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Dark on Campus: A Phenomenological Study of Being a Dark-Skinned Black College Student

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **DARK ON CAMPUS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BEING A DARK-SKINNED BLACK COLLEGE STUDENT**

Kiara Shanay Lee

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

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As recent research finally starts to recognize colorism, a form of discrimination where light skin is valued over dark skin within an ethnic group, as a legitimate form of discrimination in the Black community, research on colorism in higher education still wanes. A limited amount of scholarship focuses on the manifestation of colorism in education and even less research examines the implications of complexion on Black college students and their intersectional identities. As empirical studies describe how complexion often denotes institutional degradation for dark-skinned Black students in K-12 and beyond -- from teacher perceptions, to the school-

to-prison pipeline, to social dynamics with peers and more, this study privileges the voices of these marginalized students. This qualitative study uses phenomenology to detail the experiences of dark-skinned Black college students at a PWI (predominately white institution) to illustrate their lived experiences, the often intricate relationships between dark skin and intersectional identities like gender and ethnicity, and the unique phenomenon of being dark-skinned on campus. This work aims to complicate, adding rigorous research and thick qualitative description to burgeoning scholarship on colorism in education.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many forms of discrimination, a few that come to the minds of many may include racism, sexism, ageism and ableism. Colorism, a form of discrimination that marginalizes people of color based on complexion, where light skin is widely valued over dark skin, is lesser known. Despite this, colorism and its effects on society are prevalent as ever. Although burgeoning scholarship on colorism has slowly come to pass as of late and the word itself has recently been included in the Oxford Dictionary, there remains a great deal of fairly uncharted territory, particularly in regard to colorism in education. There are numerous ways in which colorism produces inequality in education – from graduation rates, to teacher perceptions, disproportionate discipline, social dynamics and more, dark-skinned students of color constantly receive the short end of the stick (Hunter, 2007; Monroe, 2017). Colorism persists throughout primary, secondary and higher education, making it harder for dark-skinned students of color to succeed, due to preconceived notions of whiteness and privilege, which tend to favor light-skinned students. Overall, academic scholarship on colorism lacks a sufficient amount of research on colorism in education, particularly the preferential treatment and lack thereof in educational settings determined by complexion (Monroe, 2013).

As dark-skinned Black<sup>1</sup> students are particularly discriminated against and the experiences of Black college students with colorism at predominately white institutions (PWIs)

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<sup>1</sup> Black is used instead of African American throughout this study, as this research is not intended to be limited to the experiences of only African Americans. It also includes all identities that encompass the African diaspora. The ‘B’ in “Black” is capitalized, following the ideology of Dumas (2016), as it is “a self-determined name for a racialized social group” with shared kinship, cultural rites and values (“Negro” and “Colored” were formerly used). The “w” in “white” is not capitalized, as the term itself does not represent a group of people with shared kinship, cultural rites and values, unlike “European” or “French” (Dumas, 12-13).

may pose unique challenges to Black students due to racial dynamics (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Dahlvig, 2010; Moore, 2016; Von Robertson and Chaney, 2017), my research interest lies in the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students at PWIs. Accordingly, I use phenomenology as a methodology to investigate the lived experiences of both Black male and female college students who self-identify as dark-skinned and how this intersects with other identities. Beyond the generalizable coding most qualitative methodologies tend to offer, phenomenology describes the specific and nuanced ways in which specific individuals live out a particular phenomenon; as a methodology, it also has a great deal to offer topics related to race and identity. As Alcoff (1999) suggests, some may fear phenomenology because they may view it simply as an explanation rather than an attempt to get closer to lived experience dealing with race and identity. He contends “A possible reason for the hesitancy one might have in going in this direction is a fear that phenomenological description will naturalize or fetishize racial experiences. This can happen when descriptions of felt experience begin to operate as *explanations* of felt experience, as if the experience itself is fully self-presenting” (18). Alcoff defends phenomenology and its ability to uncover the complicatedness of racial identification. He alleges that race has been traditionally reduced to nominalism, or simple categorization while its fluidity is often not embraced. For this very reason, exploring lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students and the implications of their identity intersections with an intersectionality theoretical framework (which will be discussed in detail later in this paper) is an invaluable way to thoroughly explore issues related to race and identity. “Only when we come to be clear about how race is lived, in its multiple manifestations; only when we come to appreciate its often hidden epistemic effects and its power over collective imaginations of public space, can we entertain even the remote possibility of its eventual transformation” (15). This further

highlights the need for adopting a phenomenological methodology for colorism, complexion and intersectional identity intersections.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **A Brief History of Colorism in the Black Community**

Colorism in the Black community has historical roots in colonial slavery. Hunter (2007) cites life on the plantation during chattel slavery as the official start of colorism in the Black community (238). Once Africans were kidnapped from their homeland and brought to and enslaved in America, their value was determined by their skin tones. On the plantation, dark-skinned enslaved Africans were forced to work and toil outside in the fields in all weather conditions, exposed to all the elements, while light-skinned enslaved Africans were able to work inside the homes of the slave owners (Gasman and Abiola, 2015). In addition, with slave owners often having relations with female enslaved Africans, their biracial children tended to have lighter-skin than the other enslaved Africans. Oftentimes, they also got to work inside the house. Although all enslaved Africans faced extreme degradation and objectification, the separation of light-skinned and dark-skinned enslaved Africans demonstrated and perpetuated inequality – not only for the enslaved African community at-large, but also within it, according to complexion. It also ignited a split in the enslaved community that would continue for many centuries after the end of slavery as a split in the African-American community (Hunter, 2007).

Into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the effects of colorism took many forms. Blacks took on colorism as a way to determine access for their community. During the early 1900s, organizations like historically Black sororities and churches used the Brown Paper Bag Test to determine membership (Gasman and Abiola, 2015). The test consisted of an individual putting a brown paper sandwich bag up to their arm. If their arm was darker than the bag, they would be

denied admission into the space or organization in consideration. In 1939, Dr. Kenneth Clark, a Black psychologist, decided to study the way in which Black children viewed and internalized their skin color. In his test, the Doll Test, Dr. Clark used a series of questions surrounding Black and white baby dolls to measure the self-concept of Black children. The children were presented with two dolls – a Black one and a white one. They were asked the following questions: Which doll is good? Which doll is bad? Which doll is pretty? Which doll is ugly? Which doll looks like you? Most of the sample of Black children gave the white doll all the positive attributes while assigning the Black doll with negative attributes. In addition, most said that the Black doll (the same doll they called “bad” and “ugly” during the test) looked most like them. The Doll Test concluded that Black children felt negatively about their skin color (Clark and Clark, 1947). For the first time, the psychological effects of racism and colorism were made plain to see. The act of the Black children placing more value on the white doll underscores colorism as a form of discrimination, as whiteness is what is privileged. The closer to white an individual is, the more value he or she is assigned, per the underlying ideology of colorism. The test has been replicated many times since 1939, and the same results hold. In 2006, filmmaker Kiri Davis conducted her own version of the test, and so did I in a colorism documentary in 2011; both instances revealed Black children equating their own brown skin with negative connotations, unearthing internalized hate (Robinson, 2011; Lee, 2010).

The “light is right” mentality pervades the education system. Among other manifestations of colorism, teachers often, whether knowing or unknowingly, treat students of color differently based on their complexion. Hunter (2017) contends that in order to comprehend colorism in education, one must first understand the ways in which colorism is perpetuated in the classroom. She explains how the halo effect, or a psychological phenomenon where the likability of one trait

of a person is used to assume positive a totally different characteristic that has nothing to do with the first. Considering colorism in the classroom, this could look like a teacher assuming a light-skinned student is a high achiever just because he or she is partial to the student's complexion, it being a symbol of whiteness. Hunter borrows the halo effect from the field of psychology to describe the extent teachers and students buy into the ideology of colorism, asserting their tendency to transpose their desirability of light skin as a physical trait to their acceptance of light skin as an automatic indicator of intelligence and favorability of light-skinned students. She claims this gives light-skinned students a 'halo' and consequently, a more positive school experience, compared to the experiences of dark-skinned students (56). Unfortunately, the ugly history of colorism in the African American community lives on through our educators in K-12, underscoring the importance of investigating the ways in which colorism carries on past K-12 education, connecting to and manifesting in the experiences of dark-skinned Black students in college.

### **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Burgeoning research on colorism not only reveals this form of discrimination and the ways in which it persists generally in society, but it also details how complexion negotiates the educational experiences of Black students. The ways in which colorism can manifest in the educational experiences of dark-skinned Black students are a reflection of the ways colorism tends to regulate life for dark-skinned Black people beyond the school walls. A plethora of empirical studies reveal that complexion-based ideology navigates job selection processes. The same negative assumptions studies show to be held by other Blacks and whites about dark-skinned Black job candidates correlate with the assumptions other studies reveal to be held by White teachers about dark-skinned Black students. Through statistical analyses, researchers have

found that dark-skinned Black defendants are likely to be sentenced to more time in jail or prison than light-skinned Black defendants. Again, there are major parallels between this trend and the trends that can be found in school disciplinary spaces. as dark-skinned Black students are much more likely to be suspended than light-skinned Black students, with dark-skinned Black girls carrying most of this burden; they are significantly more likely to be suspended than dark-skinned boys (Hunter, 2007). Aside from societal institutions like the criminal justice system and the job market, tropes and dynamics relating complexion with identity, self-worth, gender norms and more are pervasive in Black families, Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCUs), the media and more. These themes rear themselves in virtually all colorism literature and empirical research. Some qualitative research, however, can explicitly draw out the nuanced ways these things and more can influence experiences with and perspectives on complexion.

### **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

Colorism research surrounding the experiences of college students is limited, at best, and phenomenological research in this regard is almost non-existent. Heckstall (2013) conducted a survey analysis of Black and white college students, but the research was simply looking for the existence of colorism on a white college campus. Although Gray (2017) used ethnographic interviewing to investigate the experiences of colorism in “Black, Black biracial and Black multiracial” female college students, this research centered upon women only and focused more on the ways in which female students made meanings instead of on their lived experiences or the essences of the phenomena of colorism, as I plan to in my work. Veras (2016) used phenomenological focus groups in a study about colorism at Georgia State University, but the study only focused on men. In order to pay special attention to the unique phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student and to examine the multiple intersections of this identity,

my project will work to get close to the lived experiences with an intersectionality framework, not limited to just gender. Scholars are calling for an intersectional approach to studying gender and complexion; for example, complexion is a meaningful and often politicized influence in the experiences of Black transgender individuals. According to Nadal (2017), complexion is considered a “social premium” (214). Considering all genders -- male, female, other genders and non-genders and the intricacies of their experiences and identities with colorism will help further nuance the intersectional framework of this research.

### **RATIONALE OF STUDY**

In addition to enriching the current research available on colorism and higher education, this study also aims to inform student life and other services colleges provide students, as institutions nationwide have been slowly starting to pay more attention to colorism on campus. Events examining, critiquing and shedding awareness on complexion bias have sprung up on a plethora of college campuses in recent years. In March 2014, the Graduate Student Council at Dartmouth held an event titled “Let’s Talk: Women and Colorism,” which featured panel speakers and included a group-wide discussion (Trustees of Dartmouth College, 2018). In October 2015, the Office of Institutional Diversity at the College of Charleston hosted an interactive discussion about colorism “to explore the issue on a deeper level” (College of Charleston Office of Institutional Diversity, 2015). In this particular event, which was titled “Which Hue are You?,” two students took part in a panel moderated by an African American studies professor. In a detailed survey assessment of the program, the event attendees expressed a desire for the Office of Institutional Diversity to offer programming surrounding the intersections of race, politics and class, issues pertaining to those who identify as LGBTQ, implications of religion and topics surrounding (dis)ability; to add, the majority of participants elected for future

events to take place in the form of an “intimate workshop” instead of “hands-on activities” or “large lectures” (College of Charleston, 2015). “What We Don’t Talk About: Racism, Classism, Colorism,” a panel discussion that took place at Georgia College in November 2016; the event put colorism into context with a production from the Georgia College Theatre and Dance Department of *Stick Fly*, a play bringing to light the deep secrets of two upper-middle class Black families (Front Page, 2018).

Although college campuses have become increasingly aware of colorism and the need for spaces of discussion, education and reflection around this unique form of discrimination, it still is not quite enough. While some events such as the 2014 event at Dartmouth previously mentioned only focus on one gender in reference to colorism, others could benefit from programming including multiple identity intersections, as the attendees of the 2015 College of Charleston event cited in post-event surveys. The intersectionality lens which will be utilized in the analysis of the findings of the present study will elicit rich details about colorism and its intersections with identity, details that may help to inform future programming and the students who may participate in it. Whether students are looking to be educated on colorism or to be included in spaces of reflection and connection with others who may share similar lived experiences with colorism, this contribution to the needs of diverse students and to the overall knowledge of all of the student body (and even faculty and staff) would only benefit colleges. To that end, the intimate programming also called for by students at College of Charleston can become a reality, as the phenomenological methods that will be used in the present study will draw out subtle and sensitive nuances of lived experiences which may prove difficult to appreciate in a larger setting, like a lecture.

The purpose of this study is to detail and explicate the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students at PWIs and the influence of their identity intersections to contribute to a better understanding of their experiences in light of the widespread and often institutional marginalization of dark-skinned Black bodies that occurs in education and virtually every sphere of society as a whole, particularly on the PWI campus. This study also serves to shed light on the nuanced ways in which gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and other identity intersections play a role in the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student. To add, this work aims to both complicate and disrupt the misconception of a monolithic Black experience at the PWI. This study, its results and its conclusions should build on the work already in motion at college campuses across the country. It is important to note that this study may not only be limited to influencing college programming, but it may also have crucial implications for counseling, academic disciplines and more. This study contributes details about the lived experience of being a dark-skinned Black college student that colleges and universities can use to best support the overall well-being of these students. To add, this study will also contribute to a fairly new knowledge base of colorism, particularly the manifestation of colorism at PWIs, adding layers of understanding to this under-studied form of discrimination and its marginalized intersections. As research about Black students and belonging at PWIs has slowly come to pass, this study can also build off of and expand the depth of that research, giving credence to the possible nuances of the dark-skinned Black student experience.

### **OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY**

The use of phenomenology efficiently draws out the lived experience of being a dark-skinned Black college student and the identity intersections that may impact the lived experience. Compared to other forms of qualitative research, the primary focus of phenomenology is the way

a phenomenon is lived, or its literal ebb and flow. Max van Manen asserts that phenomenology can detail experiences often not consciously thought about in “taken-for-granted spheres of our everyday lifeworld” (van Manen, 2014, 215). As experiences surrounding colorism are often under-discussed and treated as taboo (Hunter, 2007), phenomenology has the power to elicit description, meaning and complicatedness related to such a sensitive topic. Theoretically, this calls for two processes -- the epoché and the reduction. The epoché requires the researcher to bracket or recognize and set aside previous experiences or assumptions that may hinder a natural and unhindered arrival to the phenomenon in question and the reduction elicits observation to get to the meaning of the phenomenon. Pragmatically, in the current study, intentional journaling and reflection alongside sampling constitutes the epoché and the phenomenological interviews and focus group works toward the reduction.

Purposive sampling was used to find six Black undergraduate students who self-identify as dark-skinned, are open to talking about colorism and the implications of complexion and are currently enrolled at a PWI. Each participant was interviewed once individually and each took part in one focus group with the rest of the participants. The individual interviews provided the safe space needed for participants to open up about colorism while the focus group encouraged relational conversation among participants and help to highlight the identity intersections the current study seeks to find. The interviews and the focus group were transcribed and coded using open coding.

## **OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading scholar in intersectionality, uses Black women and the perceptions of their experiences with discrimination to expose simplistic views toward identity and their potential threat to the lives of Black women. In Crenshaw (1989), she says “With Black

women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” (140). She details how this way of thinking marginalizes Black women and how it will ultimately lead to their erasure (Crenshaw, 140). I plan to apply this intersectionality framework toward the current study to capture the essence of the unique experience of being a dark-skinned Black college student, as intersections like gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and others can thicken the description and understanding of being dark-skinned.

