student on this campus would pick up on these things being that I am on a white campus, but this class is different. This class is filled with majority black students, they would know. It is not that I am ashamed of being an AKA. In fact the opposite is true. It’s that me saying that I am one automatically validates peoples assumptions about the organization and perhaps about me. Of all the countless conversations and debates I had with people where I try to inform them that the stereotypes about AKA’s are not real and that we don’t take people based on skin tone it always end in “look at you.” Suddenly in that moment I’m deflated because my past five minutes of words meant nothing. Especially the part of me saying “I have so many sorors who are not light skinned”! In that moment I feel that I sound like a white person who says “I have black friends” so I stop. I don’t know how to get past that. The professor on record gave me feedback today. He said I did a great job but I needed to open up a little more so they could connect with me. Even he sensed me trying to disconnect myself from the subject. Why do I do that? I tried the same thing in dissertation seminar and it didn’t work then either. Why am I so afraid to make myself a part of the narrative?*

I'm grateful that I joined my sorority. I love the sisterhood and will constantly try to dispel the myth of a stuck up AKA. Even through the difficult conversations I will continue. What frustrates me the most is I know I am so much more than a stereotype, but then again I feel that same way about being a black woman in general, AKA aside.

### **Church—Serenity or Strain**

#### **Even Tanning Can't Take the Pain Away**

Because I am self-proclaimed believer I always consider how what I learn in the classroom lines up with what I am learning at church. Over the years I have learned to keep the two as separate as possible because most times they do not align. That could not be any truer especially since my research is on race, racism and colorism. I truly believe that God does not see color. I never really heard anyone talk about their own issue with color stratification in a church setting until I attended a fellowship for women early one Saturday morning. This is why the next story intrigued me so much.

To fellowship with one's community of believers is to come together with like-minded spirits to talk about the goodness of our heavenly father and the life that lies there within. This particular Saturday was special because one of the high-ranking officials of the church had recently gotten married. His wife, Natalie, was being introduced into the church community. Natalie is absolutely beautiful, both inside and out. She has very light skin, keen features, sandy brown hair, light eyes and a slim waist. I find it important to note that her features of lightness

are not what make her beautiful; features completely opposite of what is listed would make her equally as beautiful, but rather her heart for God is what shines the most.

Natalie began to share her life, or her testimony as “church folk” call it with the ladies who were present. She grew up in a rural community in North Carolina. She was a product of single parent home, where her mother and her grandmother raised her. She never knew her father growing up and expressed a void in her life because of that. As she continued to testify about her upbringing she especially got sentimental when she began to talk about her skin tone. She told a story of a young child whom others teased because she was so light skinned. Because of this during the summer months she would stay outside for long periods of time to get darker. Unfortunately, her getting a tan only caused her to be the brunt of more ridicule, but now by her care givers and even some of the same kids who teased her for being too light.

She goes on to tell us that she never felt accepted because of this ridicule and how it promoted her to look for love in all the wrong places. She just never felt quite “black enough” is how she put it. This caused a major void in her life. It was not until she found Christ did her desire to find acceptance become fulfilled. In this instance Natalie’s need to heal the wound of colorism was sought through love in all the wrong places. My last chapter discusses the processing of healing from the wound a bit more.

### **Pulpit Partitioning**

It seemed like Natalie coming to the church brought out the color complex in all of us. Well at least it did with my Pastor. I love my church. Every Sunday that the doors open and I am in town I am there. I particularly love my Pastor because he speaks very candidly. At times he says things that some traditional believers would warn against. It is because of this brutal honesty that I am drawn to his teaching. It is also this bluntness which has thrown me off on some Sunday mornings.

Although I go to church to get away from my regular routine, because I am part of a predominantly black church, much of the issues that are relevant to me are also relevant to others. There have been many times when my Pastor has made comments about colorism while in the pulpit. In those moments I am in disbelief that I can never get away from "it." Not even in church.

For example, one of our ministry leaders was leaving because she was getting married. As my pastor began to pray for her and her future husband he later told the congregation how much of a good man her future husband was and to make matters better he stated "and he is dark skin" as if these attributes could not belong to a person of his complexion. This is one of many instances that occur like this on Sunday. In a church setting it is hard for me to recall other instances, because I am there to receive healing and uplifting from the world, but I do know they happen.

He makes so many comments surrounding skin tone that, another church member, Lisa, who knows my research, always looks at me when the comments are made. Additionally, his wife who also knows my area of research has told him on a few occasions “you know Wanda is going to use you in her dissertation.” She was absolutely correct. He continues to talk about shade from the pulpit. Normally it is done in the form of a joke where people laugh. I never laugh.

### **Self-Actualization—Proving my Blackness**

*Lisa asked me one day in conversation about my research if I felt that I had to defend my blackness to others. Without hesitation I answered yes, depending on where I am or who I am with. One thing is for sure I never have to convince white people, it's just my own people that unofficially put me to the test. We both know that I'm black. It's just something that we do.*

### **What Are You?**

While finishing up my last two years of graduate school I worked on campus as a graduate assistant. My role allowed me to work with students, which is something that I truly enjoy. I worked with several students on campus but none became attached to me as much as Cedric did. I remember our first advising session very vividly. My hair was pulled back and I was dressed in an eclectic way, a style that is very familiar to me. Before I could get through my normal “getting to know you questions” Cedric interrupted by asking “what are you?” Amazed by his interruption and simple yet complex question I responded,

*“what do you mean what am I?”* His jovial laugh accompanied by *“you know, what is your race?”* let me know that he was genuinely unaware.

