

Lee-Ann Percoski

Professor Mazzuchelli

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### Changing Color. Changing Race.

What is “Race?” A word we hear nearly every day. A word that makes everyone different. One that creates diversity and urges war. Where does “Race” come from, and why does it matter? Many scholars believe that “Race” is not a natural entity of life, but is a “cultural invention” that reflects social interpretations of “physical variations” (Smedley). The meaning of race is ever evolving due to social constructions much like culture (Hunter). Eventually, these physical differences led to much more than questions. Once race was interpreted as a biological variance, skin color began to define social structure, and further defined “Race.” It was used to distinguish groups of people and allowed for “social identification and stratification” (Smedley). Whites separated themselves from blacks and rationalized that their “cleaner” looking skin naturally made them more superior. The idea of viewing one’s own race as superior to another is defined as racism, and has led to physical, emotional, and sociological damage.

When one envisions “White Supremacy,” images of the Ku Klux Klan, the Jim Crow Laws, and severe segregation arise. Yes, both of these are associated, but White Supremacy encompasses much more. Yaba Amgboralw Blay, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at Lafayette College, defines it as a “historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of... ‘Non-white[s]’ by people who, by virtue of their white skin pigmentation...classify themselves as ‘white’” (Blay). He simply states that, as we all know, people historically oppressed others simply due to their skin color. In doing so, they created

social benefits for themselves, and forced darker-skinned people to submit to these ideas.

According to Blay, Africans “endorse the constructed superiority of whiteness and thus white supremacy” when acknowledging the painful truth of self-hate and internalized racism (Blay).

White Supremacy has been part of society for so long that blacks unintentionally submit to it themselves. Internalized racism is the act of believing “that derogatory messages about [oneself] are true” (Kaufka). They have been forced to believe that the entire negative stigma that surrounds African culture is accurate. Because of the emergence of White Supremacy, self-hatred and denial of African American ancestry evolved. Throughout history, we see people from African descent work to do whatever they can to be accepted into the “white community.”

During the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance was a very significant movement made by African Americans that was the backbone of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Mostly known for the art and literature of the time, the Harlem Renaissance was the first real measure after the Civil War in which African Americans sought to prove their equality. Many African American authors wrote to expose the underlying issues of racism in America. Daniel M. Scott III analyzed Wallace Thurman’s novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, which thoroughly illustrates internalized racism during the Harlem Renaissance. Author Shirley Haizlipp describes how Thurman “invested... [in] the context of how black self-hate [and] black rage is created” (Scott III). He acknowledges that self-hatred stems from the abhorrence inflicted upon African Americans by other races, specifically whites. As mentioned, African Americans began to believe that the derogatory comments about them were true, and some accepted them as fact. In addition, Scott describes how Thurman does not depict “race as...a given identity, [but as] a constructed performance” (Scott III). Even in the 1920s, people understood that the idea of race was not natural, rather it was an abstract idea created by society that still haunts today.

Akissi Britton, an African American woman, struggled with the desire to feel beautiful for most of her childhood. She was a fairly dark-skinned African American, and was always taught self-pride and self-love at home. Once she reached elementary school, her outlook on her beloved African heritage turned for the worst. She felt like she had entered a “world that hated [her] dark skin,” and acknowledged that the hate did not come from racist White people, but actually dark-skinned people like her. The young children she went to school with ridiculed her often and gave her nicknames such as “Blackie, Darky, and African Booty-scratcher” (Britton). All of these derogatory messages, no matter how much she was taught self-respect at home, began to terrorize her every single day. Eventually Britton hated herself. She recalled thinking about her sister, “it was in elementary school that I realized you were light and I wasn’t. And that meant you were pretty and I was ugly [...] I hated and envied you” (Britton). Although she loved her sister very much, Britton acknowledged that even in the African American community, it was more “beautiful” to be lighter skinned.

Colorism is a division of racism solely focused on the pigment of skin. It basically justifies internalized racism. As stated by Margaret L. Hunter, colorism is “the system that privileges the lighter skinned over the darker skinned” (Hunter). Not only do the negative stereotypes constructed by whites affect African Americans, but colorism allows for other African Americans to belittle those of their own race. Associate professor of law at Harvard University, Alice M. Thomas claims that, “If you are light, you are all right. If you are brown, you can stick around. If you are black, get back,” as the real backbone for colorism (Brown). With this idea, African Americans believe they are acceptable as long as they are not very dark-skinned. According to DeNeen, L. Brown, in “Through the Past, Darkly,” she acknowledges that colorism in America dates all the way back to slavery. Light-skinned slaves worked in the house

while dark-skinned slaves were forced to work outside in the fields (Brown). This alone was justification for African Americans to believe that lighter skin was better skin. The ideas of white American slave-owners were enforced to such an extent, that African Americans began to internalize the discrimination and believe it to be true.