Carastathis (2016), who asserts intersectionality to be grounded in “Black and women-of-color feminisms,” alleges that these roots must be fully understood and acknowledged to successfully utilize intersectionality as a research paradigm (53). Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells and other Black women ushered the beginnings of intersectionality, as they problematized both discrimination based on race and discrimination based on gender “not only as separate categories impacting identity and oppression, but also as systems of oppression that work together [and] mutually reinforce each other” (Carastathis, 2016, p. 16; Grines, 2014, p. 14, 24-25; Tong and Botts 2014, p. 216-17). Just like the work of the foremothers of intersectionality, the current study will work to draw out the identity intersections of the participants and the ways in which they work jointly to foment the phenomena of being dark-skinned. To add, intersectionality carries “analytical benefits” as a theoretical framework -- they include “simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity,” proving intersectionality and its consideration of multiple identity intersections to not be simply additive, or a categorical listing (Carastathis, 2016, p. 53). As intersectionality focuses on multiple facets of identity, it also complements the use of phenomenology as methodology, as phenomenology focuses on the lived experience and the complicatedness or various layers of that experience.

## POSITIONALITY

I have great interest in the study of colorism and the nuances of complexion in the Black community. I also have been conducting research, engaging in the arts and in the community surrounding the topic of colorism. A play, an amateur documentary, a children's book, numerous editorials, community outreach programs and more all make up my body of work, all with the aim of increasing awareness about this form of discrimination. This work has provided me the privilege of speaking with Black people of all complexions and walks of life about their experiences with colorism and complexion, some even in my own family. My personal experience with direct discrimination based on complexion is limited at best. Living my life as a brown-skinned Black woman, I fall in-between the margins into a type of no-man's land, in a sense. In the realm of colorism, I am not as affected by the negative perception of a darker body, but still not fair-skinned enough to be included in the privilege of light skin.

Although I have not faced any known institutional privilege or degradation due to the shade of my skin, my appreciation for all hues and awareness of colorism came at an early age. I come from a family of varied complexions; my father has skin as dark as midnight, the complexion of my mother could be best described as church pew brown, my oldest sister sports a peanut brittle tan and my middle sister and I are a little darker than the church pew. I grew up with a strong sense of Black pride and a love for all shades. The day this love was questioned is etched into my eternal memory as the day I was first introduced to colorism. One day in middle school, as a dark-skinned Black boy caught my eye, my female classmates told me that I should aspire to marry a man with light skin and "good hair" to ensure the light skin privilege of my future progeny. In that moment, I discovered that not all Black is perceived as beautiful. I credit this moment of innocence and naivety as the catalyst of my research interest.

In the current study, I elicit the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students, coming as close to the pure phenomenon as possible. Given my experiences with colorism as a researcher and in my personal life, I attempted to be as transparent as possible while collecting and analyzing data, working actively to address my biases and set them aside to uncover unhindered data. Through my past experiences, I feel that I had the sensitivity necessary to tease out the subtleties and intersections of this unique phenomenon and the familiarity to provide spaces of comfort while sampling.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

My research question serves to evoke rich phenomenological description. It is listed below. As the purpose of the study is to inform supportive programming for college students and add to scholarship about Black student PWI experiences and their nuances of race and color, all parts of the question serve to detail Black dark-skinned college student experiences for the benefits of students, programming and higher education scholarship.

1. What are the lived experiences and perspectives of Black students who identify as dark-skinned at a predominately white institution (PWI) related to the phenomenon of colorism, if any?
  - a. How does being dark-skinned mediate their experiences?
  - b. How do other intersectional identities mediate these experiences?

## **CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In order to adequately approach this study, a full understanding of colorism in the Black community is paramount, including the way it pervades education experiences, from early years through college and beyond. The literature review that follows provides an in-depth overview of colorism, exploring the ways in which the term “colorism” is defined and contextualized, its historical origins in the Black community, its societal implications and its intersectional nature. Outlining the structural aspects of colorism serves to inform the effects of colorism on the education of Black students.

The research included in the following review of literature was compiled through a series of library database searches. Common search terms used included “colorism in education,” “colorism in college,” “skin tone bias,” and “complexion bias.” At the end of these phrases, I often added “Black” or “African American” in an effort to narrow down the results to information more specific to the Black community, as Black college students are the center of the current study. As I read through research surrounding colorism and skin tone, I was led to classic and contemporary

### **DEFINING COLORISM**

Looking at several sources, most researchers highlight the advantage of light skin and the disadvantage of dark skin when defining colorism. Russell, Wilson and Hall (1992) suggest that colorism “centers on advantages and disadvantages that people who identify as the same race experience based on the lightness or the darkness of their skin tone.” Hunter (2007) uses a more specific definition, naming a few of the societal institutions where this form of discrimination takes place, stating “colorism, or skin color stratification, is a process that privileges light-

skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market (1).” In regard to colorism, Ryabov (2013) suggests that “the favoring of light complexion over dark complexion has traditionally been important to our acceptance of racialized identities of Black folks in the United States. (1)” In other words, Ryabov asserts that the mentality that involves valuing lighter skin over darker skin in people of color has become commonplace in US society. Hunter (2007) adds an important element when defining colorism; things like hair texture and eye color closer to a white phenotype (i.e. European features, like straighter hair, lighter eye color) also come into play with colorism, in addition to complexion. African phenotypic features (i.e. short, coarse, coily hair and brown eyes) have been institutionally devalued; hair with less African ancestry is widely received as “good hair,” while thicker, more coarse hair is most often considered “nappy” or bad (Robinson, 2011). Black hair and its often coarse texture, especially, falls victim to a caste-like system similar to the complexion pecking order produced by colorism. The term colorism itself originates from renowned African American author Alice Walker, who described it as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" in an essay titled “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” In this essay, she details the historical relationship between light-skinned and dark-skinned Black women, illustrating the preference of light-skinned women and the degradation of dark-skinned women with cultural evidence, such as soul ballad lyrics, classic American literature and implications of the dynamics of African chattel slavery. Walker writes from the vantage point of a dark-skinned woman when she says, "What black black women would be interested in, I think, is a consciously heightened awareness on the part of light black women that they are capable, often quite unconsciously, of inflicting pain

upon them” (Walker, 290). Walker fears that if colorism is left a taboo and not grappled with, Blacks “...cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us” (Walker, 290). As early as the 1980s (and presumably earlier), people like Alice Walker called for attention to colorism in the Black community; however, calculated efforts toward the division of African Americans by complexion created years ago during the slavery era created a complex, interwoven social dynamic that would prove to be hard to break.

## **COLORISM AND RACE**

### **White Supremacy, Blackness and Anti-Blackness**

Considering white supremacy, blackness and anti-blackness can help to understand the strong relationship between colorism and race. Fanon (1952), a classic work in anti-colonialist thought, takes a psychoanalytical approach toward racism and Black oppression, critiquing colonialism and the lowly status it has forever imposed upon the colonized, which they have in effect internalized themselves. Fanon details the unchanging abominable position of colonized Blacks in the shadow of white supremacy throughout the book. “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of non-existence. Sin is Negro and virtue is white. All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good” (Fanon, 139). Although Fanon takes a global perspective, focusing on African countries that were colonized by France, the Black / white dichotomy Fanon speaks of is the bedrock of colorism ideology, as it lays the foundation for valuing light skin over dark skin. Antiblackness also informs colorism and its ties to race. The work of Fanon also informs phenomenology, as he also explores the way antiblackness is imposed upon and embodied by Black bodies, to the extent that movement about society and the world at-large is hindered. He reflects “I was

responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships...” (Fanon, 112). In other words, the world’s perception of blackness restricted his body and its agency. The same logic can be applied to colorism and its restrictions on dark skin in the form of inequality.

Dumas (2016) stresses the importance of considering antiblackness in education and policy, as he describes instances where Black students were essentially denied their humanity because of their blackness. Antiblackness can be summed up as the overall attack on Black bodies from all facets of society -- from police brutality, to racially-biased rules and regulations in schools and more (Dumas, 12). Antiblackness is a substructure of afro-pessimism, a theory that says “Black people exist in a structurally antagonistic relationship with humanity. That is, the very technologies and imaginations that allow a social recognition of the humanness of others systematically exclude this possibility for the Black. The Black cannot be human, is not simply an Other but is other than human” (Dumas, 13). Historically, dark-skinned Blacks have been denied their humanity, simply because their dark skin served as the antithesis to whiteness (i.e. the ‘house slave’ and ‘field slave’ dichotomy, the Brown Paper Bag Test, etc.). Currently, antiblackness pervades colorism in education when light-skinned Black students are favored by teachers instead over dark-skinned Black students or when dark-skinned Black students are more likely to be criminalized in punitive school spaces than their light-skinned peers and more (Monroe 2017). Scholarship zeroing in on colorism and colorism in education underscores the ways in which race and colorism are related.

## **A Structural Look at Colorism and Race**

Hunter (2007) offers a generous overview of the foundations of colorism. Although the primary focus of her article is the Black community, she also reveals the ways in which Blacks, Latinos and Asian-Americans experience colorism in the 21st century, noting various discriminatory social dynamics faced by African-Americans, including those listed in the introduction and the notion that lighter skin pays. Light-skinned African-Americans can make thousands more a year than their dark-skinned co-workers holding the same positions, all because of color bias (241). Hunter explains “Systems of racial discrimination operate on at least two levels: race and color” (238). In the first level, the discrimination and degradation of racism occurs in the lives of all African-Americans, regardless of complexion. In the second level in which colorism is apparent, skin tone delineates the magnitude of mistreatment and bias. Hunter asserts “Although all blacks experience discrimination as blacks, the intensity of that discrimination, the frequency, and the outcomes of that discrimination will differ dramatically by skin tone” (238). The work of Hunter (2007) does a sound job of laying out a general foundation of colorism, while other works detail specific aspects of it. Scholarship on colorism in the African-American community considered for the purposes of her study focus on its historical implications, the manifestation of colorism in contemporary society (in terms of social positionality, livelihood, etc.) and its effects on academics and the institution of education (including academics, discipline and overall schooling. She contends that colorism is inherently connected to race and racism, as the root of color bias is the valuing of skin closest to white, as seen by a historical lack of dark-skinned representation in the media and other outlets (239-240).

Keith and Herring (1991) also assert that colorism is more than history. “Virtually all of our findings parallel those that occurred before the civil rights movement. These facts suggest that the effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America” (Keith and Herring 1991, 777). This also provides a clear parallel between colorism and racism and underscores the notion that colorism and its ill effects still exist today. The connection between the past and present Keith and Herring bring to light reveals the strong correlation between the nature of separation of enslaved Africans and the separation imposed on Blacks today based on complexion. Notions of antiblackness denoted dark complexion as inferior in the past and continue to do so in the present day.

Although a great deal of research focuses on the ways whites historically implemented colorism with Black communities, Hannon (2015) explores the notion of white colorism and the ways whites perpetuate colorism currently. In the beginning of the article, he acknowledges the fact that colorism occurs within groups of color; however, he suggests that when examined in this frame only, colorism and its effects are minimized. Hannon argues that whites can also perpetuate colorism and feels that this often missing link serves great importance to the study of colorism. He asserts that whites are the gatekeepers of colorism. In the article, he shares results of a study that asked white interviewers to rate the intellect of Black and Latino interviewees. Participants used the American National Election Study to assess the skin tone and intelligence of the interviewees. The study used multivariate ordinal logistic regression. Once the relationship between the report skin tone and estimated intellect was calculated, it was found that participants that marked interviewees as light-skinned were much more likely to assume they possess a high

rate of intelligence. Hannon argues that “colorism and racism in the United States are intrinsically linked in that they share the same historical roots, and white hegemony is central to both” (14). Living within a white hegemonic society, whiteness is power and it is standard. This same power fuels discrimination based on race and thus trickles down to discrimination based on complexion. This study reveals more than preference; it reveals a systematic degradation and rejection of dark skin. Resonating with the work of Hunter (2007), it is impossible to fully consider colorism without simultaneously considering race.

The navigation of college by biracial students is a clear illustration of the way race and colorism collide. Perkins (2014) highlights the dual identities biracial students often grapple with in their college experiences. “Many biracial students live in duality, understanding both their Black identity coupled with their White identity” (211). Oftentimes, issues may arise when an identity mismatch occurs and a student identifies as one race but is viewed by others to be another. Perkins gives an example this type of mismatch. “For example, a biracial student may choose to only identify with their White identity because that is how they were raised, however, because of their lightly tanned skin and textured hair, they may be treated as a minority and expected to identify with being black” (213). Here, race can help form a student’s self-perceptions while colorism can disrupt the student and his whole way of knowing himself. Particularly considering race, color and biracial students in college, Perkins makes an appeal to professionals, urging them to get rid of a colorblind ideology, which assumes a worldview that does not include race or color in interpretation. She also highlights the importance of representation, so biracial college students see themselves in their college experiences. Thus, the current study would also call for complexion representation, accounting for the array of

complexions for biracial students. In general, reflecting upon scholarship on race and connecting it to colorism ideology helps to further facilitate the purpose of the study: to enlighten higher education support for Black college students at the PWI and to inform scholarship surrounding Black college student experiences and identity intersections at a PWI, particularly dark-skinned students.

### **Institutional Racism, Internalized Racism and Colorism**

Paralleling institutional racism, implicit bias and white supremacy can help to foster an even deeper understanding of colorism. Black Panther leader Stokely Carmichael first used the term “institutional racism” in Carmichael and Hamilton (1967). The book critiques US racism and outlines a Black Power framework to counter racist practices used and normalized by societal institutions. In Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), he explains institutional racism in the context of the turbulent Black racial strife of the 1960s.

"When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children, that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the society. But when in that same city – Birmingham, Alabama – five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of power, food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the blackcommunity, that is a function of institutional racism. When a black family moves into a home in a white neighborhood and is stoned, burned or routed out, they are victims of an overt act of individual racism which most people will condemn. But it is institutional racism that keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents."(Carmichael and Hamilton, 4, 1967)

Although laws and other things have been initiated to combat institutional racism, racist ideology maintains an insidious existence through colorism in institutions like the criminal

justice system, employment and other aspects of society. In this sense, a darker complexion faces the same stigma and disregard as being Black while a lighter complexion is often exempt from such treatment. Statistics show that dark-skinned defendants, job applicants and others have the odds stacked against them because they're dark-skinned. These wider societal implications all originate in schools, from dark-skinned Black K-12 students being more likely to be suspended than light-skinned Black students to teachers perceiving dark-skinned Black K-12 students as having less support at home, thus treating them differently than others (Hunter, 2007; Hunter, 2017).

Institutional racism leaves an ingrained and ever perpetuating legacy in the Black community in the form of internalized racism. While the race problem has been translated into a color or shade problem, the Black community, along with the non-Black community, also takes part in enacting racist norms and limitations in regard to skin complexion. “Dark Girls” and “Light Girls,” two documentaries produced by Filmmaker Bill Duke, explore colorism from the perspectives of light-skinned and dark-skinned women; almost every testimony involves nuanced treatment from other members of the Black community based on complexion. Wilder and Cain (2010) found that in the Black community, perceptions of color are almost always rooted in family values, particularly in the internalized thoughts and experiences of the mother or mother figure. Potapchuck and Liederman (2005) provide an analysis of internalized racism, writing a call to attention.

“The biggest contribution people of color can make to the dismantling of racism and the white privilege it results in is to notice, acknowledge and dismantle internalized racism—that is, to claim and bring forth our full humanity, power and wisdom as co-creators of an anti-racist society and culture. (44)”

As colorism and race are intrinsically linked, and as the devaluation of blackness in colorism mirrors the degradation of blackness within a racist framework, addressing internalized racism is also important while making a case about colorism. Potapchuck and Liederman (2005) outline three major understandings vital for addressing internalized racism: internalized racism is systematic, it is structural and not meant to be masked by unitary experiences, like low “self-esteem” or “self-hatred,” and it has intra-cultural and cross-cultural effects, often resulting in hierarchy and a group being against its own self (44-45). The authors underscore how and why internalized racism is important to consider, providing a clear explanation of internalized racism. Although there is plenty of room to infer and make obvious connections to colorism, an explicit application of this analysis to colorism would facilitate this understanding. Before approaching the phenomenological study itself, it is crucial to acknowledge internalized racism and the reality that both those who are non-Black and those who are Black can perpetuate colorism in the Black community.

All in all, no study of colorism would be complete without considering the way it is framed within the construct of race, as the two inform the understanding and legitimacy of the perpetuation of colorism in education.

### **COLORISM IN SOCIETY**

Aside from education, colorism produces inequality in other facets of society, including but not limited to marriage and relationships, the criminal justice system and income and employment. The broader implications of colorism within these societal arenas invade the field of education and directly influence Black students.