After I politely told him that *I was black just like him* he replied with *“I know that but what else are you mixed with?”* At this point I am bit confused and little on edge. We are supposed to be talking about him not me. Also, it had been a while since I had been asked this question so I wondered what prompted him. After pointing out the fact that my hair was locked (an obvious identifier to me) I stated (probably a bit sarcastically) that *my father was black and my mother was black so that made me 100% black*. He chuckled and we began our advising session.

*This conversation makes me think of the documentary that Soledad O'Brian (2012) just did entitled “Who is Black in America” on CNN. In it she discusses the issue of colorism from the perspective of light skinned people. The people she interviewed were light skinned because they were biracial. As I watched the show I could connect with their issue of feeling casted out for not being black enough but I could not identify with their struggle of racial identity. Thinking about my conversation with Cedric and looking back over my life I guess there are times where I could have “passed” for being bi-racial which is why people have asked me that question. I do feel that although I may share the same complexion with many biracial people that overall our struggles are different. The idea of being biracial is a modern thing. With increasing families*

*becoming multiracial this adds a new dimension to the understanding of what it means to be black and various shades.*

### **How Does It Feel to Have More Color?**

Being a full time graduate student has its perks. One of which is being engaged in the campus community. During one spring semester I got heavily involved in the campus recreation program. I participated in several outdoor events (this is not something I ever even thought I would do) and had an amazingly good time. One trip in particular, lake kayaking, was wonderful. I spent an entire day out on a lake with fellow Spartans learning how to Kayak and learn about nature itself. Although I put sun block on, as to not get burned, not to avoid a tan, it was undeniably warm on this particular day and I not only got a deep tan but also sun burned very badly. If I had it to do all over again I wouldn't change a thing.

At work the following week I ran into one of the students who worked in our office. Calvin was very mature, thus all of the graduate students in the office had very candid conversations with him. As soon as he saw me he said "wow, somebody got a tan." I giggled and said "yes" I did and then he immediately followed up with "how does it feel to have color"? I was taken back and slightly offended and replied with "What do you mean? I'm black!" By the look in his eyes I could tell that he felt that he was innocently having a conversation with me and that he was not quite sure why I responded the way I did. After so many years I

guess the age old conversation about my complexion has gotten tiresome thus the response I gave. The internal emotional scar was opened again.

*Reading this short journal entry made me angry all over again. Because I have such a vivid memory I remember everything about that moment. Calvin was the second person on this campus who verbally challenged my race and ethnicity and I did not like it. Being black is a strong part of my identity and I don't like to be questioned about it. In those moments it makes me feel like I am not a part of an identity that means so much to me.*

### **She is a REAL Sister**

Although I am on a new campus I often visit my “home” campus, my roots (an HBCU) to keep me grounded in what I know and believe. Much like the student organization on my current campus, during the spring semester two years ago my alma mater put on a similar program surrounding colorism that I was able to attend. The room was crowded with students who wanted to explore a topic that had deeply touched so many of them.

The people on the panel appeared to be strategically placed by shade. I was not quite sure why this separation was necessary, or how or why those particular students were chosen. Most of people’s experiences with colorism are individual thus, one light skin person cannot speak for all light skinned people, nor can one dark skin person can speak for all dark skinned people. Although there was a student panel the moderator, Dr. Allison did the majority of the talking.

In the back of the room sat the current Miss A&T of that time, whom was a light skinned young woman with natural hair. As Dr. Allison began to speak not only was I uncomfortable for her, but was bothered by her choice of stories. I was also bothered that she monopolized the floor which left little time for student voices to be heard. She began to tell the story of the evolution of colorism on the college campus. She could not believe that after all these years that the age-old topic had resurfaced, and had done so with a vengeance. She proceeded with the talk that a young lady wanted to run to be the queen of the university but was afraid because she heard the queen had to be light skinned. Because Dr. Allison did, and had for many years, overseen the queens of the institution the young lady felt comfortable speaking with her concerning this. Not only did she reassure the young lady that was not true (a simple history of looking at the queens would have told the student the same thing) she began to tell the young lady of a time when she remembered the queens of the college were "*real sisters*."

She began to describe to the audience what this real sister looked like. She said the queens who were real dark skinned, with afros were naturally beautiful. Her description of a real sister alienated those black women who did not look like that. She ended her story with a speech to the darker skinned sister telling them to not let anybody tell them they are not beautiful simply because they were dark. I agreed with her, but what advice did she have for the women who were not dark? What advice did she have for the black women who, in her eyes, were not considered "real sisters"?

*I got frustrated all over again reading this story. Dr. Allison clearly projected her feelings and experiences on to the students in the room. There was a considerably large generational gap between the students and her so I felt that she did the students an injustice by not allowing them to verbalize their experiences during their time period. Furthermore, I had a personal connection with the Miss A&T at the time. She was my former student who favored me considerably. In fact people would always tell her that. She is beautiful and I wondered what she must have been feeling in that moment if anything. She and I never talked about it. In fact most light skinned women don't sit around and talk about the ways in which we might feel silenced or blamed for peoples hurt in some settings. This statement is not an inference that dark skinned women sit around and have conversations like this. I can only speak from my experience.*

### **Men Experience It Too—Divided Perception**

#### **They Like Him Better**

I miss my days at my old university. My office was always filled with lots of students, laughter and talk. The days I enjoyed the most were the days that students would come to my office just to hang out because they knew they would run into other student-athletes that they possibly had not seen in a while. Many of the student-athletes considered my office to be like a “home room.” When it was several of them in there they entertained each other, thus I was able to still get a lot of work done in their company. It was times like this when students had their most truthful conversations. I want to believe that it was in part because they felt

comfortable in my presence, but more so because they partially thought I was not listening. Although I may not have responded, I heard everything the students had to say. Of all the conversations that took place in my office none stuck with me more than the one held between Kevin and Andrew, two football players who were best friends.