In more recent years, colorism is still a part of American culture. Brown describes how Alvin F. Poussaint went through a time in which he felt it difficult to call himself black. To him it was a derogatory term used in a destructive manner (Brown). A documentary produced by Kiri Davis, "A Girl Like Me," offers true insight to the internalized racism and self-hate that colorism allows. An eighteen-year-old named Glenda expresses, "There are standards imposed upon us. You are prettier if you are light-skinned" (Brown). In addition, sixteen-year-old Wahida illustrates "I know people who went out and got bleaching cream and got capfuls of bleach and poured it in a tub and laid in the tub" (Brown). Scary, but true, these stories of colorism lead to the negative ideals that light skin is better skin. Brown also depicts a study in which pre-school aged children chose a white doll over a darker skinned one. One dark-skinned boy claimed that the white skinned doll was "nicer" (Brown).

With so much self-hatred within the black community itself, there is a dramatic identity crisis. In Blay's article, she explores the amount of people engaging in the act of skin-lightening and bleaching. As many as 60% of Zambian women ages 30-39 "reportedly use skin bleaching agents" (Blay). Blay also acknowledges, in Cote d'Ivoire, "eight out of every [ten] seemingly fair-complexioned women use skin lightening products on a regular basis" (Blay). With more than 50% of two separate populations exclusively partaking in skin-bleaching and lightening treatments, there is no wonder so much confusion exists in the African community. In analyzing Jamaican ideals about skin color one woman stated, "Fairer is better in our country" (Charles).

As society focuses more on the vitality of beauty, women of every color are forced to submit to the authority of popular culture. Due to the identity crisis that African women are already pressured to feel, society makes individuality even more impossible than ever. American dermatologists claim that nearly ten to fifteen percent of women age twenty to thirty are bleaching their skin (Charles).

Skin-bleaching is attempting to lighten one's skin. Daudi Ajani ya Azibo, an independent scholar, acknowledges it as a "deliberate alteration of one's phenotype skin pigmentation to a hue that is less dark by any nonmedical or potentially dangerous means" (Azibo). When someone engages in skin-bleaching, they most commonly are reacting to the feelings of inferiority and internalized racism that have existed for so long. Allison Ross, 45, in a New York Times article, stated that she "used the lightening creams to be more accepted in society" (Saint Louis). The act has definitely been attributed to a psychological imbalance. In one's mind, he/she truly believes that he/she cannot measure up to the rest of society, and begins to believe the negative undertones about them are true.

As stated earlier, Wallace Thurman explores the idea of skin-lightening in, *The Blacker the Berry*. The protagonist of the story, Emma Lou, is a dark-skinned African American woman. She encounters rejection in various African American communities. It is evident that in Emma Lou's character the idea of light-skin superiority is even rampant in the minds of dark-skinned individuals. Scott discusses how some communities involved in the novel "define racial identity according to a hierarchy of complexion" (Scott III). Although the Harlem Renaissance was an empowering movement for African Americans in which they began to experience more equality, Emma Lou suffers from a deep hatred of her skin color as depicted by Thurman. Even in African

American communities, she still felt too dark and in turn felt less important. In a short section of the novel Thurman describes Emma's morning routine:

Before putting on her dress she stood in front of her mirror for over an hour, fixing her face, drenching it with peroxide solution, plastering it with mudpack, massaging it with a bleaching ointment, and then, as a final touch, using much vanishing cream and powder. She even ate an arsenic wafer (Scott III).

The main character of the novel clearly depicts the severe internalized racism and self-hate that African Americans felt during the 1920s, and still today. She wanted to look like other people around her, and took drastic and extremely dangerous measures to achieve this.

Interestingly, "the history of skin bleaching via the use of whitening commodities began with Europeans themselves" (Blay). Skin bleaching, in fact, dates all the way back to the Elizabethan times. Queen Elizabeth I, a white woman, had a bathroom full of different powders in order to enhance her naturally pale skin and restore her youthful beauty. During this time, a woman was considered to be beautiful if she was pale. Much like women today, the gender codes dictated that beauty was one of the most important aspects of a woman's life. The new makeup helped women create the "ideal face" (Blay). To a dark skinned woman, the penetrating desire to be light skinned intensified. If light-skinned women were making themselves even lighter, then surely she was not adequate enough. As newer technologies developed, scientists and medical personnel discovered the real harm that bleaching can do to the skin. Many of the products contained lead which can lead to serious medical complications when ingested. Despite this, women continued to engage in skin-lightening, and eventually shaped the ideas behind bleaching today.