## **Employment**

Harrison and Thomas (2009) look at employment preferences toward Blacks, considering complexion. The overwhelming majority of the participants, when asked to select the best qualified candidates for a fictitious job search, chose the pictures of light-skinned men and women as more educated and more capable of fulfilling the job. Using a 3-way ANOVA looking at the variables of age, gender and complexion, the results indicate that age, gender, and complexion were significant variables, as the dark-skinned candidates pictured, especially the dark-skinned men, were more likely to be assumed incapable. This sheds light on the ways in which the bigger picture of color bias and colorism within the school or university are related. In general, light-skinned candidates were perceived as having more social capital (i.e. education, etc.) than the dark-skinned candidates. Hunter (2017) also uses social capital to illustrate the assumptions colorism causes educators to hold. She uses the concept of racial capital to account for the way parental involvement is nuanced by complexion. She argues that parents of African American and Latino students who possess traits of racial capital (i.e. light skin, light-colored eyes, straight hair and other Eurocentric aesthetic features) have more power in their ability to advocate for their children than parents who lack such traits. Using racial capital, Hunter highlights yet another way the ideology of colorism infringes upon the classroom from sources beyond it. When certain students are assumed to be lacking based on superficial assumptions in their K-12 education and in their college careers, their potential for achievement can be substantially limited. This same form of discrimination persists for students once they become

adults in the workforce, ultimately posing an enormous obstacle to the livelihoods of dark-skinned Blacks beyond the classroom.

### **The Criminal Justice System**

Colorism has a direct role in the school-to-prison pipeline ushered by a combination of racial discrimination and zero-tolerance policies in school that funnel Black students and other students of color into the criminal justice system. Hannon, DeFina and Bruch (2013) note the stark racialized disproportionality in school discipline that sends more Black students than white students to disciplinary spaces, but wish to further analyze this phenomenon in terms of complexion within the Black community. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1997 (NYLS97), a survey of youth aged 12-16 years old, served as the sample (n= 9,000) in multiple bivariate and multivariate correlations. The NYLS97 asked the participants basic demographic information, questions surrounding their experiences with suspension, and even included an interview assessment of complexion, based on the Massey and Martin Skin Color Scale, a 0-10 complexion scale ranging from no pigment (0) to the darkest pigment (10). In a bivariate correlation between complexion and suspension, dark-skinned Black boys were found to be 2.5 times more likely than light-skinned Black boys to be suspended while dark-skinned Black females were found to be 3.4 times more likely than light-skinned Black girls to be suspended. Not only did Hannon et al. (2013) define complexion as a factor in school suspension practice, but the study also unveiled colorism as a potentially gendered form of discrimination, as dark-skinned Black girls are significantly more likely to be suspended than dark-skinned Black boys. Unlike like Black boys, Black girls are often criminalized in school surrounding notions of femininity, thus, they are more likely to be cited by general, catchall infractions, like being

“unladylike,” and defiant, for their dark skin serves as a badge of unyielding criminality, a badge legitimized by ideologies of anti-blackness and whiteness. In effect, Black females receive the brunt of skin tone discrimination in disciplinary school spaces, for in this context, colorism presents them with a double-edged sword, as colorism threatens both their perceived criminality and femininity.

The way skin tone bias pervades punitive school spaces mirrors the way it persists in the criminal justice system at-large. Viglione, Hannon and DeFina (2011) find that colorism exists in the sentencing practices of the North Carolina prison system. As the study notes, complexion is an important demographic in the criminal justice system; in fact, North Carolina along with other states like Mississippi, Montana and South Carolina require correctional officers to assess the complexions of incoming inmates. “Correctional officers typically record this information, along with height, weight, body build, hair color, and eye color, to make sure that inmates are properly identified and easily described in case of escape or other institutional violations” (253). Using regression analysis on data from prison records of women imprisoned from 1995-2009 to assess the relationship between complexion and prison time of Black female offenders, the researchers found that across the board, North Carolina prisons sentence light-skinned female inmates with 12% less prison time than dark-skinned inmates (n= 12,158) (255). At the end of the study, the researchers make a call for more research on colorism in the Black community, asserting that it is “no longer sufficient to understand racial discrimination solely in terms of the relative advantages of whites compared to non-whites. Among Blacks, characteristics associated with whiteness appear to have a significant impact on important life outcomes, such as the amount of time one spends in prison” (255). These studies show that dark skin is a marker of criminality

for children before they even have the chance to commit a crime and for adults, despite their actual innocence or guilt.

### **Family and Relationships**

Wilder and Cain (2010) assert that family plays a significant role in Black perceptions of color and complexion. In the study, focus groups were conducted with 26 Black women aged 18-40 who worked or studied at a large higher education institution in Northern Florida (583).

Wilder and Cain utilized the same complexion scale used in the National Survey of Black Americans (1977). Three major themes emerged from their findings -- the role of mothers in forming early perceptions of complexion, the role of family in solidifying views toward complexion and the role of the family as the source of “oppositional ideology” (585).

Focusing on the role of mothers and mother-like figures, their influence proves to be pervasive in the lives of the women sampled. “Each woman in this study understood herself as a direct reflection of her mother, grandmother, or other female family member. In many ways, these maternal family members serve as the source of identity construction” (586). The study reveals how mothers and mother-like figures often set boundaries in regard to the ways the Black woman can navigate the world, “from cautioning her to stay out of the sun to influencing her attraction to light-skinned men.” Some women shared stories of competition pitted among them and other relatives based on complexion, while other women were warned as children by their mothers and mother-like figures to avoid the sun and use products to lighten their skin. Here, whiteness and antiblackness control and limit Black women and their movement through life. Their mothers and mother figures attempt to lead their steps to the best of their knowledge, negotiating the trials and tribulations of society-wide colorism ideologies.

In the context of relationships, Hunter (2007) takes time to explore the relationship between complexion and marriage. Hunter discusses how dark-skinned women are perceived as less desirable for marriage and how light-skinned women are more likely to “marry-up,” and form a union with a partner who is educated and makes a decent living (247). In general, she adds, light-skinned people are more likely to marry. She also acknowledges that light-skinned people can also face discrimination in relationships. For example, a light-skinned man or woman may feel excluded in certain situations, as light skin may be perceived as a lack of culture or ethnicity.

Relationships in school play out similarly in the Black community surrounding complexion. Gasman and Abiola (2016) discuss how colorism shaped the social dynamics of HBCUs. Traditionally, light-skinned students had access to HBCUs first during the early to mid 20th century, and when the opportunity to attend opened up for more Black students, light-skinned students dominated major HBCU social arenas, including Greek Letter Organizations and homecoming court, to the point where it was an anomaly to see a dark-skinned woman crowned homecoming queen. Gasman and Abiola assert, “Extracurricular outlets often served as the forum in which skin tone discrimination on HBCU campuses was nurtured” (42). The authors suggest that these historical implications influence social dynamics on college campuses today, particularly HBCU campuses. At the end of the article, Gasman and Abiola make a call to researchers and practitioners to further explore Black colorism in college, particularly in HBCUs, given their unique history. “HBCUs are ripe with skin tone issues and examining these concerns may help to provide a better understanding of larger societal discrimination trends” (42). In short, the past and the present are so closely linked in regard to colorism, there is no doubt that

the effects of colorism persist on college campuses and the lived experiences of Black college students.

### **THE PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION**

Black students tend to face nuanced hardships at predominately white institutions. A plethora of research shows that Black students describe their PWI experiences as uninviting or unwelcoming and that across the board, PWIs are known to be unaccommodating to the needs of Black students (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Dahlvig, 2010) which can cause additional negatively nuanced experiences for Black men (Von Robertson and Chaney, 2017) and Black women (Moore, 2016). One scholar describes Black PWI experiences as microcosmic, particularly in regard to the interplay of campus-wide phenomena like race and class within the Black student community (Moore, 2016). The following critique of two qualitative studies surrounding Black PWI experiences further illustrates the atmosphere of the PWI and underscores the need to explore the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black students at a PWI.

Moore (2016) takes an ethnographic approach to examining the experiences of Black women at a PWI in the deep south referred to using the pseudonym “South University.” The study, which uses a critical race feminist theoretical lens, includes twelve interviews with three students (4 interviews each). Emergent coding revealed many themes relating to colorism; one in particular shares much overlap with the philosophical underpinnings of colorism. Moore (2016) finds that the racial history of the PWI itself, no matter how far removed from current times, has a major impact on the ways in which Black women carry themselves. Moore codes this as “Encounters of Resistance” (85). Some of the interviewees recall encountering racial resistance when being called the N word on fraternity row (88), their talking volume being policed in

public spaces on campus (90), and the policing of their hair (where and how their hair should be worn) (91). All of these encounters of resistance were imposed by white students and faculty. In the latter instances, the interviewees discussed adjusting tone and changing hairstyles to mask blackness and forge whiteness, in an attempt to be accepted. One could imply that these manifestations of racism would not be as widespread at an HBCU, given that the majority of HBCU students are Black.

The forces of racism from the wider school environment acting upon the smaller, microcosmic Black student community can have possible implications for exploring the experiences of dark-skinned Black students. That additional form of oppression, that extra layer of hegemony may influence thoughts and connotations associated with complexion. The students changing their hair and lowering their voices on the campus of South University are attempting to minimize their blackness. It would be significant to explore if and how dark-skinned students of all genders, whose blackness is exacerbated by complexion, feel the extra pressure to minimize their blackness. Overall, the study provided insight into life at a PWI for Black women. The way the study highlighted particular experiences and focused on storytelling provided a visual and deep look into their lives. Although the study included 12 interviews, there were only three interviewees. Perhaps the study could have detailed the life of a Black woman at a PWI even further with a bigger sample size.

Cunningham (2015) explores the places Black students at a PWI utilize institutionally designated safe spaces (IDSS) on the campus of a mid-Atlantic PWI, given the pseudonym at Middle State University after a negative campus racial incident (NCRI). At Middle State University, less than 5 percent of the undergraduate student body is Black (58). Cunningham

(2015) conducts the study to find out if the safe spaces put in place aid in comforting and retaining Black students at Middle State University. The study provides an extensive literature review on the experiences of Black college students and the implications of a sense of belonging, as the sense of belonging a Black student has or doesn't have, particularly at a PWI, has a huge influence on their retention and general future as a student (4). Twelve Black undergraduate students (6 men and 6 women) participated in phenomenological interviews that lasted about 80 minutes each. In the data analysis, Cunningham finds that most of the sampled students use words and phrases that detail the IDSS as the "Black Student Hangout" (71). Among many emergent codes, the study reveals a great deal about conversations at the IDSS. A student named Vincent describes the IDSS as "a great common area for [Black students] to just kind of relax and unwind and talk about whatever and not feel like [they're] being judged" (76). Another student, Olivia, expresses what it was like overhearing a white student say "most Black people aren't as intelligent as white people," in reference to the hate crime murder of Trayvon Martin (76). She shares how the IDSS and the Cultural Center at large supported her and helped her to process complicated questions surrounding race and identity.

While the Cultural Center and IDSS seem to create crucial spaces of belonging for Black students in response to the natural lack of safe spaces on PWI campuses, there is no way to ensure that all PWI campuses have such spaces, or such spaces as accommodating to Black students as the IDSS. To add, neither the word 'complexion' nor 'colorism' appear in the entire study. In the context of colorism, this study evokes a few questions: 1. Even at PWIs with spaces as safe as those at Middle State University, do Black students feel comfortable discussing matters involving complexion? 2. At PWIs without safe spaces like those at Middle State

University, how does the lack of safe space inform or not inform complexion bias? This study helps to underscore the need to consider space in the research questions for the current study. It also further legitimates the setting of the PWI for the current study, a space where the outside forces from the campus at-large may play a significant role in complexion bias, or at the very least, the ways in which dark-skinned students live on-campus.

Although the study revealed important themes surrounding feelings of belonging among Black students at a PWI and clear potential connections to the lived experience of dark-skinned Black students, the study was incentivized, as interviewees were provided a \$10 gift card for the dining hall upon participation (61). Such incentives may have the potential to influence study results. There is no way to fully determine if participants express their true feelings or simply participate to receive the incentive. Despite the participation incentive, the study still provides detail on Black students and belonging at a PWI. The open-ended interview questions were able to yield illustrative details of safe spaces at a PWI and the lived experiences of Black students.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY IN BLACK COLLEGE EXPERIENCES**

Chang (2013) addresses a gap in research in regard to diversity, race and higher education in an article addressing higher education research post- *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013), a case which upheld affirmative action admissions policies of the University of Texas after Abigail Fisher, a white student who was denied admission to the university, claimed its policies were unconstitutional.

“In a symposium at the 2012 National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education annual conference, Claremont Graduate University Professor Daryl G. Smith, a pioneer in the study of diversity in postsecondary educational contexts, critiqued the disproportionate framing of diversity-related research around past, present, and future U.S. Supreme Court cases. She rightly argued that such a

narrow orientation, though critical for shaping access to highly selective institutions, has overlooked a wider range of issues that continually affect student bodies, irrespective of Court rulings.” (Chang, 172)

Historically, initiatives have addressed race in higher education with a deficit approach; since colleges and universities systematically excluded Blacks until the post- Civil War era, many policies examined ways to make institutions more racially inclusive (Anderson, 2002). Much research has focused on admissions policies and other factors to attract Black students to colleges and universities. To boot, in recent years, higher education inclusion work seems to focus less on race and more on broader buzzwords like “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” steering away from an impetus on race (Cobham & Parker, 2007). What about research that explores the missing link, the factors that can make or break the college experience for Black students that are unseen by popular research? One of these links, the particular lived experience of being a dark-skinned Black college student, has not been studied using a phenomenological methodology. This gap in research provides a lucrative space to explore the ways in which bias based on complexion and living with dark skin in general informs the experiences of Black college students.

The college experience for Black students is not monolithic; in fact, gender can heavily influence college experiences for Blacks. Particularly at PWIs, Black females and males negotiate their identities in very unique ways. Hesse-Biber et. al (2010) investigate the college experiences of Black women. Although the authors focus on body image in this qualitative study, they also address the lack of research on the identities of college students of color at PWIs and the complex identity work they may be forced to take on at PWIs. Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) explain how Black female college students are constantly living within and in-between different worlds; they are both within and beyond Black and American cultures. For some Black women,

however, this dual identity is not a hardship. The authors assert that Black women with identities more similar to those of white middle class students “may find it easier to fit into the values and goals of upward mobility, making their racial identity differences a less important contingency of their overall identity” (499). Colorism could also contribute to this ease, as light skin and even Eurocentric phenotypic traits (i.e. straight hair texture, light colored eyes, etc.) signify whiteness and, essentially, capital (Hunter, 2007). To add, taking the many factors that may influence identity into consideration, the researchers warn of the danger of viewing Black female college student experiences as one single, uniform reality (Hesse-Biber et. al, 2010, p. 709). Research surrounding college students and colorism would be remiss and incomplete without considering gender and without acknowledging the complexities of Black college identities.

A thorough consideration of gender would be incomplete without addressing the experiences of males. Instead of a being caught in-between two worlds, as Hesse-Biber et. al (2010) assert in their research about Black female college students, Spurgeon and Myers (2010) reveal feelings of isolation in their study of Black male college students. In a study focusing on overall student wellness, Spurgeon and Myers find that Black male college students at HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) are more likely to thrive, while Black male college students at PWIs are more inclined to experience feelings of isolation. These findings resulted after Spurgeon and Myers conducted a comparative study of Black male college students in PWIs and HBCUs, assessing their overall wellness using 5F Wel Physical Self Scale (536). Their results revealed that Black male students at PWIs score lower in creativity and socialization indicators than HBCU students. To add, HBCU students achieved higher scores in the “Coping Self” indicator, which includes leisure, self-worth and stress management skills.

Black college enrollment is on the rise -- in fact, in a 38-year time span (1976-2014), it rose from 9.6 percent to almost 15 percent (US Department of Education, 2016). Although enrollment is increasing, Black degree attainment still wanes. Within a 10-year span (2005-2015), the bachelor's degree attainment gap between Black and white college students has increased 5 percent (US Department of Education, 2016). To this end, research on the lived experiences of Black college students will be invaluable. With a particular focus on colorism, this research has the potential to unearth the ways in which this form of discrimination can influence identity construction, self-concept and overall well-being. In addition, the majority of colorism research focusing on gender is only focused on gender binaries. Scholarship on colorism and the LGBTQ community is extremely limited, but this does not negate the influence of complexion in LGBTQ lived experiences (Monroe, 2016).