Kevin and Andrew had been friends since their first year at the university. They did just about everything together as they played the same position on the field, offensive line. These guys, although big, are typically the sweetest and caring men on the team at least that has been my experience. Kevin was dark complexioned, and Andrew was lighter complexioned. In addition to playing football together they were bouncers at a local club. They begin to talk about how the owner of the club was prejudiced. Obviously this disturbed me if they believed this was true, because they continued to work there. Although they laughed about it, I could tell that it bothered the guys, especially Kevin. They talked about an instance where the guys were asked to wear shorts below the knees and how Andrew was allowed to wear whatever kind of shorts he wanted. They attributed this difference to their shades, although they previously stated that overall the manager was prejudiced.

After chiming into their conversation (I could not resist it was about what I am passionate about) they told me that what their manager was doing was normal, because it all steamed back to the "field negro" and the "house negro." Although Kevin and Andrew were both college students on full scholarships, and

Kevin was actually the better student (more involved, a member of a Greek letter organization and overall more popular) in this one instance they blamed the difference on skin tone.

*I am left thinking that the experience that Kevin had was true. What gave me hope about the situation is that it did not cause animosity between him and Andrew. There other commonalities are what they both chose to focus on. I wonder how different this would have been if this were women. Even being true this narrative illustrates that men deal with colorism as well.*

### **Twins—PhD and Prison**

*Tonight while sitting in the coffee shop that I frequent the most, I met a guy named Shawn. Although I went to write I was not able to do so, due to the conversation that I had with him. Even though I was not able to write I actually gained so much more. It turns out like Kevin and Andrew Shawn also dealt with colorism in his family. Much like my experience with most people of color, once I shared my research topic with Shawn he began to share his personal story with me as it relates to colorism.*

Shawn was from the Midwest. He came to North Carolina to attend college. This is not as unique as his journey to how he got here. Shawn grew up in a rough neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up with a twin brother. His brother was lighter complexioned and Shawn was darker skinned. Sitting there watching Shawn talk about the differences in complexions I could tell how hurtful his experience was growing up.

Shawn shared with me that he felt his parents adored his brother more. He felt that he always received better clothes and just more love from his family. It would be interesting to speak with his brother and his parents to see if they too shared these same sentiments. Shawn's tone changed when he began to talk about the turn in his life. Although his brother was lighter complexioned he is now in prison doing time while Shawn is married with a child, a wife and just completed his terminal degree. With a boyish grin he says he was supposed to be the one with all of this because of how much love he got when they were younger but "I am the *one* who made it."

As Shawn came back to the present moment with his eyes and his thoughts I couldn't help but to wonder if he was happy that he was the one who "made it" or if he was shocked. It was unclear to me if Shawn had any heartache about his brother being in jail. The one thing that was very clear to me was Shawn was dark skinned, his brother was light skinned (according to him) and that contrast had deeply shaped the way that Shawn viewed the world.

*Reading this story again I am left with so many more questions. Did Shawn truly beat the odds of his skin color or did he beat the odds of a black man in general? Was his brother really light skinned? How would his brother interpret the childhood and now their adulthood? Was Shawn really loved less by his parents because he was darker? I obviously don't have the answers to these questions, but I do have the answer to if colorism exists amongst me. The answer is yes.*

## **Popular Culture & Self-Perception**

### **I Am Light Skin Darn It!**

I am part of a group called DIVAS, which stands for Divine, Intellectual, Virtuous, Academic Sista's. The overall purpose of DIVAS is to provide a community for women of color who are either in pursuit of their PhD's or who have begun their journey into the academy. As a part of our community women are paired with other women (we refer to them as bigs and littles) as to keep a closer watch on each other. For a period of time in my PhD process I was what I like to call a "lost soul." I wanted my PhD but I allowed my life circumstances to overshadow my goals. After refocusing and getting back to what was most central and important to me I resigned from my thriving position of eight years to pursue completing my degree. The decision paid off and within a month's time I had made major steps towards finishing my degree. Being a former "lost soul" I take special interest in those who I feel may be a little lost themselves. As such I invited one my fellow Divas out to lunch.

As we talked and caught up on the small things in life, Candice and I did what any and every graduate student and even former graduate student does. We began to talk about our experiences as graduate students and our research agendas. Like most people Candice found my topic to be very interesting. She began to talk about her husbands' experience and how he felt that he was brown skinned even though most people who saw him would agree that he is darker complexioned. I have seen her husband before and would agree with her on this

one. Ironically he grew up in the same town that Natalie grew up in from Church. After we laughed a bit about his thoughts she began to tell me her thoughts on colorism.