Treatment creams and lotions contain very powerful and lethal chemicals that the body is designed to reject. One of the most common components of skin-bleaching products is Hydroquinone. This chemical has actually been banned in France due to the high cancer risks associated with use (Grace). Further, the poisonous ingredient, Arsenic, has been found in many of the skin-bleaching products. This alone is related to cancers found in the lungs, bladder, prostate, liver, kidney and, of course, skin. Many doctors have actually found that the use of these creams can have an adverse effect on skin color. If that is not enough, one of the most active ingredients in these products is Mercury. Mercury, as most know, has been shown to attack the brain and severely damage the nervous system (Grace). The use of these products can literally cause brain damage. Patients have been found to experience the completely adverse effect when using these lightening creams. They suffered from “a blue-black darkening of the skin” (Saint Louis). Other dangerous medical issues that have been linked to the use of skin-lightening creams include “hypertension, elevated blood sugar and suppression of the body’s natural steroids” (Saint Louis). These medical issues are extremely dangerous and can cause long-term or permanent effects on the body. Additionally, some of the less severe consequences associated with skin bleaching include visibility of capillaries, horrific acne, and skin so thin that it bruises to the touch. Allison Ross experienced all of these effects after extensive use of the lightening creams. She explains after receiving treatment for her lightening addiction “I went through a terrible depressed phase...I wanted to go back to the use of the creams a couple months back” (Saint Louis).

Skin bleaching not only has severe medical concerns, but also encompasses deep psychological issues as well. Dr. Jonith Breadon, a dermatologist in Chicago, describes how she has patients that come “to her requesting powerful lightening creams solely for the purpose of

whitening their skin” (O’Callaghan). She attributes this specially to the pressures they feel from the outside world. Some models even tell her that they will be able to get more jobs if they lighten their skin (O’Callaghan). Breadon “always recommends counseling” when prescribing skin-lightening treatment for any reason because she realizes that it is a very emotional process to become a different skin color (O’Callaghan). Much like Allison Ross, dark-skinned individuals live with societal pressures to be lighter-skinned. According to Dr. Glenn, president of the American Sociological Association, “Sociological studies have shown...a clear connection between skin color and socioeconomic status” (Saint Louis). Ideas like this connect directly to internalized racism because it seems that success in society is correlated with skin color. Advertisements that depict happiness and success with lighter-skin begin to attack dark-skinned people psychologically. Since the media has such a dramatic effect on people and their perceptions of themselves, the relation between lighter skin and happiness begins to take over in the minds of dark-skinned people. A Jamaican woman claimed she wanted “to look beautiful, [and wanted] to attract members of the opposite sex” (Charles). Due to the relation between light skin and happiness, darker-skinned individuals begin to believe that it is their only way for success. In a study about why African women engage in skin-bleaching, it was found that the most common reason was to be “beautiful” (Blay). Women from Tanzania and Ghana alike shared this belief that lighter skin would make them more appealing and further their opportunities. Although they claimed to desire softer, clearer skin, the aspiration to be more beautiful defined their decisions.

In summary, the societal idea of race has directly led to internalized racism and self-hatred among African Americans. It has led to extensive physical, emotional, and sociological damage. The basis of White Supremacy was to justify the oppression of dark-skinned people.

African Americans unconsciously submitted to these ideals. When someone is told anything for a long time, they begin to believe that it is a fact. No matter how hard African Americans strive for equality, the derogatory messages that they constantly hear begin to root in their own minds. Internalized racism also leads to colorism within African American communities. Even today, the basis for colorism is rampant in society. The idea that lighter skin is better both professionally and socially led to skin lightening. Bleaching has resulted from deep historical roots that reflect the desire for beauty. Queen Elizabeth I, although white, wanted lighter skin because she found it more beautiful. It is common knowledge that beauty is one of the most vital societal codes for women, and a yearn for beauty is most important among all races. Although it is very dangerous, people will often take as many risks as it takes in order for them to feel more beautiful and be accepted. Society likes to think that it is judge-free and equal, but the traditional ideals governing beauty always take control whether regarding weight, hair style or skin color. People will take drastic measures simply to be accepted in society.

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