Colorism can be viewed as a gendered form of discrimination, with its association with beauty, femininity and overall desirability. European and US beauty standards (a "light is right" attitude) pervade skin bias ideology and pose a particular stress on Black women, African women and others in the diaspora. Skin bleaching has become one result of this. Blay (2011) juxtaposes African colorism with whiteness and white supremacy in regard to skin bleaching or skin lightening and highlights the powerful influence attitudes of skin bias from Europe and the US have on Ghanaian women. She also analyzes the beginning of the spread of global colorism, highlighting the histories of women's beauty products, their marketing (she calls commodity racism), the relationship between these variables and more. She reveals a tangled web between the US, Africa and Europe in regard to skin bleaching. Blay gives a clear definition of white supremacy, calling it a "historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and

oppression of continents, nations, and peoples classified as "non-White" by continents, nations, and peoples who, by virtue of their white (light) skin pigmentation and/or ancestral origin from Europe, classify themselves as 'White. (6)'" In this vein, she notes the insidious and covert nature of white supremacy and its effects. She reveals how the use of dangerous, life-threatening skin bleaching creams underscores the extent to which colorism by way of white supremacy, commodity racism and other societal structures infiltrate the lives of Ghanaian men and women. It can demonstrate how colorism is a worldwide issue that spans across the African diaspora and beyond. Blay conducts extensive analysis on the way companies advertise products to value lightness, showing the depth of colorism.

The media also reveals the ways in which colorism can be a gendered form of discrimination. Steele (2016) takes a close look at the Disney Channel animated series *Proud Family*, a popular cartoon centered around the day-to-day life of an African American family. Steel situates the show's debut in the midst of a paradigm shift (year 2000), a turn to what was believed to be a colorblind or post-racial society, for many. Steele briefly explains the implications this paradigm shift has on television. "Manifestations of color-blind ideology in mass media yield a tendency to use characters that exist apart from the real lived experiences of African Americans (54)." Often in television, this translates to Black television characters and shows themselves dismissing race or minimizing its role in the lived experiences of Black characters, which further perpetuates the fallacy of colorblindness, or white supremacy as a whole. Steele uses reproduction theory (cultivation theory, to be exact) and Black feminist theory in her contextual framework, and both serve the study well. Steele finds that although the show

pushed back on colorblindness and the belief of a post-racial society, it also reinforces and reproduces colorism.

Steele conducted a textual analysis of the characters from *Proud Family*. The textual analysis is deep and thoughtful, considering the hair textures, skin complexions, gestures and even the names of the characters, coming to the conclusion that the dark-skinned female characters are given unfavorable traits and names, that even perpetuate colorism. Light-skinned female characters serve as the main characters, with Eurocentric features. Perhaps such messages in the media can negatively shape and reshape attitudes surrounding self-concept and self-esteem for dark-skinned Black girls, who may grow up into Black women with low self-esteem and identity conflict.

Considering colorism in education and the nature of this research, an intersectionality framework will aid in illuminating the complexity of the lived experiences of colorism of both dark-skinned Black men and women. Looking at gender is just one way to complicate these experiences and further debunk the myth that the lived experiences of Black college students are monolithic. This research has the potential to uncover many ways being dark-skinned yields diverse lived experiences for different individuals. Intersectionality is especially appropriate for colorism research, as this form of discrimination is so closely related to race, and intersectionality originally looked at the nuances of race and gender in violence against Black women. “Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality is a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool” (Carbado et. al, 2013, 303).

## **Conclusion**

Phenomenological research on lived experiences with colorism has the potential to fill a gap in research fundamental to better understanding the well-being of Black college students without generalizing their experiences. The history of colorism in the Black community reveals the ways in which this form of discrimination is still alive and well today, as its insidious origins linger in all aspects of its contemporary manifestation. A structural focus on race shows how colorism is directly linked to race, whiteness and white supremacy, demonstrating how colorism and its implications are not limited to only the experiences of Black college students. The ways in which colorism manifests in K-12 education illustrate the trajectory of skin bias ideology, mapping when, where and how students, teachers and others enact bias and assign connotations specific to light-skinned and dark-skinned Black students. Nuances like gender also serve to further detail experiences with colorism in the Black community. All in all, this comprehensive literature review only serves to further legitimize and validate the significance of phenomenological work centered around colorism and Black college students.

## **CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Intersectionality, the theoretical framework used in this study, facilitates the interplay of multiple oppressions. Intersections of gender, sexuality and other identity groups or forms of oppression based on complexion are at the focus of this study; intersectionality as a theoretical framework works to outline description and meaning from these intersections. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the historical roots of intersectionality, significance of metaphors and its application to the current study. Providing historical uses of an intersectional framework iterate how and why intersectionality can be used. It also underscores the revolutionary component of intersectionality, as it often works to uplift the oppressed. Metaphors of intersectionality provide imagery for further understanding of such a complex theoretical framework. This chapter ends with the theoretical benefits of intersectionality for the current study.

### **THE HISTORICAL BEGINNINGS OF INTERSECTIONALITY**

To best understand intersectionality as a theoretical framework, it is important to address its beginnings. Some scholars cite the convergent oppression both race and gender yielded during chattel slavery and the ways in which select enslaved Black females spoke out about it as early forms of intersectionality and scholarship (Truth, 1851; Carastathis, 2016; Feinstein, 2016). Enslaved Black females grappled with the racial degradation of slavery itself and the sexual

objectification of being an enslaved Black *woman*. Under the institution of slavery, their blackness alone signified a lack of humanity, but their gender, or more specifically their Black femininity, indicated an open invitation for endless rape and sexual abuse at the hands of white slave owners, opposed to the gentle treatment and honor denoted by white femininity. Feinstein (2016) explains the lack of power enslaved Black women had in their forced sexual activity with slave owners.

Sexual relationships between masters and enslaved Black women involved an overt power dynamic. Although some enslaved women may have given consent to a sexual relationship with their master, it remains that slave masters had property rights over the slaves; and because these women did not have access to legal protection of any personal rights, ultimately they did not have the choice to resist unwanted advances (Feinstein, 2019, p. 546). This unique experience was not shared by enslaved Black men or free white women, despite their shared marginalizations of race and gender. This particular nuanced intersection of both race and gender needed to be addressed, and many Black women writers and activists answered the call with fervor and frustration (Carastathis, 2016).

### **Black Feminism during the Slavery Era and the Early 20th Century**

Sojourner Truth, a former enslaved Black female who later became an activist for women's rights and the abolition of slavery, and Elise Johnson McDougald, an outspoken educator from the early 20th century, both outlined the ways race and gender create a unique oppression for the Black woman. Sojourner Truth, a Black woman who spent most of her life in slavery, spoke publicly about her frustrations with her double identity. Specifically, in *Ain't I a Woman*, she provides a vivid description of life as an enslaved Black females and the

accompanying discrimination This extemporaneous speech was delivered in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio (Truth, 1851).

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?

Here, Truth cites what she perceives as her exclusion from the society considered feminine. She recognizes that society views women as people who deserve chivalry and protection, yet, she identifies as a woman who has not received such treatment.

I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

In this excerpt, she details what exclusion from femininity looks like within the institution of slavery. In her experience, her gender did not protect her from beatings or having her children taken away from. Her experience is a far cry from the treatment of white women. In brief, she perceived her femininity to be negated by her blackness. The intersection of Black and woman created a space of extreme objectification, where blackness in itself allowed the degrading horrors of slavery for Black men and women; however, female blackness added an extra layer of degradation. The extra layer Truth examines in her speech completely disregards the gentle feminine standards society upheld for white women.

The end of slavery did not exonerate Black women from the ill effects of their identity intersectionalities. Elise Johnson McDougald, New York's first Black female school principal, wrote to draw attention to the modern-day Black woman of the early 20th century. She describes the diversity in Black women, including their varying lifestyles, perspectives and more in an essay titled *The Task of Negro Womanhood* (Locke, 1925). She let the world know of their

strides and struggles, including detail of the intersection of blackness and womanhood and its particularly unique dynamic.

She is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her. She realizes that the ideals of beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the street-car advertisements, proclaim only an ability to serve, without grace of loveliness. (Locke, 68-69)

Similar to the speech delivered by Sojourner Truth decades earlier, McDougald highlights how the Black woman is not heavily regarded for her feminine and womanly traits. She even refers to chivalry as being out of her reach. Here again, race and feminine gender foment a subversive space, one that marginalizes and excludes.

### **Antecedent Concepts**

The current conceptualization of intersectionality derived from multiple antecedent concepts. Taking a critical look at these concepts is worthwhile for a full understanding of intersectionality and how it is currently operationalized as a way to uncover the complexity of multiple identities, oppressions and more.

**Double jeopardy and triple jeopardy.** As the mid-20th century ushered in, an increased interest in revolutionary ideologies began to grow. Frances Beal, a Black feminist and activist of the Civil Rights Movement, brought public attention to the double oppressions Black women faced during the Black movements of the 1960s and 1970s. A member of S.N.C.C. (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Beal used the term double jeopardy to outline how race and gender oppress Black women. She explicitly outlines how double jeopardy occurs. Wallace (1979) sums up her three main points:

“Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” emphasized three points: that Black Women would not “exchange a white master for a Black master,” that “the ideology of male supremacy was divisive and backward and had no place in the Black Movement” and that “having babies for the revolution” and “walking three

steps behind your man” were concepts counterproductive to the rightful struggle of black people. Frances Beale presented this document at a S.N.C.C. staff meeting (mainly black males) in 1968, and it was then adopted as the official S.N.C.C. position on women.

Beal particularly analyzes the role of capitalism in double jeopardy, outlining how at the time, non-white women comprised the lowest paid demographic group in the nation. According to Beal, racialized economic exploitation was not the only contributor to the lowly social status of the Black woman, but also, the way in which this dynamic promoted mistreatment of Black women by Black men. Beal details the pathology of this mistreatment.

The economic system of capitalism finds it expedient to reduce women to a state of enslavement. They oftentimes serve as a scapegoat for the evils of this system. Much in the same way that the poor white c\*\*\*\*\* of the South who is equally victimized, looks down upon blacks and contributes to the oppression of blacks, -- So by giving to men a false feeling of superiority (at least in their own home or in their relationships with women,) the oppression of women acts as an escape valve for capitalism. Men may be cruelly exploited and subjected to all sorts of dehumanizing tactics on the part of the ruling class, but they brave someone who is below them - at least they're not women.

Beal (1970), who refers to the Black woman as “the slave of the slave,” reveals how women served as scapegoats, receiving punishment and abuse as a result of the racialized abuse and injustice faced by the Black man. Furthermore, Beal critiques the white feminist movement, and brings attention to economic agency, noting how white women of this movement tended to be middle class, while Black women struggled to survive. Furthermore, she examines the way capitalism is both racialized and gendered, as the same time middle class white feminists who allege the same causes and grievances as Black women can also afford to purchase help and assistance, often by way of Black female domestic labor. This poses an almost counterproductive schema in the context of feminism and overcoming oppression in general. Although Beal uses the term “double jeopardy,” her critique of race, gender and capitalism mirrors more the concept of triple jeopardy (King, 1988). Historically (and in some current scholarship), double jeopardy

is a term that was used to describe what Berdahl and Moore (2006) call “a double whammy of discrimination” for Black women of color because they struggle with “both sexual and ethnic prejudice” (p. 2). Triple jeopardy adds a third form of oppression to examine. Although the antecedent terms of double jeopardy, triple jeopardy and the like call attention to the multiple ways a person experiences discrimination and oppression, these concepts don’t fully explicate the nature of the effects of these multiple oppressions. King (1988) explains why the additive approach of merely accounting for multiple categories or forms of oppression falls short.

Unfortunately, most applications of the concepts of double and triple jeopardy have been overly simplistic in assuming that the relationships among the various discriminations are merely additive. These relationships are interpreted as equivalent to the mathematical equation, racism plus sexism plus classism equals triple jeopardy. In this instance, each discrimination has a single, direct, and independent effect on status, wherein the relative contribution of each is readily apparent (47).

Utilizing intersectionality as a theoretical framework in qualitative research has the power to draw out the interrelatedness between the categories or forms of discrimination instead of simply identifying them. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Black legal scholar who coined the term intersectionality, examined the legal system to demonstrate the way societal institutions have trouble acknowledging the complexity of identity, particularly the multiple and complex ways Black women are discriminated against based on gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw found that employers and the courts were unwilling to acknowledge the discrimination cases of Black women at work as both gender and racially-motivated. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates the need for a deep consideration of intersectionality in research more broadly.

The historical implications of intersectionality remain relevant in contemporary studies. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) provide a thorough introduction of intersectionality, highlighting the importance of context and temporality, as recent work tends to take an ahistorical approach to intersectionality. These implications “are relevant not only to not only to intersectionality’s discursive history, but to thinking through how intersectionality currently travels and develops as a field” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, p. 789). To add, although intersectionality and the work leading up to it is deeply rooted in Black feminism and the unique plight of Black women, the concept of intersectionality can be applied to any person or phenomena which deals with multiple oppressions. Collins (2017) revisits an earlier work about violence and intersectionality, written in the 1990s. Recognizing the importance of context, she feels a need to re-address violence and intersectionality with a more contemporary lens (Collins, pg. 1463). Collins acknowledges how intersectionality studies paired with political action can yield a powerful analytical tool, serving to dismantle violence and its intersectional power relations. Considering the Black Lives Matter movement, Collins takes a close look at its mission statement and how it utilizes intersectionality “to expand the categories of Black people who should be respected by the movement” (Collins, pg. 1471). As the mission statement of the Black Lives Matter movement focuses on validating all Black bodies, including those with (dis)ability, those who identify anywhere on the gender spectrum and more; this simultaneously acknowledges the intersections of violence against any and all Black identities (Collins, pg. 1471). In short, revisiting history and intersectionality work of the earlier days remains an important facet of intersectionality scholarship.

## **METAPHORS AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

Since the concept of intersectionality can be perceived as abstract, scholars have come up with various metaphors for better understanding. Both of the following two metaphors illustrate an intersectional lens and also illuminate the importance of intersectionality, foreshadowing its potential as a theoretical framework.

### **The Traffic Intersection**

Crenshaw (1989) uses this metaphor to describe the possible interactions of both race and gender discrimination. At a traffic intersection, cars travel in all four directions. Like traffic, discrimination can come from any direction; specifically, when a collision occurs, the car or cars at fault can come from one of four directions, many of them or possibly, all of them. If someone is at the center of a multiple-car collision, it will prove difficult to figure out how the cars hit the victim (i.e. if multiple cars interacted together and caused the impact, if each car collided with the victim individually, etc.).

In general, this metaphor sets out to problematize intersectionality and critique the way it is perceived. Carastathis (2016) sums up the metaphor, saying “with U.S. litigation culture in the background, the allegorical quality of the metaphor is that the intersectional functions as the site of an accident for which no driver -- no form of discrimination -- wants to take responsibility or claim fault” , p. 90). As previously discussed, Crenshaw (1989) analyzes discrimination cases where the nuanced discrimination Black women face along both gender and racial lines is not acknowledged. The traffic intersection metaphor illustrates this destructive and intentional negligence.

### **The Basement**

Another intersectionality metaphor places oppressed people in a basement, where they are stacked upon one another. Those who are discriminated against in multiple ways are in the

bottom of this stack, while those who face a singular form of discrimination are closer to the ceiling, or at the top of this stack. A hatch on the ceiling is the only escape out of the crowded basement, and only those at the top of this stack can access it. In other words, those facing singular discrimination have more freedom than those inflicted by multiple oppressions. A critique of social hierarchy, this metaphor reveals the invisibility of the intersection, the complicated space of multiple oppressions (Carastathis, 2016).

Both metaphors reveal the potential of intersectionality to unearth the power dynamics that traditionally render people who face multiple oppressions invisible. Such metaphoric language may aid in interpreting the results of the current study, as the interviews and the focus group should yield rich, qualitative data.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRENT STUDY**

### **Advantages of Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework**

Carastathis (2016) outlines four major advantages of the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework -- complexity, irreducibility, inclusivity and simultaneity. Intersectionality embraces complexity and irreducibility, which is consistent with the nature of our culture. Leslie McCall, an intersectionality scholar, explains that “social life is considered too irreducibly complex...to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions” (McCall, 2005, 1773). Complexity and irreducibility both hone in on interaction versus categorical organization of identities and forms of oppression. Of the four advantages, inclusivity has a special socio-political importance. Many scholars believe that intersectionality as a framework has potential to shatter dominations of power by revealing people and spaces who are traditionally ignored and invisible (Carastathis).