There is no question that Candice would be considered to be brown skin by most people, but in her eyes she was much lighter. Much like her husband, she had an internalized an identity that truly did not belong to her. She began to tell me of experiences that she felt that people discriminated against her because of her complexion. Although the research written shows that she would not be discriminated upon because she was brown skinned, in her eyes she was lighter and it had been done. I could not believe that she had those experiences or that she considered herself light skinned but I heard her very loud and clear. Her words screamed "I am light skinned darn it."

*Almost a year after meeting with her and writing this story I have read other stories of women who are browner hue who have had similar experiences of light skinned women. Reading those stories made me believe that Candice really did go through what she said. This thought frightens me. I have expressed several times that in the conundrum of colorism that brown skinned women are usually shielded from the internal conflict of the matter. Hearing her story and reading further I feel very differently. I am troubled. The idea is to bring women of color together. In some ways I felt as if the brown skinned women were the glue between "light and dark." This does not make me think that.*

### **Hash Tag—Team Light Skin (#teamlightskin)**

I joined twitter a few years ago. My reasoning was simple. I work with college students, and although I never actually use my account, I do not want to be left behind the times. One day while surfing the site I came across several post that said #teamlightskin. At the time I had no idea that this was considered a trending topic for people to write about, although I was looking at several post from people across the country and possibly even the world. The post I read disturbed me deeply. It was light skinned girls writing about why they love being light skinned. Such things like “I can wear my hair any color” to “because everybody likes me” were written. More disturbing then that post was the post I saw from girls who were not light skinned, but who considered themselves to be so. Furthermore, the posts that were written about why being dark skinned was not cool truly bothered me.

After researching more I learned that not only was there a “team light skin,” but other “shades” had teams as well. The fact that social media has created an outlet to further perpetuate the divide of colorism is problematic in itself. The fact that younger people are still subscribing to this way of thought is even more problematic. Whatever happened to #teambblackpride? Does it even exist anymore?

*When I read this story initially it saddens me. I also wondered why I wrote in my journal about it because it doesn't support what I am saying. In being*

*honest with myself I know why I wrote it. It is a part of that guilt that I have felt along with the objectification and victimization.*

### **Conclusion**

This chapter was not about joining my sorority or being labeled a light skinned pretty girl but rather it's about social norms, master narratives and what it meant to be a light skinned girl who is now a woman in the same skin. Over the years I have felt objectified and I dare say victimized by my skin. It feels like having black skin that is light means in some places I am all things black and then in other spaces I am not black enough.

I am amazed in the ways that people talk about colorism. It has become so common and so much a part of that which "we" are, that hurtful stereotypes flow out of people's mouths like water flows through a streaming pond. I for one am tired of it. I'm tired of having to be okay with the stereotypes about being light out of fear of arguing with someone. I'm tired of always having to be nice when some of my girlfriends of darker hue around me don't want to and don't have to feel the same social responsibility that I do. At times I feel like I carry the weight of light skinned women on my shoulders. If I'm nice perhaps I can help light skinned women be seen in a "better" light, but if I'm rude then I feel that I am just feeding into the stereotype of being stuck up and being an object. I have assumed the collective identity of my shade. I feel this same burden when it comes to my sorority and my religion, both of which I can choose to or not

choose to disclose to people. I don't get to choose if people know me to be a light skinned woman or not. It is obvious to most when they look at me.

Although I have not come full circle in this autoethnographic process I have progressed in my thoughts on the subject. In the spirit of change and forward movement I would like to leave the reader with hope for the future. My next and final chapter will do just that.

## CHAPTER VI

### YOU CAN'T STAY IN THE PAST SO HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD: EDUCATION AS A FORM OF LIBERATION

#### Introduction

Oftentimes when people are in oppressive situations they find it difficult to get past what they see. It is usually the ways in which we are marginalized that are most salient to us. The ways in which we may marginalize others is not as easily acceptable. Unfortunately, most people tend to focus more on the bad than the good. It takes a lot of introspective reflection to get to a place where you are able to not only see the ways in which you are or oppressed or have been oppressed but also how you have oppressed others. It is finding this balance that can lead one to viewing the world in a more holistic way; loving thy neighbor and loving thy self.

In this dissertation I discuss the sensitive issue of race and racism in America. My conversation on this topic led me to a deeper discussion on colorism and how it has affected my life. Within the black race people have adopted a hierarchy system which privileges lighter skin over darker skin. This ranking system is used as social currency and estimations on what skin tone is better. This has caused a form of prejudice within the community. Cooper-Lewter (1999) describes this black-on-black victimization as "soul drive-bys" (p. 30).

Colorism is a form of intra-racism which keeps black people divided. I felt that sharing my personal experiences would help unmask the issue more but I questioned whether it would further the divide. Not only did I expose myself in this work, but I also exposed a hidden and ugly truth that happens within my community. Discussing colorism in the “company” of others outside the black race is seen as taboo and is not always welcomed; never the less I journaled my experiences over the past two years which had the biggest impact on me.

This work has truly unraveled me, but in this loosening I have found ways to make some peace with the issue. I reflected on the moments, which impacted me the most and I coupled those experiences with the knowledge that I have gained throughout my time as a doctoral student. Those two things combined helped me to find ways in which I believe I can transcend past the issue of racism/colorism. I believe every experience in life can lead us back to some form of education. This is especially true, if we believe that true education does not need traditional classroom walls but rather a space where people can think through ideas in hopes of constructing new meaning. This can be done anywhere that people are willing.

This final chapter offers a few ways, which I have resolved to work through the issue of colorism. Through my work it is my desire that a reader have a chance to gain an understanding of colorism from a different perspective. Equally important is the opportunity to find next steps, which may aid them in coming to peace with the issue, especially if they have struggled as I have.

## Conclusion of Research

### Reflexivity

Going into this research project I was not sure what I was going to find out. In fact, I was not sure if the conversations that were taking place around me would deny or validate my personal experiences. Although the entire dissertation is about colorism each chapter stretched me and taught me things about myself as a person, as well as myself as a researcher.

My second chapter, the review of the literature, allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how the issue of internalized racism materialized throughout the years. It taught me that, the division has been reinforced and reenacted through each generation. During slavery the division was “house” versus “field” Negro. Now it’s “team light skinned” versus “team dark skinned” that divides people; these teams have been named on *twitter* and *facebook*, and serve as the new millennium way to perpetuate colorism. In the future one can only hope that there will be no separate “teams” but that we will all identify as one. By one I do not just mean black people but all people.

The second reinforced the notion that skin tone stratification is not just about the shade of one’s skin but rather about the bigger system of oppression. This system causes people who have shared origins to divide amongst each other. This divisive nature was inherited from racism and has penetrated the minds of so many. The good news is people are talking about the issue more

often now in ways to not continue the divide but rather close the gap. The bad news is it is not enough; we need more conversations surrounding the issue.

Most recently CNN reporter Soledad O'Brian (2012) hosted *Who is Black in America?* This documentary is the fifth one of the multi-part series which discusses the idea of blackness in this country. In it Soledad speaks to the idea of colorism through the perspective of light skinned biracial people. Although I am not biracial I could identify with many of the struggles because many of them were because of the "shade" of their skin versus the "blood" within their veins.

O'Brian followed the lives of several young people who struggled with colorism on a daily basis. For them the idea of blackness is not as definitive as it may be to others. This is due to the complexion of their skin. Nayo Jones, a 17-year-old who was part of the documentary stated "they always called me white girl. I was never ashamed of myself until they taught me to be ashamed." Placing Nayo's struggle and others like herself, at the forefront of the documentary allowed the issue of colorism to be discussed from a different perspective that is not normally discussed.

Similarly to Brian, in 2010 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. hosted *Faces of America* on PBS. The purpose of the series was to trace the genealogy of 12 Americans. These persons were Elizabeth Alexander, Mario Batali, Stephen Colbert, Louise Erdrich, Malcom Gladwell, Evan Longoria, Yo-Yo Ma, Mike Nichols, Queen Noor of Jordan, Dr. Mehmet Oz, Meryl Streep, and Kristi Yamaguchi. These persons were chosen because of their fame. It turned out that what people were labeled

as [in terms of race in America] and what their genealogy showed did not coincide. For example, Gates found out that he was genetically 60% Irish. This concept further complicates the idea of race, racism and colorism in America.

It is reported that the series *Who is Black in America* has been the most watched show on CNN since it first aired in September 2008. The popularity of the show would suggest that there is an interest in wanting to understand blackness. Understanding is the beginning of all change. There have been other documentaries which have sought to speak to this issue of blackness, which also addressed colorism; none however have reached mainstream appeal.

My methodology chapter stretched my perspective on being reflexive and scholarly at the same time. It gave me the tools that I needed to be able to balance the *personal* nature of my work with producing an academic piece. The most challenging component of this chapter was trying to recognize my selectivity, silencing and slippage throughout this research project (Casey, 1993). I became keenly aware of the stories that I chose to share and the moments that I left out. Slippage happened when I verbally shared my research with others. There are still some things I realized that I am not ready to discuss. This is part of my process of navigating life with my light skin. I was left wondering if my readers would feel that. The feeling of not wanting to share all makes me empathetic to others who may also struggle with colorism.

My fourth chapter helped me to see the identity of black women as it has been seen through the eyes of the media. It also helped me to put a frame of

reference to the roles that I have actually seen people enact in real life. The complexity of being a black woman expands further beyond the three roles that we have been type-casted in [mammy, sapphire, jezebel].

This year Denzel Washington is nominated by the Academy for best leading actor in his role in *Flight*. In it he played a drunken, cocaine-addicted pilot. My guess is that he will win for his role. Although I did not study black men in this dissertation and the stereotypical roles they are casted in, I will in future studies. This would be important to truly get a thorough racist understanding of the collective identity of black people as depicted by media. The political agenda behind Washington not winning the Oscar many years ago for his role in *Malcolm X* reaffirms this notion of what is accepted in Hollywood and what is not. Malcolm X too struggled with the shade of his skin.

Also nominated this year is Quvenzhané Wallis, a 9-year-old African American girl. She is making history this year by being the youngest actress ever nominated for a leading role. At the age of 5 she auditioned for her role although her roll called for her to be 6. At such a young age Wallis has the ability to help shape the image of women of color. I am truly inspired by this.

In this chapter, I also felt a strong sense of black womanhood. Every time I typed the word “we” in refereeing to black women I felt both responsible and pride. My responsibility lead me to be cautious as to not make statements which I felt could portray black women in the wrong image. Although we struggle with

colorism I never wanted to frame the work where people could not understand that this suffering comes from a bigger system of racism.

This chapter solidified what I already knew and felt in my heart. I am indeed a black feminist. This is a label that I proudly accept. As such I feel the social responsibility to portray black women in a more balanced way. For future studies I would like to expand on how the stereotypical roles of black women in movies have a direct link to colorism.