Simultaneity, the fourth major advantage of intersectionality as a theoretical framework, complements the methodology of the current study. Intersectionality recognizes the salience of considering how multiple intersections occur at the same time. In the lived experience, the center of phenomenology, no aspect of the lifeworld occurs in a vacuum (Van Manen, 2014). While identity or discrimination categories and labels seek to fragment, evoking essentialism, intersectionality and its focus on simultaneity makes such simplification difficult. The pairing of the intersectional work of the current study with the deep, rich description that phenomenology offers as a methodology is intentional, as approaching this study phenomenologically facilitates the study of the lived experience, and its multiple, simultaneous layers.

### **Intersectionality as Fluid, Evolutionary and Revolutionary**

At present, many scholars and researchers try to “operationalize” intersectionality, although, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw, the goal of the use of intersectionality in scholarship is not to make the concept more concrete, as intersectionality is an evolving and relative concept (Carastathis, 62). Given the goal of this study, intersectionality provides an appropriate framework to reflect on the increasing complex and problematic ways in which colorism and identity intersect. This aligns with the current study, and its goal to use colorism to problematize the ways in which identity intersections of dark-skinned Black students such as socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality and other intersections interact with colorism experiences. Colorism studies tend to focus solely on gender or the mere existence of colorism. A use of intersectionality in the current study not only helps to unearth how gender influences the experiences of dark-skinned Black students, but also how other facets of identity converge with the phenomenon of colorism. Since intersectionality does not stress a linear focus on identity categories or forms of discrimination, its purpose as a conceptual framework is much deeper.

Maria Lugones, another leading intersectionality scholar, asserts that instead of “lifting the veil,” a phrase 20th century Black literary scholar W.E.B. Du Bois used to describe the way America should be exposed to racism to reveal the interdependency of multiple oppressions and identity intersections, intersectionality should aim to “rend the veil” to avoid it coming down once more (Carastathis, 64). “Rending the veil” means making the invisibility of multiple oppressions visible. The use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework in this study means eliminating the blinders in regard to colorism and the experiences of dark-skinned Black students and revealing the muddiness of these experiences with the identity intersections that have emerged during the study.

### **Inter-Categorical Intersectionality**

Artiles (2017) explores disabled students, inequities and its racial implications with an intersectionality framework. The ways in which he examines the complexities of intersectionality pertaining to race and disability can be applied to colorism and the importance of intra-categorical intersectionality given the purpose of this study. He gives advice for future researchers of intersectionality, urging scholars to “Take advantage of the potential of intersectionality. Probe the depths within categories” (342). In the current study, this very probing has taken place, as its intersectional framework has led to the discovery of secondary marginalization. Digging deep into the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black students at LAU, it was discovered that dark-skinned students who identified as poor are more likely to have lacked guidance at home for issues with complexion, and in effect, depend more on campus outreach services for support and making meaning of their experiences. Essentially, not only does colorism itself influence the experiences of these students, but socioeconomic status works to further marginalize their experiences. As the purpose of this study is to complicate monolithic

assumptions surrounding Black student experiences and, more specifically, to detail the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student, looking beyond the general implications of being a dark-skinned Black college student is vital. The exploration of inter-categorical intersectionality in this study unearths details and nuances surrounding colorism and its intersections with socioeconomic statuses, sexuality, gender and more.

### **SUMMARY**

Intersectionality, although an ever-evolving research paradigm, has been utilized to do the difficult work that a growing number of scholars are attempting to do. Enslaved Black females used it to process, describe and understand their plight at the bleak intersection of Black and woman, and from then on, many scholars adapted this paradigm to examine further this intersection and others. Its usefulness and potential has been verified with research over time. The use of intersectionality in this study continues the work that has elucidated the complex ways in which race, gender, colorism and more interact. Phenomenology as methodology best illustrates the richness of intersectional lived experience. By “rending the veil,” this study works to reveal the lesser known and lesser studied phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student at a white PWI and the multitude of identity and oppression intersections that may nuance this phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Qualitative research focuses on and values the complexity of experience, more particularly, “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, pg. 6). In other words, a qualitative paradigm does not aim to reduce. In addition to lived experience, phenomenology, a type of qualitative research, affords the opportunity to examine essence or structure, attempting to study the essence of lived experience in its purest form (Merriam and Tisdell, pg. 26). Reeder (2010) defines phenomenology as “a philosophical movement based upon a self-critical methodology for reflectively (reflexively or introspectively) examining and describing the lived evidence (the phenomena) which provides a crucial link in our philosophical and scientific understanding of the world” (p. 21). Reeder (2010) describes phenomenology as both a self-critical and reflective methodology (20). This methodology embraces a process of constant questioning and evaluating, to get as close to the actual lived experience as possible. In phenomenology, the lived experience itself serves as evidence and the researcher collects and analyzes this evidence; in essence, the researcher and the way his or her pre-understandings and biases are recognized and set aside is a methodological tool for which self-criticality and reflexivity are necessary to ensure reliability (Reeder, 2010).

As this study aims to reveal intersectional complexity, a phenomenological methodology can adequately capture the experience of being a Black dark-skinned college student. The end of

chapter 3 outlined four major theoretical benefits of intersectionality identified in Carastathis (2016). Simultaneity, one of those benefits, directly resonates with phenomenology.

Intersectionality examines the overlaps between multiple identity classifications and/or forms of discrimination, focusing on how they occur at the same time. The use of phenomenology provides an opportunity to analyze a phenomenon and its existence in the lifeworld, in terms of the pre-consciousness and the “consciousness of the world, including objects or experiences within it [...] always set against a horizon that provides context” (Bevan, 2014, p. 136). In other words, a phenomenological methodology provides an opportunity to examine the phenomenon in question in relation to other factors, as phenomena do not occur in isolation or in a vacuum. This simultaneity works together with intersectionality to take a close look at the ways in which identity intersections (i.e. ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, etc.) interact within the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned college student. To boot, the use of phenomenology as a methodology opens up opportunities to study emotional experiences, such as experiences with colorism and skin tone bias (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, pg. 28).

This study elicits and details the phenomenon of being dark-skinned and its intersectional attributes at a PWI. As phenomenology focuses on the lived experience, it aligns with the purpose of the study; phenomenological methods will help to detail the experiences of dark-skinned Black college students, including their identity intersections, for the benefit of practice and scholarship. The methods and the ways in which my bias and pre-understandings were managed have ensured that the study will be able to reveal itself in its most uninhibited and intentional form. This study used interpretive phenomenology, as rich description instead of reductive categories are at interest. The use of interpretive phenomenology details the ways in which people live or experience a phenomenon. In this light, “the individual’s exact words and

expressions are the focus of data collection” (Ivey, 2013, p. 27). Phenomenological studies typically use an open-ended interview protocol often coupled with focus groups, observations or open-ended questionnaires with relatively small sample sizes, as the methods tend to yield rich qualitative data without the need for large sample sizes. This has been demonstrated in phenomenological studies that focus on both education (Papp, Markkanen and von Bondsdorff, 2003; Heindel, 2014) and matters of complexion and colorism in the Black community (Tamkin, 2009; Ragland, 2016). To further elaborate the benefit of phenomenological study, “Lifeworld researchers can go to ‘the things themselves’ using open interviews and turn to the research informant’s lifeworld in order to explore a phenomenon of common interest” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, 2008, p.184). Essentially, the goal of the interviews and the focus group was to understand the subjective experiences of the participants and to see the phenomenon through the eyes of each participant.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

My research question is listed again. It is as follows:

1. What are the experiences and perspectives of Black students who identify as dark-skinned at a predominately white institution (PWI) related to the phenomenon of colorism, if any?
  - a. How does being dark-skinned mediate their experiences?
  - b. How do other intersectional identities mediate these experiences?

### **DESIGN**

The sensitive and complicated nature of the phenomenon of colorism was taken into consideration upon deciding which methods to use for the current study. The way in which data is gathered in a phenomenological study is important as “the more complex and ambiguous a phenomenon seems to be, the more it requires sensitive choices of data gathering methods. A

combination of methods can be worthwhile” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, 2008, p.176). The design of this study included individual interviews with each participant and one focus group with all participants. The interviews provided the privacy needed to comfortably discuss personal experiences with colorism and the focus group provided participants the chance to relate to other participants in a safe environment. The research questions themselves also guide the research design (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, p. 177). The research questions ask for the “what” and “how” of student experiences -- student experiences and how dark skin mediates those experiences, student negotiation of their dark skin and the relationship between their dark skin and their movement on campus. Such topics require open-ended questions and descriptive answers, which both the interviews and the optional focus group provided, using a concept-based interview protocol (see Appendix A) and focus group protocol (see Appendix B) to best answer the research questions. Merleau-Ponty, a renowned phenomenologist, focused on the ways in which people relate with other people and things in the lifeworld. According to him, all beings have “body and language,” so interactions between beings are much more than the beings themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1987, p. 19). The intersubjectivity that results from the interactions in the focus group provided vital detail of the phenomenon in question. This section will explain this two-part design in detail.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

### **Individual Interviews**

Six individual interviews were conducted in a private, vacant study room on site at the Liberal Arts University (LAU) library. Each student read and signed a consent form (see appendix C) before the interview started. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes. The interviews

were recorded using a handheld voice recorder; permission for recording was also requested in the consent form.

The interviews were intended to detail the phenomenon and its intersections, so openness of interviews was paramount, as the goal was to get to the heart of the phenomenon of being dark-skinned and its intersections. Open-ended interview questions are a signature of phenomenological interviewing (Bevan, 137, 2014). An open dialogue approach was used in the interviews to evoke description and to facilitate openness, starting with a general, open-ended question like “considering that you self-identify as dark-skinned and may have experienced colorism, what is it like being a student at Liberal Arts University?” From there, I probed based on the content of the conversation, using the interview protocol (Appendix A) as a guide to keep answers related to the research question. My role as interviewer included eliciting description from each participant and hence, guiding the conversation in a way that attempted to answer my research question. The study included an interview protocol in order to target intersectionality and all facets of the research question. I had no protocol in the pilot, and it was difficult to target my research question. In the interviews and the focus group, I used a concept-based protocol with concepts associated with each research question. Participants were informed that some of the general meanings that emerged from the individual interviews would be revisited during the focus group without revealing identifying information. Each interview was transcribed upon its completion and before the next interview. Interview memos were also completed before and after each interview. No follow-up interviews were necessary, as the interviews were all about 60 minutes long and filled with detail.

### **Focus Group**

After all individual interviews have been completed, participants were invited to participate in one focus group. All 6 participants chose to participate in the focus group. The focus group occurred after all the individual interviews were finished, as the individual interviews helped to build trust between the participants and I, preparing them for the focus group. Meanings that emerged from the individual interviews were presented to the participants in the focus group, as the focus group served as a space for students to expand on, reaffirm or even challenge what was discussed in the individual interviews. The rationale for incorporating a focus group was to engage with a space where the intersectionalities of participants are in action. It also served as a chance to compare and contrast the experiences and identity intersections of others, adding richness to the data. I facilitated the focus group in a private, unoccupied study room in the library of Liberal Arts University, where all 6 participants attended. The focus group was about 60 minutes long. The focus group audio, like the interview, was recorded on the handheld voice recorder.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

Recruitment flyers explaining the study were sent to board members of Black student groups and directors and administrative assistants of university offices that specialize in cultural affairs at Liberal Arts University (see Appendix D). The flyers also included detailed instructions for flyer email disbursement to students. The flyer called for Black undergraduate students of any ethnicity who identify as dark-skinned as participants and was emailed to students through email listserv. To indicate interest, interested students filled out a questionnaire on Survey Monkey that highlighted various identity categories (focusing on gender, socioeconomic status and sexuality). The due date for the questionnaire was two weeks from the date the flyers were emailed out to students. The goal was to secure a group of at least 6 participants. Although 7

students responded to the initial survey, only 6 qualified for the study (one did not identify as dark-skinned on the survey). Below is a chart organizing demographic information about the 6 participants gathered from the recruitment survey and interview data. Names appear in the order in which the students were interviewed.

Name	Year	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Dana	Rising junior	Female	Straight
Penny	Rising senior	Female	Straight
Gary	Rising junior	Male	Gay
Amiya	Rising junior	Female	Straight
Mason	Rising sophomore	Male	Straight
Eva	Rising junior	Female	Straight

### Setting

I chose Liberal Arts University as the study site because it is a PWI and I have access to it. Liberal Arts University also has many offices and departments aimed at diversity and inclusion, which will also facilitate access to potential participants. Colorism has also been addressed through programming at Liberal Arts University and the city in which the University lies.

Liberal Arts University is a small, highly selective private liberal arts university located in a residential area in the southeast region of the United States. For the 2017-2018 academic year, undergraduate tuition costs about \$63,000. According to the student profile of the class of 2021, 3,301 students were admitted to Liberal Arts University. Female students slightly outnumber the male students, as the class of 2021 is 53% female and 47% male. A racial or

ethnic demographic breakdown is not available, but the class of 2021 student profile lists 38% of the students as “all students of color (U.S. and international).” First-generation college students make up 13% of the class.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Instead of a focus on generalizable coding, descriptive phenomenology centers on subjectivity and meanings that emerge from the participants of the study at hand. Data analysis for the current study deeply considered the flights and arrivals (or ebb and flow) of experiences and meanings. In other words, after the first initial readings of each interview transcription and the focus group notes, close attention was paid to how and when meanings emerged in the interviews and the focus group. The specificity of the data analysis and the study at-large will contribute to a large understanding of the phenomenon of colorism and its intersections.

### **Phenomenological Parts**

With the abundance of text this phenomenological study yielded and its intent to detail and not generalize, focus on phenomenological parts was extremely important as “the portions of the text signal commencement of the actual analysis” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, 243). Interview and focus group transcripts were read once for understanding. During the second reading and subsequent readings, the transcripts were grouped into meaning units (i.e. talk about childhood, fraternity life, etc.). These meaning units were identified to draw out flights and arrivals detailing the phenomenon of colorism and its intersections. Hermeneutics or a tacking in and out of parts of the text and the text as a whole, took place in a spiral, iterative-like fashion, as I considered a section of text, tacked meaning back to the whole, considered the whole text again, tacked meaning to smaller, particular parts, and continued to repeat the process (Gadamer, 1977). Each page of the transcripts from the interviews and the focus group were printed on

pages with an additional column to the right of the text, providing room for notes. The notes documented “emerging meanings and thoughts that come while trying to identify, unpack, and understand the meanings” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, 243). These meanings are discussed in the findings and givings chapter.

### **Reflexivity**

Bracketing, where the personal experiences and opinions of the researcher are described (often through memoing and reflection) and managed in order to start the reduction, or the process of unfolding the most uninhibited version of the phenomena in question, took place before and after data collection in addition to before and after data analysis (Van Manen, 2014, p. 215). This occurred in the form of memoing, where my judgements and preconceptions were brought to light and temporarily withheld. Before each individual interview and before the focus group started, I wrote down my thoughts and touched base with anything already in my mind or past experiences that may influence the way I would perceive the participants and what they had to say. The memoing occurred after tapping into how I felt during the interview itself and what I observed (i.e. frustration from the participants holding back).

In addition to memoing before each interview and before the start of the focus group, I also journaled about my pre-understandings or preconceived notions that may have had the potential to infringe upon the voice of the data itself before data analysis. The journaling served as space to explore my biases and any other preconceived notions or thoughts. Through my scholarship and work in the community, I have become an advocate for colorism awareness and, in particular, have developed empathy for dark-skinned Black individuals upon learning of the discrimination they often face based on complexion. I had to bridle this empathy upon analyzing the data because although it adds to my unique sensitivity for work with colorism, my

experiences could have potentially spoken to me instead of the text itself without such management. In this vane, being in the moment during data analysis was key, as I was immersed with and never completely removed from the data. Writing about my pre-understandings and biases, along with writing about why I should carefully bracket and bridle them in my journaling also helped. Although my personal experience was bracketed to a certain extent, it was not completely dismissed. Bridling called for the careful consideration of my pre-understandings to not determine but inform the data, the flights and arrivals and the ways in which I interpreted the data (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, p. 242). In brief, I will maintain a certain fluidity – a mindful awareness of my pre-understandings while carefully managing their influence -- throughout the data analysis.