Reading back over my fifth chapter I relived the entire journey of this PhD process. This process is what Ellis and Bochner (2000) refer to as reflexivity, which is retrospectively looking back over what you have already reflected upon. It was as if I was re-telling the story all over again to myself. "As human beings we learn a great deal from re-telling stories, creating new meaning and deepening existing ones" (Etherington, 2004, p. 55). I knew that I had grown as a person because although some of the stories evoked strong emotions, it was nothing compared to what I remember feeling at the time that I heard the conversations. I used to get very frustrated when I heard people talk about colorism. The frustration is why I knew this was the topic that I needed to research. I would get so angry that I could not even add commentary to the discussions. After doing the research I am not limited to my initial perceptions. Because of this, I am now able to listen to people and understand their experiences without frustration.

Although I did not agree with all that was written in her book, I have Marita Golden (2004) to thank for giving me the courage to do this work. The moment I knew that I could do what I was attempting to do was when I read the following passage.

Writing about the color complex means thinking about the color complex, and the process becomes akin to breaking through a dense, evil encryption that masks, hides, denies, and silences the truth about what we have inflicted on ourselves. Writing this book, *I surrender to memory*. Writing this book, I inevitably seek out and find others brave enough to witness, question, and remember. (2004, p. 53)

In this dissertation I began to surrender to my own memories.

Golden goes on to discuss the recollections in her life as it relates to her shade. There was no time in her life where she did not feel like a “second class” citizen to light skinned women. “I was eight and I already knew that I was invisible” (p. 8) she writes. She also noted:

I had been wounded, and quite deeply, by colorism in my eighteen years. Now that I was nearly an adult, I wanted to opt out of any situations that could rekindle pain that was never far from the surface. (p. 47)

She attributes most of her negative experiences to her complexion. Whereas I have had some not so good experiences with colorism I do not see all of my bad experiences as a result of my skin tone. Perhaps some would say that this is because I am light skinned. Golden however validates my bad experiences in another way.

I find that when a light-skinned sister is not doing so well, when she's facing the kinds of disappointments that we all are bound to face, there's sometimes this sense that she has been cheated, denied in a way that is deeper and more painful than for women who don't look like her. (p. 69)

This statement is such a generalization. This is one of the many way in which she and I disagree on issues dealing with shade. Even though Golden and I share a difference of opinion, I recognize that this is due in majority to our age difference, geographical regions and of course our skin tone. Each has given us a very different meaning of colorism. One thing is certain, we both have had to deal with (I am still dealing) with this issue.

Be it true, I admire her bravery to discuss such a sensitive subject, especially knowing that she was often greeted with disdain for doing so. That is also an experience that we both share. Usually I hear "*what do you have to say You are light skinned?*" I must admit those words pierce my soul and give me pause, but the bigger desire to add more meaning and dialogue has encouraged me to continue my work on racism/colorism. For future work I would like to collaborate with her to perhaps could combine our shared experiences.

### **Limitations of Study**

#### **Location**

Although I traveled quite a bit during this process I never encountered honest conversations concerning colorism. I have been everywhere from Miami to Arizona and most states in between but never once did the conversation come up. I am not certain if it was due to the reasons I was traveling [some personal

and some business], the people that I was around [colleagues, friends and family members] or the area that I was in [various states in the US], but I never heard one story. This certainly is a limitation to my study because the experiences and stories are based on my interaction with people in the South. What I could have learned from other parts of the country is unknown, but could have enhanced my understanding and knowledge of the subject matter.

### **Other Autoethnographies**

There are other forms of autoethnographies that I could have considered. Some in fact call for the collection of ideas between two or more people. Ellis (1998) offers co-constructed narratives and interactive interviews as the other two forms. In co-constructed narratives I would have utilized another person who may also be experiencing issues with colorism. We would construct our stories separately by writing them down. Together a communal story would unfold.

The third approach, interactive interviews, would have given me a space to utilize a few other people in the process. This could have possibly been a committee member or someone who is in close proximity of my work, who may or may not have experienced colorism first hand, but who had an interest in it. I would be interviewed by them prior to beginning my research.

Either of these added components may have helped me better identify my own subjectivity which may be seen as a limitation in my study. My future work on this topic will employ one of these other forms of autoethnography. I share the same sentiments of Peshkin (1988) who once said:

I decided that in subsequent studies I would actively seek out my subjectivity. I did not want to happen upon it accidentally as I was writing up the data. I want to be aware of it in process, mindful of its enabling and disabling potential while the data were still coming in, not after the fact. (p. 18)

I did not truly start to seek out my subjectivity until I began to share my narrative with my chair. Her challenging my ideas sent me in “search of my subjectivity”. I would suggest to anyone contemplating autoethnography as method, to try adding someone to your process. I believe it will make it a more meaningful experience to you and your reader.

### **Liberation through Education**

“To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone” (hooks, 1994, p. 3). This danger zone is what I felt I entered once I began to formulate and verbalize my truth about what I have experienced. In order for me to grow however, I had to seek more knowledge about the very thing that was binding me. In Chapter V, I shared that I learned about colorism at home. I never learned that others were “bad” because of their color or that I was “good” I just knew that I was different. By no means did I understand while standing in the circle getting ready to fight why I was always told *“you think you are cute because you are light skinned.”* I now understand that the kids I was fighting were only saying what they had been educated on by their families, whom I am certain learned what they knew from their elders.