### **LIMITATIONS**

A few limitations affected the current study. Liberal Arts University is a private university; the population of the university and consequently, the study sample, may not have yielded the diversity in participants a larger, public school population might have offered. This may have infringed upon the richness of identity intersections represented in the data. Also, the time limits of a spring college semester also posed a challenge, since students typically leave campus for summer break. This hastened data collection. Although these limitations may exist, they had only minor influence on the study and the way in which it was conducted.

### **CONCLUSION**

The use of phenomenology in this study aligns well with the sensitive nature of colorism and the intricacies of being a dark skinned Black college student. The attention to detail and subjectivity that phenomenological methods provide fulfill the purpose of the study -- to add insight to the phenomenon of being a dark skinned Black college student and the phenomenon of

colorism at-large. As phenomenological methods heavily depend upon the researcher and his or her ability to not only gather and analyze data, but also consider it with careful bracketing and bridling, the methods of the current study work well, as I was intentional about my pre-understandings while being in the moment as I gathered and analyzed data.

## CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS AND GIVINGS

While non-phenomenological projects tend to include study findings in a separate chapter, phenomenological studies tend not to. Phenomenological study works to intentionally manage subjectivity through bridling (the negotiation of what the researcher observes happening in the moment with experiences of the researcher that determine the ways in which the researcher makes their observations) (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom, 2008). Consequently, this chapter will not only explore interview and focus group findings, but it will also deeply consider the influence of the perspectives of the researcher or in other words, what the researcher “gives,” as both are intrinsically connected and useful for identifying the abiding phenomenon. Specifically, this chapter will detail the lived experience of being a dark-skinned Black college student at a PWI. The lived experiences the students shared in the interviews and the focus group help to illustrate a general phenomenon of not-being. In particular, the findings reveal that experiences of invisibility, in tandem with hypervisibility and denial of authentic self, manage to reinforce this phenomenon. To add, the intersectional framework of the study unearths the relevance of intra-categorical intersectionality in these experiences, as dark-skinned Black college students and their experiences are not monolithic; in fact, data reveal how factors like sexual orientation and socioeconomic status significantly nuance lived experiences.

### A PHENOMENON OF NOT-BEING

#### **Introduction**

The abiding phenomenon revealed itself after an iterative process of visiting, re-visiting, and tacking back and forth between smaller and larger sections of the data. The dark-skinned

Black college students sampled at LAU described a phenomenon of not-being. Often for the participants, according to their interviews, their complexion makes it so they can't be their natural selves and the judgements or stereotypes students, professors and the university at large associate with dark skin are essentially not accepted and thus, others have defined them and their movement about the campus as not-being. Through detailed personal accounts, the participants vividly described many ways they themselves and the university at-large enact their status of not-being. An intentional search for intersectionality in the data collecting process and a critical eye for identity interplay in data analysis have also helped to contribute to detailing the abiding phenomenon. Further, the nuances in participant storytelling also provide deeper insight.

### **Lived Experiences of Not-Being**

While reviewing the interview transcripts, meaning units came forth that inform the phenomenon of not-being that defines the lived experience of dark-skinned Black college students. Participants shared experiences with fellow students and the university at-large that make them feel as if they cannot be their authentic selves. Mason, a straight male sophomore, recalls a time when his identity was challenged because of his complexion. He shares a time when his friends could not believe that he preferred dark-skinned women over light-skinned women. In his sharing, he includes description and dialogue from those around him.

“And when I said that it was like nobody believed me. It's like whatever. They say ‘naw you can say that all you want, you can't fight what's in you.’ And somebody starts talking about how dark-skinned guys...how every dark-skinned man's dream is a light-skinned woman to balance him out.

When reflecting on this experience in the interview, he simply says “It's like...it's like. Yeah it's just crazy,” holding back. The holding back frustrates me in the moment because I am almost certain there is something else there that he is not sharing. His lack of eye contact acts like a shield to hide his truth, as if he is afraid of it. I can almost see his words coming to mind but

being detoured elsewhere. Although my instincts say he does not want to disclose any more at this point, I still push, asking more questions. I want to know what exactly is on his mind. I want to see what is hidden. Only after my pushing for more, asking “can we unpack that hesitation if you don’t mind?” does he finally reveal “I mean, I tell people how I feel and it’s like it’s not me. I don’t get the right to be who I want to be.” Throughout the interview, there is an ebb and flow of openness and holding back. When I ask Mason what it is generally like being a dark-skinned Black college student in the very beginning of the interview, his answer begins with hesitancy. “Whoa okay. Alright let me think about my answer. My first response is to say trying but doable,” Mason adds, only to shortly after open and expand his answer, calling his experience “A lot of tests. Trials and tribulations.” Even in this point in the interview, I watch his facial expressions change throughout his openness and his holding back. In the hesitancy, he looks away a little, but when he is fully open, vividly describing his experiences, he makes constant eye contact.

The lack of eye contact Mason exhibits in the intense moments of holding back reminds me of a particular point earlier in the interview where Mason reflects on the lack of eye contact he receives from his teachers. When I ask him to give an example of the “trials and tribulations” referred to previously, he explains:

Mason: Okay. Well for one thing, here I am always always aware of myself being a dark-skinned Black man. It is something that never escapes my mind, like ever, especially here. And it makes my life harder. I always have to prove myself.

Interviewer: Can you take me back to a particular time where you had to prove yourself? Like, take me through it. So we’re getting on the time machine now. Take me back.

M: Well in class it’s just the eye contact...a lack of it.

Mason eventually describes being in a politics class and feeling ignored because of his identity as a dark-skinned Black college student.

M: Yeah so I raise my hand to speak. As I'm raising my hand, I'm finding the professor basically calls on everyone and anyone but me. As everyone's being called, I know he sees me with my hand up there. He doesn't even look my way, at all.

When I ask Mason to describe how he feels in that moment, he replies "I'm thinking 'I know this man sees this Black hand up.' (laughs) No, but really. It hurts me to my stomach a little bit. I'm here being flat out ignored." I interpret him articulating the need to "prove" himself at LAU as a need to prove his being, to prove that he simply exists in this particular example. Mason talks about not-being seen or noticed and how the lacking eye contact from his professor indicated this. Comparatively, his lack of eye contact while I push back with questions as he holds back during the interview also indicates some kind of resistance. At this point, I am confused; it all leaves me wondering, if Mason is determined to be seen and to be, why does he also insist on simultaneously holding back his being or his truth unless it is forced out of him? Does his being cause more discomfort than his not-being? I start to think it may be easier and more familiar to not-be at LAU for Mason. It seems like being, living as his authentic self would be something new or an adjustment in the particular setting of LAU. Life at LAU for him includes experiences of being ignored and being pre-judged. The irony of a person who wants to be, yet not be. Mason longs for authenticity, but the essence of authenticity in the space of LAU may be foreign to him, it is uncharted territory so unfamiliar, that being defined by others is safer, as there is less risk.

Besides Mason, other participants display a very similar ebb and flow of hesitancy and openness. It feels like while they describe the abiding phenomenon of not-being, they cannot fully "be" in front of me during the interview. Dana goes back to a time when a woman falls in

the library and how her friends expect a particular reaction from her, which Dana attributes to dark-skinned stereotyping.

So I know I'm also a jokester type person but this one day this lady fell in the library. She was a little older and so a few people came to her aid or whatever right. Well I was with a few girls from that friend group. We were studying together in the library. The lady fell and we weren't that far away from it and they were looking at me. "I know you got something to say Dana so go ahead and say it," my one friend said. And my other friend was like "I'm ready to laugh Dana what you got on the little old lady?"

She goes on to address her feelings in regard to the experience, feelings that seem to retract what she originally said.

Yeah it's like I'm automatically supposed to be joking, I'm supposed to be in a laughing and jovial mood. And on the surface or to you this may sound harmless or like I'm exaggerating or it's not what I'm making it to be.

In reference to Black female gender stereotyping and Black feminist critique, the lived experience Dana describes reflects the damaging stereotyping Black women face on a daily basis. United States society uses such images of Black women to facilitate othering. As Patricia Hill-Collins puts it, "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 55). Although the lived experience Dana described does not fit perfectly into one of the established Black female stereotypes identified by Patricia Hill-Collins like Mammy, the commonly overweight docile servant; Jezebel, the promiscuous woman of the night; Welfare Mother, and others, the oppression and stigmatization these stereotypes maintain parallels the denial of agency or minimization Dana tries to express (and often imposes on herself, similar to Mason and other participants) in the interview. In the instance where she describes her friends singling her out, expecting her and only her to laugh or make light of a catastrophic event, she is being othered just as the so-called Mammy, the Welfare Queen and the Jezebel. Traditional

Black female stereotyping occurs at the intersections of being Black and being woman. As she describes herself as the darkest friend in her group of Black friends, I see another layer of othering occurring, as she is the only dark-skinned woman in her particular group of friends. Dana elaborates, “Well it feels like being stuck right. Like you have to be one-dimensional. Like you have to be this one way all the time. It’s like being dark-skinned makes me have to be...have to be a certain way. And for me I’m kinda minimized to be the comic relief.” Here, Dana attributes the way she is treated to notions of colorism, as she describes feeling boxed in due to preconceived notions about being dark-skinned.

When I push back with questions like “what does it feel like?” and “You say it feels like being stuck. Can you tell me more?”, she gets quiet and even laughs. At this point, I become apologetic, acknowledging that I have been asking a lot of questions. After the interview I think back and hope that my becoming apologetic is not reaffirming her not-being, her inability to be herself and fully express her lived experience. Again, in this instance, following a chunk of details given by the participant comes moments of hesitancy, second-guessing and self-doubting. I worry that I am participating in the process of facilitating her not-being, by giving her an easy way out from confronting her truth and her being. These experiences and more highlight a sense of authenticity and agency that the participants feel has been stripped away from them and ironically, often strip away from themselves, all contributing to the general sense of not-being.

In general, Penny talks about how she observes light-skinned Black students navigate LAU with more ease due to their “privilege.” In her retelling of the experience, she describes a time when her resident assistant (RA) demonstrates extreme mistrust toward her, viewing her as criminal all while exhibiting full trust and openness with other students, who all have a lighter complexion than she does.

In the beginning of this year when my RA did the little ‘welcome to our floor’ type meeting thing is a perfect example. So me and maybe 3 other hall mates were there early. My RA was there but she had to go get the sign-in sheet so she had to leave her laptop. So she looks around at us 4 and we’re all women of color. So she hands her laptop off to my friend Leah. But it’s like she’s a lighter-skinned Hispanic and the other people I was with were brown or dark-brown and then there’s me, dark chocolate. I don’t know it’s pretty interesting to me how after my RA scanned around at us 4 that she only trusted Leah with her computer.

When I asked her how she felt in this particular moment, she replies “In that moment, I felt degraded. I felt like I wasn’t good enough. But Leah was.” She goes on to explain that her RA did not know Leah previously, and that she perceives her trust to be solely based on complexion. The halo effect Hunter (2017) details reaffirms the reality of this experience. Hunter (2017) asserts that teachers associate students with a lighter complexion with other traits like intelligence and ability. In effect, students may metaphorically wear a halo, a possible symbol of perfection, innocence and the like. Although the RA Penny discusses is not a teacher, and Penny is not her student, but rather her resident, the same ideology could contribute to the un-being of Penny. She tells me “Yeah, Leah could have been a thief but she wouldn’t have known because she didn’t even give it a chance. She just had that light-skin thing going, that privilege.” Penny attributes this negative experience to colorism as if a halo was symbolically bestowed onto Leah by the RA herself, indicating trustworthiness as an award for light skin. Considering the way Penny perceived the situation, she did not receive the halo because to her RA, she lacked the light skin that would indicate trust and safety.

Amiya, who shares that she is a member of a traditionally white sorority on campus, talks about her experience during rush. Rush, as she defines it, is when mainstream sororities look to recruit new members. She notes that Divine 9 (or traditionally Black) sororities do not practice the same recruitment style. At first she openly reflects without inhibition.

See during rush, I remember feeling that not a lot of women were picking me to speak with. So I assumed it was a Black white thing, somebody being racist or something. But I called it wrong and I saw uhh...maybe two or so lighter brown dark-skinned Black girls getting all the attention from the sorority sisters. Right then I feel in my gut that they're going to fit in better. You know, a dark-skinned girl in a white sorority rush.

Although Amiya reflects on feeling left out because of her dark complexion, after she shares this with me, she looks away, as if she is distracted. Here, I take this as yet another instance of a student not being able to fully and authentically be in front of me by means of self-suppression. At the same time, her responses become shorter and quieter. This change prompts me to dig deeper into my questioning, and to continue my pursuit to get at the phenomenon itself. "So when you talk about it, try to talk in the literal moment. Like, take me back there," I insist. After a few seconds of silence, she responds, providing a little more detail about her experience at rush.

Yeah, other Black women, they were kind of getting along with everyone. So yeah I'm sitting there with this afro puff in my hair, dark chocolate and these lighter-skinned women were prancing around with everyone else. So I'm feeling kind of bummed. But I'm also thinking in the back of my mind, "maybe I should have gone for a Black sorority...hey it's still not too late." It's like "maybe I should have stuck with my own the whole time." Yeah, I was kind of regretting the whole situation in the moment.

As she reveals her second-guessing, it makes me wonder why she picked a white sorority in the first place, given her consideration of a Black sorority in that tense moment, as if it could possibly give her some sense of safety. To my chagrin, when I ask her what made her choose to go for a white sorority, she provides a mere surface level answer.

Well see, there was one particular sorority I was going for, but you know they have to pick you. I heard great things about them and a few of my friends in my dorm are in it. I'm friends with Black people, white people, international kids and whoever else really. So I didn't feel like I had to absolutely be in a Black sorority.

As I listen to her response, I feel that something is still under the surface. If she was fully invested in the white sorority, why would she be so quick to consider a Black sorority? Tacking back to both the experience of being dark-skinned Mason shares with me and the experience he and I share in the interview, the abiding phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student at a PWI seems to have a lot to do with authenticity. Authenticity or being the true self may be so unfamiliar for these students, that being defined by complexion has in some ways become standard and comfortable. In the case of Amiya, the positive remarks she says her friends made about the white sorority may have steered her decision to join the white sorority but her dark skin made her invisible during rush, as if she was not even participating. In the moment of the interview, it seems like it is easier for Amiya to be deemed by others as invisible because it is status quo for dark-skinned Black students at LAU. In other words, it is customary. In this light, not-being is more acceptable to these students than being their authentic selves. This also contributes to the lived self-suppression the participants tend to practice.

Penny describes microaggressions she perceives and receives from her white roommate.

P: Moving in I just felt like I looked like an alien to her, It was bad enough that I'm poor so I wasn't moving in the kind of stuff she had. I had some food, some clothes, no real decoration. Nothing like that. So I felt like I was being judged.

I: Take me to that moment. What made you feel judged?

P: Again, the difference between how I was being treated and how other lighter, more closer-to-white Black girls were being treated by her. I felt like my roomie looked at me like I was from another planet. I don't know if it's just that she never saw someone as dark as me or what.

Although Penny does not describe a concrete, explicit physical action of her roommate, the feeling of looking “like an alien” to her is just as viscerally experienced. As I revisit this particular part of our interview, reading and re-reading what Penny has said, I think back to the structure of the PWI itself. In addition to the PWI often being viewed as unequipped for the needs of Black students, the uninviting environment the PWI can create at-large can also be

replicated in the microcosm of the Black student body (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Dahlvig, 2010; Moore, 2016). In this light, the phenomenon as experienced from within the Black community may be a direct effect of the marginalization of Black students by white students and LAU in general. Penny provides some insight into the intra-group interactions between light-skinned and dark-skinned Black women at LAU.

P: Well you probably don't want to hear this.

I: Wrong. I want to hear everything so just say it.

P: I think the little light-skinned girls here think they're better around here and I think they have it easier. That's just what I think. Yeah that's right you wanted an example. Meeting new Black people is when I see it. So on campus it's like that. I can't sit here and say every light-skinned person at LAU is like that but in my experience (pauses). That's right, an example. At a party a few weeks ago here, one of my friends is friends with this other girl I see in passing all the time but never talked to. So my friend introduces her and girl, she didn't have the time of day if you know what I mean. She's light-skinned and even before I kind of assessed her as that type. Like when I said my name she just gave me a cold "hi." Like LAU is small, the Black student community is small so I would just think everybody...I don't know. Everybody would at least be friendly. And she stays with her light skin crew. I don't know."

When Penny prefaces her experience with "Well, you probably don't want to hear this," I am a little alarmed in the moment. I am wondering what would make her think that I would not be interested in hearing about her experience. As I analyze her interview and the rest of the interviews, I sense an internalized lack of legitimacy by dark-skinned Black students in the presence of or compared to light-skinned students. During the interview, it really bothered me that a student would view their own experience as unworthy of being heard. The essence of the lived experience of being at a PWI perpetuates and legitimizes the not-being dark-skinned Black students face from other Black students. This particular experience also brings to surface questions about my presence as interviewer. Earlier in the interview, I commended her for

sticking with her studies in STEM, and we had a discussion about the need for more Black scholars in STEM and the importance of sticking together.

I: What are you studying here at LAU?

P: I'm a chemistry major.

I: Wow, chemistry? I remember doing so bad in chemistry, I mean an introductory chem class, when I was in undergrad. I actually withdrew from the class. It was pretty rough!

P: Yeah, it is sometimes, but it's not that bad overall though. Once you get the hang of it, it's fine.

I: Speak for yourself! But I mean, it's really a great thing. You know we need more color in STEM.

P: (laughs)

I: Stay the course girl, stay the course. You and the other future Black scientists please stick together. Y'all are the future, okay?

P: (laughs) Okay.

I wondered, could being perceived as very pro-Black make Penny feel that I would not want to hear anything about the lack of unity among light-skinned and dark-skinned Black students at LAU?

The ebb and flow of reluctance in the interviews of all of the women corroborate with scholarship surrounding the experiences of Black women at PWIs being policed for their blackness. Moore (2016) shares how Black PWI women shared about instances where their hair and voice volume were constantly policed, as Black women most often have hair texture unlike that of white women and in some cases, groups of Black students may talk louder than other groups of students due to cultural norms. It seems as if the not-being of dark-skinned students constitutes a form of policing; from the interviews, the more dark-skinned Black students are ignored, assumed to be criminal and the like, the more likely they are to suppress their true selves. The space of the PWI itself proves to be favorable for such conditioning.

Although the interviews are intriguing, I grow frustrated with the holding back I sense from the interviewees in general. Reflecting on my own experiences, I remember clear forms of

separation between light-skinned and dark-skinned students during my undergraduate experience, particularly while visiting friends at other schools. Fraternities and sororities had clear color lines, complexion played a large role in dating or lack thereof, and even in my own college experience at a PWI, I remember hearing various stories of discrimination and mistreatment both light-skinned and dark-skinned friends and acquaintances attributed to complexion. It takes me back to a particular time when I was a junior in college at a leadership luncheon. A dark-skinned Black first year student and I had a conversation about colorism and she shared her testimony with me. "Colorism is my whole life." I remember consoling her during the conversation, as she began to cry hysterically after sharing that she was just beginning to like who she was. It was like she could not hold back any longer from releasing her pain. After all these years, I never forgot her words. Although she is just one person and our conversation was just one experience, it attests to the self-suppression I have experienced in the interviews and speaks to my frustration and my yearning to hear more.

Throughout my interview with Eva, she talks about her experiences spreading awareness about colorism at LAU. While she paints most of these experiences in a positive light, she too highlights feelings of not-being. Although, when I ask her about her negative experiences, she retreats and when I ask her to reflect back to a negative experience at a party she briefly referenced, she took a long pause, without answering. I try to probe more upon her silence. She then shares about a time when she felt she was separated from her friend group because she was not as light as her other friends.

I: You said you felt left out, remember? Can you tell me a little more about that?

E: Yeah, well I was so excited for college. So excited for school. I met some friends in the orientation and everything. Then the guys we meet just completely exclude me. I just felt like there goes us...my group is gonna be broken up. And I ...well for a minute I didn't have high hopes for my

experience at LAU.

To Eva, being includes socialization and making friends. She feels that she was not included in this facet of being at LAU. Unfortunately, she too does not feel quite comfortable sharing this. This suppression of her experience of being dark-skinned at LAU echoes the other interviews.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

### Dark Skin and Gender Lines

In addition to the individual interviews, the focus group not only helps to describe the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student, but it also illuminates the intersections of dark skin with gender, socioeconomic status and sexuality. I would best describe the focus group as a “gender war,” as I feel the men and the women were all trying to convince the group which gender had the most difficult experience as a dark-skinned student. A particular exchange with Dana, Penny, Mason and Eva underscores the “gender war” between the interviewees.

D: Well, I think it’s mighty tough.

P: Hell yeah it is. I second that one.

I: So what makes it so tough for you?

P: Well you go ahead. (*motions to Dana*)

D: Being a dark-skinned woman here? It’s difficult. I, to me, myself isn’t good enough here. Like I don’t know, to me I have to be somebody that I’m not. I gotta be what they want me to be. What they see a dark-skinned female is supposed to be.

P: Yeah it’s kind like you don’t truly fit in right?

M: Excuse me, can I chime in?

I: Yes go ahead. There’s no, there’s no order or anything.

M: Well I feel the same, but I feel so because I’m a male. Being a man and being a dark-skinned man is probably the worst position one could play here.

E: Hmm, now I don’t know about that one.

Reflecting back to the interviews, when gender is mentioned, the interviewees almost always describe how their gender has a much more difficult experience. For example, Mason and Gary both discuss how being dark-skinned adds an extra burden to the already-burdensome status of being a Black male in America. Here, Mason gives a general description of his experience at LAU, describing how his complexion and his gender both exacerbate his need to prove himself.

“Well for one thing, here I am always aware of myself. Aware of myself being a dark-skinned Black man. It is something that never escapes my mind, like ever, especially here. And it makes my life harder. People stay scared of the Black man you know. And then ‘oh, you’re so dark, you’re like really really Black.’ Extra Black. I always have to prove myself.”

Another push and pull in the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student at LAU is the lack of room for empathy among dark-skinned Black men and women. Not once has any of the six interviewees expressed compassion or interest in the plight of another gender. The defensiveness that arises when intersectionality or the experience of another gender is the subject of conversation is apparent upon asking. It pervades the interview space. Particularly in the focus group space, I could feel an intense lack of empathy and support the interviewees had for one another across gender lines. I could not help but wonder how a microcosmic lack of empathy and support within this group influences the lack of support the interviewees describe. Thinking back to how focus group participants engaged with each other, the focus group space was a microcosm of their LAU experiences, as it highlighted the way the not-being status ascribed to the interviewees at LAU at large plays out in interaction. During the focus group, notions of both self-suppression and hyper-awareness pervade both the individual interviews and the focus group.

### **Dark Skin and Sexuality**

Gary, the only interviewee who identifies as gay, shares jarring experiences of degradation and objectification at the intersections of being dark-skinned and being gay. Gary, just like the other interviewees, exhibits an ebb and flow of suppression and disclosure. When describing a time when he feels he was over-sexualized at a party, Gary constantly strays off topic, as if to avoid revisiting his story. Once he finally goes back to the moment and reflects back on the experience, he shares without inhibition about a time where his crush asked him a series of inappropriate questions at a black light party.

G: So there's this guy on campus I had been eyeing from afar you know, for a while. For a long while. But for some time, I wasn't sure if he felt the same way for me. You know how that goes. So I finally ran into him at a party in a situation where we could talk up close and personal. We had good conversation.

I: Okay, so put me in the situation. You know, go back to that actual moment.

G: I'm talking to him and I'm all happy. I'm happy because I'm finally getting to talk to somebody I'm so attracted to. So then I'm thinkin' "Okay, is he gay?" And I'm leaning more towards yes because of how long the conversation went on for. So then the conversation changes real quick...he starts asking me some sex...some sexual questions. I'm like 'okay, this is feeling like too much.'

I: And still in the moment, can you explain to me why you felt like it's "too much?"

G: Well just because I want to talk to somebody and I admire them doesn't mean I want to jump straight to sex!

I: Okay, I see.

After sharing about the actual black light party encounter, Gary shares how it felt to receive romantic attention at the party that was strictly hidden and over-sexualized.

G: And what made it worse was this is what I expected. And what made it even worse was that this conversation happened basically in the dark.

I: In the dark? What do you mean by that? Do you mean like literally in the dark?

G: Yes and no. So it was a black light party. But I said that because he didn't even acknowledge my presence on the couch until the crowd behind the couch scattered.

I: You're there and this dude you know just talks to you when it can't be seen. So what is this like? Details details details. I'm sorry...

G: I didn't like being somebody's little secret fetish. You talk to me now since nobody is around about my penis and what I do this and that. I felt used. It's a used feeling without somebody even touching you.

While the others described being ignored by potential romantic interests, Gary describes the complete opposite. The other interviewees shared about their own hyper-awareness of their complexion and treatment while Gary describes a specific kind of hyper-awareness via hyper-sexualization put upon him. The man who was pursuing him views a dark-skinned gay man (and more specifically, his body) as being associated with a pass for objectification and sexualization. Consequently, a deep, fetishized interest persists. When I asked Gary if he thought the same thing would happen to a light-skinned gay Black man at the party, he responded "No, there is a difference. A light-skinned gay man, I'm pretty sure he would be idolized...more likely to be embraced." Reflecting back to Fanon (1968) and his perspectives on blackness, the negative experiences Gary and the rest of the interviewees have with hyper-awareness or hypervisibility and being a dark-skinned Black college student inform an inherently negative relationship that Black people have with their bodies. "In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (110). Following Fanon, if an objectifying consciousness of the Black body is negative, then hyper-awareness of having a dark-skinned Black body can be even more problematic. In another part of the interview, Gary even details how being dark-skinned compounds the negative, and at times, predatory way he is perceived at LAU, sharing his fear of "approaching someone in an aggressively sexual manner because I'm gay and African American and dark-skinned at that." Clearly, complexion plays a major role in the not-being of Gary. Particularly with the party experience, the intersection of dark skin and sexuality evokes an even more

problematic relationship, and the fetishizing Gary faced is yet another example of the erasure dark-skinned Black college students face in their not-being.

### **Dark Skin, Pride and Socioeconomic Status**

In addition to sexuality, socioeconomic status, culture and being dark-skinned also present a notable intersection. Penny and Gary, the only interviewees who identify as low income and report a lack of support at home to cope with their negative experiences with colorism both discuss support services at LAU that they have utilized when dealing with the difficulties of their experience as dark-skinned Black college students. Penny speaks highly about LWC (Liberal Women's Club) while Gary describes support in the LA (Liberal Allies) office. I explore supportive spaces on campus in the "PWI" section of this chapter.

Another facet of this intersection is that of culture and middle to upper-middle class socioeconomic status. The students with pro-black cultural experiences and upbringing, along with the students with backgrounds of higher socioeconomic status, share less negative connotations with being dark-skinned and more positive outlooks on their identity as dark-skinned Black college student. Eva, who disclosed that one or more of her parents have an advanced degree, reflects on her thoughts about being dark-skinned.

I: Okay, so here's the really big question. What's it like being a dark-skinned Black college student?

E: Oh my goodness. It's become complete empowerment. Something that you know, seemed like a challenge at first, but not so much now.

I: Wow. What an answer. Wow. Okay so can you tell me more about that?

E: Yeah, I feel like we're at a time where...um...you have this Revolution of sorts. This Black revolution. You know we have Lupita, we have African models starting make-up lines, we have (inaudible) and some other things like that. So we have some normalization of being dark-skinned. Being a dark-skinned woman.

Although she focused on her general thoughts, after some more questioning, she reflects specifically on her college experience as a student who is dark-skinned. She focuses on an experience with a group of men who failed to make eye contact with her while speaking to her and her friends. She feels that being the darkest woman in the group attributed to the lack of eye contact she received.

E: Especially when I first came here, there were so many times where it happened. One time I remember feeling so alone, so left out. The little guys we met on campus didn't even make eye contact with me. I didn't know them from Adam, and of course my other girlfriends were a little lighter than me. So I just stand there with...by myself. Why did I even go to the party? You know?

I: From what you said, would you say being dark-skinned at a PWI or white school is isolating?

E: Well it can be. Those situations I find myself in but that doesn't define the whole experience for me.

She shares of some similar experiences, and like she does here, she still maintains a generally positive outlook. In fact, she feels so positively and confidently about being a dark-skinned Black college student, she has felt compelled to share about colorism and other topics related to blackness in the classroom at LAU. She discusses what this looks like in the classroom.

E: Well when we talk about race, I like to you know um...include how this affects racism. How being dark-skinned does. And I feel like it's well received.

I: So can you walk me through a particular time where this happened?

E: So once I told them about how not only are Black people more likely to be arrested, convicted and all of that, but I also told them about how the complexion of Black people also plays a role. Like you know how dark-skinned people are even more likely than light-skinned people to be punished. Stuff that's well documented you know?

I: So how do the people in your class react?

E: You know I mean really, it's like a 'wow I didn't know that, tell me more about it' type of thing. I mean even sometimes the professor will even ask for my input I mean talking about colorism and things of that nature.

As she talks about the ways in which she educates others about colorism, I can see the excitement and the pride in her eyes. I witnessed a similar thing while interviewing Amiya as she described how she felt she started to embrace her blackness, thanks to her upbringing. Amiya also identified as middle to upper-middle class, according to her answers in the recruitment survey. Here, she gives some detail about her background, and how it helps her today in her college experience.

A: Well see, I um, been through a lot. With this topic here. With the whole complexion thing. I used to not feel too good about being dark-skinned. Like when I was a small child. Back then I um, I wanted to be white or just light. Because I was surrounded by white kids growing up.

I: Oh so you're talking about early childhood then, not your college experience.

A: Well yeah but it relates. It relates to it. See I used to feel like that but for a short time. My parents are very pro-Black. I mean very. So I remember once my parents started to figure out that I was feeling how I was feeling, they sorta took action. Everything was like "black is beautiful" and "love the skin you're in because you a queen!" and things like that so. I don't know I mean I draw back on that when I need to here. I guess you could put it like that.

I: So what you're saying is your family peeped out that you didn't feel positively about your dark skin and so they put the culture on you...like they worked to boost your self-esteem and educate you and encourage you to be proud of your dark skin? Correct me if I'm wrong here so I understand...

A: Yes, essentially.

Eva also mentions pro-blackness in her upbringing briefly in the interview. "Well there was always, you know, there were always visuals that I saw. I always saw Black people in art, in film, as I was growing up. I wasn't that girl that didn't have a Black doll." I find myself relating to both participants, as I have been raised with similar pro-Black beliefs, embracing my skin color, complexion and culture. Similarly to the two participants, I grew up middle class, in a home full of books, music and culture that embraced blackness. In my home, it was encouraged to be proud to be Black. I come from a family full of different complexions, so I associated

neither positive nor negative connotations with complexion. Only once I started middle school was I exposed to people and ideologies that placed those who were light-skinned on a pedestal, revering it as an honor, while condemning students who were dark-skinned. Due to these experiences and the family discussions that ensued because of them, I became more attuned to perceptions of complexion within the Black community in my college experiences. When I listen to the stories of the participants, I think back to my own experiences in college related to colorism and I can clearly see how an upbringing filled with Black pride can have a significant positive effect on identity in relation to complexion, among other things. Ryabov (2013) affirms the significant role of colorism in the experiences of those who are Black, as light-skinned Blacks are more likely to avoid the struggles many Blacks usually face, stating “Historically, blacks of all phenotypes have faced obstacles to advancement, but those with darker skin have generally experienced more difficulties than their lighter counterparts” (25). It is noteworthy that dark-skinned students living in a society riddled with colorism ideology can still thrive amidst light-skinned privilege, partly due to their upbringing. In general, the intersections of gender, sexuality, culture and socioeconomic status seemed to play a significant role in the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students. The nuances these intersections bring thicken the detailed description sought after in the study. The use of an intersectional-phenomenological lens paints a clearer picture of how lived experiences of multiple oppressions or multiple identities can lessen or exacerbate the not-being dark-skinned Black college students experience at LAU. Future studies are needed to further explicate these powerful, preliminary findings.

## **THE PWI**

The PWI itself plays a significant role in the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students. The spaces of the PWI the interviewees discussed were the classroom, the LAU social scene, and supportive spaces (LWC - Liberal Women's Club and LA- Liberal Allies). The first two spaces were cited by the interviewees as places where they experienced non-being. As I review the interview transcripts and think about the spaces named in relation to the PWI itself and its historical and contemporary contexts, colorism not only serves as a catalyst for the inequities the PWI presents to the lived experiences of Black students, but especially for the inequities faced by dark-skinned Black students in their lived experiences.