Society teaches us about internalized racism, but we perpetuate it. Our educational spaces need to be used as platforms where people can discover their own truths. I am not referring to education in a traditional sense, but rather education in a holistic way. Shapiro (2006) reflects:

Education refers to the whole process of socialization that includes all those things and influences that shape how we think, act and relate to the world we live in. This certainly includes school, but it also includes other powerful influences on us, such as the family, peer relationships, religious institutions, popular culture, and the mass media. (p. 52)

This type of education is critical and necessary when it comes to internalized racism, which some see as the new “ism” (Wilson-Cooper, Wilson, & Hall, 2003). Spaces need to be created which will allow people to truly deal with this topic. I can see this happening successfully in our community, our classrooms (making them culturally relevant) and finally through media opportunities.

### **Community**

Much of the liberation that has happened throughout the years for black people has happened in the church. “The black church is where black folks go when grief-ridden” (Cooper-Lewter, 1999, p. 8). In previous eras, such as the civil rights movement, churches were used as the hub where people went to resolve collective issues (Gadzekpo, 1997). Although the black community is no longer the way it was during the 1960s, many black people find church as a resting place to lay their own personal struggles down. “The common black argument for belief in God is not that it is logical or reasonable, but rather that such belief is

requisite for one's sanity and for entrée to the most uplifting sociality available in the black community" (West, 1999, p. 437).

The issue of internalized racism is a struggle that I have had to deal with. If you can remember, from Chapter V, Natalie struggled with it as well, as does Golden. Each of us are three various shades but we all struggle. I know that we are not the only ones. The wonderful thing about church and Christianity is it helps you get beyond your personal truths "because for Christians, Jesus Christ is the Truth" (West, 1999, p. 419). Even with the comments that have been made in church by my Pastor concerning the color complex, it is in this place where I am at most peace about any situation, not just this issue. It is in this place that race, racism or colorism no longer matter to me. It is here where I am able to transcend beyond that which I am. The church is my community.

The community enables us to see our own life as something much more than an isolated, brief moment of consciousness simply here to satisfy our egoistical wants. Within this community of meaning I can see my own life as a continuing link in a chain that connects me to countless others who have felt similar responsibilities, perceived and attended to similar challenges and experienced, celebrated, or commemorated familiar events and moments with similar rituals. (Shapiro, 2006, p. 80)

With that I offer the advice that each of us need to find a community where we can find peace and resolve to get beyond any form of oppression, including, but not limited to colorism. It is in these collective spaces where we are able to set aside our differences in hope for a better tomorrow. For me church is this place but I do not ascertain that this is the place for everyone.

## Culturally Relevant Classrooms

Culturally relevant learning spaces need to be created for those people who have the opportunity to confront skin tone stratification in traditional learning environments. Ladson-Billings (2009a) asserts that culturally relevant teaching is:

*a pedagogy of opposition* not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they *challenge the status quo* of the current social order. (p. 160)

Classrooms where students are only deposited in and not encouraged to discuss and challenge what they have learned needs to be a thing of the past. Because racism is no longer overt but rather covert culturally relevant spaces will allow space for all persons, regardless of their race or shade, to be successful.

“Culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Students must be given the space to critique ideas and identities which are associated with them as well as others. In questioning the norms they have the opportunity to become free of what they expect of themselves and people around them.

This type of freedom Freire (2004) explains:

is acquired by conquest not by gift. *It must be pursued constantly and responsibly.* Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an

idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (p. 47)

This type of freedom of thought does not come naturally, especially since students have been taught all of their lives to not question knowledge. It is the responsibility of the teacher to not only encourage academic success and cultural competence but most importantly help students recognize, understand and critique social inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We must enter each learning space understanding that it will bring new challenges for our students as well as ourselves. We must also learn to be okay with that. Culturally relevant classrooms require openness from both the student and the teacher, but the teacher must model the behavior first.

### **Media Responsibility**

When one is not in control of her image what she sees is essentially considered fiction. Only when one can become in control of what she sees can it reflect actuality, a form of art; perhaps something that she can even see as beautiful. "Films possess the ability to *re-imagine* and *refocus* what American culture knows to be 'real,' particularly pertaining to black culture" (McKoy, 2012, p. 135) Challenging the way we receive stereotypical images that are depicted through movies is one thing. Actually having the space to alter what is seen is something totally different.

Although there are black screenwriters and producers in Hollywood there are not enough to change the influence of what is seen. There is one producer

however, Tyler Perry, who has crossed over to mainstream appeal.

Unfortunately, he is known to overtly perpetuate the stereotype of blackness especially black women (Harrison, 2009; McKoy, 2012). Because of this “critics have vociferously condemned Perry’s representations of race in his films and television shows” (Patterson, 2011, p. 10). Some feel that this is why he has been so successful in reaching audiences outside of the black community. Although he is very popular many have criticized his work, wondering if he “is capable or even willing to disrupt negative media stereotypes of African Americans and challenge this system of American cultural hegemony” (Harrison, 2009, p. 108). Although he has publically spoken of being aware of the past stereotypes of black people, his movies still perpetuate the three stereotypical roles of mammy, sapphire, and jezebel that were created many years ago. Spike Lee has openly spoken out against Tyler Perry’s movies. Regrettably, some people see it as jealousy rather than a political stance.

Another prominent producer of black film is Bishop T. D. Jakes. Although a Bishop of one of the largest mega-ministries in the USA, Jakes (2013) states, “I realized that there are more people in the theater on Friday and Saturday night than there are in the pews on Sunday morning” (as cited in A. Williams, 2013, para. 3), which is why he began to produce movies; in doing so Jakes has crossed over from church appeal to worldly appeal. Bishop Jakes states that his messages are portrayed to help people through their struggles. Be it true (or not depending on your opinion) his latest film, *Sparkle*, clearly perpetuates the

stereotypes of colorism and black identity. Sparkle, a light skinned girl is the superstar of the movie. Her dark skinned sister, Carmen, is a troublemaker and her other light skinned sister, Delores, is a sexy songstress who seduced men. In watching the movie it is easy to see how colorism exists.

So with many producers of black films, both black and white, but few who are willing to challenge the stereotypes, we as a people are left with an insurmountable obstacle of internalized racism. But still there must be hope. If we teach ourselves, as well as our younger generation, to challenge what is seen and not accept it as face value, then at least we have started somewhere. The bigger challenge is to continue to put pressure on producers, both black and white by publically using our voice to speak out against what is seen.

### **Intergroup Dialogue**

My final offering of ways to make peace or find resolve with colorism is intergroup dialogue. In discussing race too often are our conversations just about black and white. Although people of color in general have interaction with one another there usually is not a shared space where issues of internalized oppressions, such as colorism, can be discussed. Intergroup dialogue (IGD) which is *guided* facilitation I believe can be used as a place to create this space. IGD would bring black women face to face and give them a “safe space” to challenge and discuss this very tough issue.

Intergroup dialogues are defined as facilitated face-to-face meetings between students from two or more social identity groups that have history of

conflict or potential conflict (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). It is more than just a simple dialogue, but rather a *guided discussion* between people. Intergroup dialogue originated on a college campus as a response to tough issues of social inequalities.

Two trained facilitators lead the discussion and should represent two identities that are represented within the group. The group needs to be reasonably small. An example for IGD for men and women should have one woman and one man as the facilitation leaders. In the scenario that I am suggesting all the women would be black. As such one of the facilitators should have light skin and the other dark skin.

IGD is different than a regular conversation because there are goals, learning outcomes and facilitated discussions. Because people have to sign up for IGD sessions there is a higher probability that they are open to talk. Understanding that the issue of racism/colorism is very sensitive for some anger and frustration is expected. Anger is not a bad emotion. In fact to often black women are silenced (indirectly and directly) out of fear of being labeled the “angry black woman.” This space would welcome this emotion and use it to further the educational experience. Intergroup dialogue usually takes place outside of traditional academic settings.

### **Conclusion**

The civil rights movement was about social change where, in the words of Dr. King, character content would be valued over biological differences. If we

believe that race is a social construction as it has been demonstrated then there could quite possibly be a time where racial transcendence is possible. We are in a post-modern society and some would argue a “post-racial” society (given a sitting black president). However, the social processes are not that advanced in all parts of society and people continue to be informed by race specific issues and act on them.

Racial transcendence is possible as long as we continue to approach the concept of humanity in an equitable value of life for everyone; however the reality rests with the shortcomings of context and socialization which operates at a slower pace than the perfect ideology of equal humanity; we are left with the reality that “race matters.” None of us, light, dark or brown feel good when we are marginalized because of our skin. The key is not to continue to see race, racism and colorism not as a separate issue but rather understand that each exists together and each are toxic. If we can get beyond something that has no biological basis anyway, then we can begin to move beyond all three.

In this chapter I have given a self-reflection on the entire dissertation project. I have, to the best of my ability, recognized my silencing, slippage and selectivity, as well as the ways that I have grown from doing this work. I am constantly inspired by new ideas and ways in which I can move further along in my thought process concerning racism and colorism. More so I thrive on finding ways to share this knowledge with others. It is the educator in me. I do not take it lightly that I have been given a platform to speak. I plan to use my voice to

inspire and change. Those who do write are written for. Those who do not speak are spoken for.

Through education we have the ability to reform communities and find new meaning for our moral and spiritual lives (Shapiro, 2006). The hidden curriculum of race, racism and colorism has been a part of who we are, but does not have to define us. This process has taught me this. Education has provided a space where I could begin to understand the ideas and images that I have been presented through media, as well as a place where I could learn to accept or reject these images. I choose to reject them. I understand that not all people will have the opportunity to engage in education the way that I have (I do recognize my privilege in this) but I do suggest, as hooks, Shapiro, Greene, Knowles, and others have that education is the space that you make it.

Popular culture has an enormous influence on informing who we are to ourselves, as well as whom we are to others. It is our reasonable obligation to not enact that which we see. If it were as easy as rejecting ideas then race, racism and colorism would have ended so many years ago. We must be aware of the ways in which these "isms" have become covert in our society. Still there is hope otherwise there would be no need to discuss and grapple with such difficult concepts.

My hope for the future is more collaborations and ways in which blackness can be discussed and celebrated. I ultimately look forward to the day where we have all transcended the idea of race. I walk away feeling less like a victim or

someone who has hurt others because of my skin tone and more like a person who can approach this work with offerings of peace and change. I truly feel a greater sense of understanding and with this knowledge I am ready to take on the world, one sentence, one paragraph, one article or book at a time.

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