### **The Classroom**

Several interviewees discuss feeling invisible in the classroom and attributing this invisibility to being dark-skinned. They report lack of eye contact from professors and fellow students, being ignored while raising their hands and in general, being underestimated. Dana explains, "some professors but not all won't even look at me or acknowledge my hand is up unless no one else's is. I mean I take that as they don't think I know the answer or they don't want to address the question I was going to ask." She goes on to tell me about her experience with group work and how differently she is treated than other students who are lighter in complexion. "And even when I work in groups with them, the white people don't treat them the same way. I feel like because they're lighter." Mason describes a similar experience, where he feels he was ignored while Black students who were lighter and other students received attention. "Everyone is being called...I know he sees me with my hand up there. He doesn't even look my way, at all." Reflecting back to literature on the policing of blackness at the PWI, I think back to Moore (2016) and what the study called "encounters of resistance" Black students can face at

PWIs. Directly linked to the racist history of PWIs, these encounters included forms of racial resistance imposed by white students and faculty at a PWI on Black students. Moore (2016) interviewed three Black students who discussed being called the “N” word, having their hair and their talking volume policed and more. Although the interviewees of the current study have not shared the same exact experiences, they are an extension of the historical racial oppression that has taken place at PWIs since their integration. In short, anti-blackness will always target the other. For the students interviewed, in their lived experiences, the darkest person in the classroom is the other, due to the implications of colorism. The “encounters of resistance” or the poignant experiences of not-being the interviewees face in the PWI classroom work alongside the forces of colorism to maintain the historic subjugation of Black students.

### **The Social Scene**

The interviewees also commented on their experiences in the social scene of LAU, which includes the dorm space, get-togethers/ parties and the dining hall. Penny shares a particular incident that occurred on her dorm floor that I previously mentioned, where her RA showed distrust toward her, while simultaneously putting all of her trust into another student, who is light-skinned. “She’s a lighter Hispanic and the other people I was with were brown or dark brown and then there’s me dark chocolate. I don’t know it’s pretty interesting to me how after my RA scanned around at us 4 that she only trusted Leah with her computer.” Every interviewee cites an example of experiencing not-being at a party or gathering. Gary talks about hyper-sexualization and the rest of the interviewees talk about experiences where they were ignored (by friends or potential love interests), or unable to be themselves and have their own identity. As I look back on what the interviewees shared about their experiences in the LAU social scene, I see more of the historical implications of the PWI reinforcing racial subjugation through

“Encounters of Resistance” (Moore 2016). Dark-skinned Black students at LAU are reminded of the bounds of the PWI, as they are put in their place through these experiences of not-being.

According to the stories of the interviewees, the social scene at LAU along with the classroom act as spaces of reinforcement of the status quo, where anti-blackness deems dark skin as other.

### **Supportive Spaces**

The Liberal Women’s Club (LWC) and Liberal Allies (LA) are spaces both Penny and Gary cite as safe and helpful. In particular, both spaces are places the interviewees feel comfortable disclosing details about their lived experiences as dark-skinned Black college students. Penny provides a general description of LWC in her individual interview.

So it’s um....basically like a support group with a few students and ...all females....and a faculty member leads it. And you know, its Black so it’s a space we can talk about stuff. It’s a good support group type thing.

Following her description, she and I have a conversation about LWC and her experience as a dark-skinned Black college student. She shares how the group helps her address and heal from situations she dealt with when she was younger where she was put down because of her dark skin.

P: Yeah so once I had a relative tell me that I need to have a child with a light-skinned man so that my kids are light.

I: Wow.

P: That made me feel pretty bad, but it’s something I don’t talk about much. But

the group, I can talk about stuff like that there and it’s nice to be able to.

I: Okay let’s go back to the moment you shared that.

P: Yeah. I...I cried. I felt relieved. It felt good to get that one off.

I: You mean it felt good to get that off your chest when you shared it in the group, right?

P: Yeah.

I: Well I’m so glad you had that experience.

P: Yeah me too.

I: Tell me more about that moment if you can.

P: It was refreshing because I was like ‘alright, here’s a space I can actually talk about this.’

I: Yeah. That's really a great thing. So as a Black dark-skinned woman, do you think something like the um, the club you mentioned...do you think that should be at every school? Every PWI or white school?

P: Definitely. I don't see how I would make it here in general without those ladies. That's my support right there. Like I don't talk to them just about complexion stuff.

Gary has a similar experiences belonging to Liberal Allies, LA, a LGBT outreach office on campus. Like Penny, he is able to open up about his childhood experiences related to being dark-skinned. For Gary, he is specifically able to receive support for his experience as being dark-skinned and identifying as gay.

G: Yeah. I feel like being dark and being gay is a whole different story. It just I don't know...it makes things harder. It makes everything harder. And there's this group here you know um, LA, Liberal Allies. So I go there and talk to the people there and it makes me...it helps me to talk out and understand stuff better. Because when I go there, when I talk to them, they listen. I can share stuff I never shared with my family and my friends even from home.

I: Well why couldn't you share with your family and friends at home? If you don't mind me asking. You know you don't have to answer anything you don't feel comfortable answering.

G: You know the way I came up, there wasn't any time for that. My dad wasn't there, I had to be the man so to speak. I had to step up so what I look like saying "yeah I know you don't have the rent momma but guess what I'm gay." I had to pick up some jobs in high school to support me and my mom. And just being big and dark, you just kind of take on that role.

It is important to note that both Penny and Gary identified as coming from low income households in the initial recruitment survey. As an intersectionality lens in an integral part of this study, it would be remiss to ignore the intersection of low socioeconomic status and being a dark-skinned Black college student. These low income dark-skinned students are looking for additional support, particularly support with their experience of being dark-skinned, to make up for the support they missed growing up. This stands out, as the other interviewees did not discuss LAU support groups or forums when describing their experiences.

## **The PWI: Discomfort, Dysmorphia and History**

The PWI creates a space of discomfort and dysmorphia or misidentification for dark-skinned Black college students. The campus questions, ignores and even objectifies their very being. The discomfort ensues when dark-skinned students see students who are not considered dark-skinned being treated differently and when students feel as if they do not matter (or matter too much, in an objectifying light). The PWI incites dysmorphia, as the assigned degradation (not-being) is internalized but not totally accepted by dark-skinned students, as revealed in the interviews when the classroom ignores students, parties facilitate objectification, dorm floors assign labels of criminality and more. In other words, although authenticity and being good enough are denied in instances of not-being, these students are fully aware that there is indeed mismatch, as they speak about the encounters they face and cite them as problematic. The PWI can present a space where dark-skinned Black college students do not get the chance to live their lives fully, as the classroom and the social scene reinforce their not-being. This ultimately makes the PWI a space where students live in suppression, holding back true thoughts and feelings.

Although some of the interviewees reported that there are supportive spaces at LAU, outside forces of racial and complexion subjugation play a role in the overall discomfort dark-skinned Black college students face at LAU. The location of LAU itself also plays a role in this. LAU is situated in the old Confederacy of the South, an area that is obsessed with the history of the Civil War and riddled with the tensions of past and present, where Confederate monuments and the ugly pasts of slavery, segregation and more are alive and well. Institutions of higher education, just like other societal institutions, do not live in a vacuum; outside forces have influence on college campuses. Considering LAU, it is possible that the campus is a microcosm of the larger city beyond its borders. As racism and colorism inform one another and are thus

closely related, it should come to no surprise that a PWI in a location similar to that of LAU would prove to be uncomfortable for dark-skinned Black college students. Referring back to “encounters of resistance” (Moore 2016) that impede on the well-being of Black college students at PWIs, the racial history of the PWI that rests just below the surface lives on in the present and is even more potent in a city that has not yet fully moved forward from the Civil War era and embraces a history that includes a past of virulent racism. The conflation of the present with the ugly past of this area helps to facilitate classrooms that exclude, dorm floors that profile, social settings that sexualize dark skin and more on the campus of LAU, as the history and the very foundation of the PWI itself was not originally intended to accommodate Black students and thus resist them; consequently, the “blackest” of students, dark-skinned Black students, are by design, the most resisted.

## **CONCLUSION**

Experiences of not-being pervade the lives of dark-skinned Black college students. The interviewees shared experiences of being ignored, objectified, overlooked, underestimated and the like. These experiences have surely influenced the ways in which dark-skinned Black college students live at LAU. The constant battle the interviewees faced in the interview space -- the need to suppress their authentic selves and authentic experiences -- says a great deal about the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student at LAU. As this chapter is titled “Findings and Givings,” my bridling was very important; my experiences with colorism education surely brought forth particular nuances while the interviewees themselves also shared their experiences. In the interviewing, I often felt frustrated, as it was clear many times that the interviewees were holding back. I had to manage this frustration and bridle it, using it to my advantage (getting a most detailed interview) while staying true to the natural essence of the

interviews and focus group. The findings and givings have elicited invaluable information that can be used to inform multiple facets of higher education, include ways to make the PWI itself a more comfortable space for dark-skinned Black college students in which their selves and identities are reified.

## **CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION**

The findings revealed that the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students at LAU are riddled with instances of not-being or, more specifically, repeated events or experiences that reinforce a status of not-being student. A unique combination of misidentification made by others in PWI spaces based on stereotypes associated with being dark-skinned and the ways in which dark-skinned Black students negotiate their engagement with this misidentification contribute to not-being. The structure of the PWI itself and the intersectional identities of the students interviewed exacerbate this not-being. It is important to carefully examine and consider the practical applications of the findings to make not only LAU a more accepting place for dark-skinned Black college students, but PWIs in general. It is also important to address ways to make further investigation of the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students more robust.

### **A CLOSER LOOK AT THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NOT-BEING**

Participants expressed experiences of not-being imposed by various places and settings at LAU. Although the participants shared a wide array of experiences that all center upon the phenomenon of not-being, they all represent different components of the phenomenon. Racist ideologies and tropes of blackness can be attributed to the negative experiences the participants have faced. Taking time to discuss both the differences and the relations among these components not only helps to better understand the phenomenon of not-being, but it also helps to

further analyze the phenomenon in order to make tangible connections between theory and practice.

### **Invisibility and Hypervisibility**

Spaces like the classroom, the dormitory, the dining hall and other social settings of LAU evoke both the lived invisibility and lived hypervisibility of dark-skinned Black college students. Invisibility occurs when students are ignored by the spaces of LAU (i.e. lack of eye contact, hand in the air being ignored by professors in the classroom) and hypervisibility happens when dark-skinned Black college students are fetishized (i.e. being stared down during a presentation in the classroom, being objectified and hypersexualized at a party on campus). These components of the phenomenon of not-being are seemingly contradictory; however, they appear widely throughout the experiences of the participants. For dark-skinned Black college students, being hypervisible and being invisible in the eyes of others is nuanced and partially dependent upon their extent of intersectional identity. In the focus group, Mason expressed that he feels that he experiences more encounters with invisibility because he is both dark-skinned and male. In the individual interview with Gary, he shared that being a gay man attracted the hypervisibility and fetishization he faced at the party. Reality for Gary means navigating a world (the campus of LAU) where his humanity may be unapparent to many all while his eligibility for being objectified screams loud and clear. This same reality may be pervasive on other PWI campuses, where other dark-skinned Black college students may be pushed and pulled in many different directions simultaneously by who they truly are, how they are treated upon perception based on complexion and their reactions (and lack thereof) to both. As shared in the interviews, sadness, pain, minimization of the true self while yearning to be seen and heard and more make for a very

complicated and tiresome lived experience. Both invisibility and hypervisibility set the stage for experiences of not being good enough and not being authentic self, which ultimately result in a lived suppression that students put upon themselves, as they respond to and grapple with the not-being imposed on them by the PWI itself, negotiating the confusing reality of being invisible and hypervisible that can define the lived experience of being dark-skinned and being a Black student. This complicated song and dance can prove to be overwhelming and emotionally taxing.

Ahmed (2006) explains how the song and dance of invisibility and hypervisibility, although ironic, is common in predominantly white spaces occupied by people of color. She explains that “white bodies are habitual,” as whiteness is the standard in society (132). Regarding the presence of non-white bodies in white spaces, Ahmed asserts that “such [non-white] bodies are made invisible when we see spaces as being white, at the same time they become hypervisible when they do not pass, which means they ‘stand out’ and ‘stand apart’ like the black sheep in the family” (135). In this particular context, dark-skinned Black college students who share experiences of invisibility and hypervisibility face the push and pull of being in a space not intended for their presence. They go unnoticed, overpowered by the hegemonic forces of whiteness, but they are also hypervisible, as they have broken the habit of the PWI, which includes the standards and norms of whiteness, which the dark-skinned Black body violates.

### **Not Being Good Enough and Not Being Authentic Self**

Specific experiences of not being good enough and not being authentic self result from the imposed lived invisibility and hypervisibility from spaces of LAU. In the instance where Penny experienced mistrust from her RA in her dormitory, who, as perceived by Penny, assumed she would steal her laptop, Penny felt criminalized. Through her interpretation of the gaze of the RA, Penny perceived herself as not good enough to leave the laptop with because of negative

connotations associated with dark complexion, as the RA chose to leave her laptop with the student of lighter complexion. To the end of authenticity, dark-skinned Black college students may be feeling as if they can't be themselves and instead, must live up to false stereotypes rooted in colorism ideology that assumes a light is right mentality. Dana shared how her friends expect her to be the comedian of the group, downplaying her true feelings and emotions. Mason expressed this when sharing about his experience in the dining hall, when his friends at the table did not believe that his dating preference was not light-skinned Black women. Not being good enough, for the dark-skinned Black college students interviewed, feels like being forced to constantly see the good in everyone else but themselves. As messages from the outside threaten to reduce dark-skinned students to objects of inferiority (the RAs, professors, fellow students, etc.), these same students internalize the external, partially believing they are not good enough as measured by the norms of the PWI, while internally yearning for the respect and humanity they feel they deserve deep down inside. Again, a push and pull ensues as the self resists the push of the outside, exerting its own energy in order to combat feelings of inadequacy. The not being authentic self-imposed by the actors on the outside and the continuous internal death for the dark-skinned Black college student who perpetually cannot be their self because of preconceptions based on complexion combined with the internal will and human need to have agency makes for a troubled existence. To make things even more complicated, not being good enough and not being authentic self co-occur (i.e. student being criminalized because they are dark-skinned, because perceptions override the true character or authentic self of the student). Students live as being indoctrinated against their own selves and their agency, fighting this indoctrination by pushing against it. This pushing looks like the thoughts shared in interviews that challenge or critique the indoctrination (think, "I know he [the professor] sees this Black

hand up,” or “Well it feels like being stuck right. Like you have to be one-dimensional. Like you have to be this one way all the time.”). Students push against the forces of not being good enough and not being authentic self while pulling back, settling with the circumstances of the phenomenon of not being, which is an ever unsettled way of being in the world. To add, it is important to note that not being good enough and not being authentic self share an interesting relationship, as only those who are “good enough” by the standards of the PWI are exempt from the pressure of authenticity. In other words, if a student is good enough (in this context, this means not dark-skinned), they do not have to worry about being authentic and its potential consequences. Ultimately, they can be themselves; they can be uninhibitedly authentic. Essentially, complexion determines the freedom (or lack thereof) to be self, free (or not free) from the predeterminations of others.

### **Lived Suppression**

“The irony of a person who wants to be yet not be.” -- As I was analyzing data, I jotted this down to describe what I was observing, and as I reflect in the discussion, it accurately sums up the conundrum of lived suppression. The lived suppression revealed itself in the mannerisms, communication and general perspectives of self the participants presented during the interviews. While asking them questions about their experiences on campus as dark-skinned students, an ebb and flow of hesitancy and openness ensued. At times, participants shared vivid personal accounts while simultaneously shutting down upon being questioned. Their unwillingness to share manifested as short responses, lack of eye contact and an overall sense of holding back. I grew frustrated during the instances of self-suppression, and have even at times felt that I facilitated this self-suppression (i.e. instances where I overlooked the quietness or aversion of a participant by changing the subject or justifying their quietness), although silence also speaks to

phenomenology, and sometimes critiques the world, adding actual detail to what we understand about the world (Irigaray, 1996). Thinking deeply about the observations and all of the components that comprise not-being, it is clear that lived suppression is the end product of the phenomenon of not-being. Invisibility and hypervisibility (produced by spaces of the PWI) make dark-skinned students feel as if they are insufficient (not good enough) by one set of standards and inauthentic by another set of standards, causing students to not be able to be their authentic selves. Consequently, during the interviews, these students attempt to suppress who they are and their experiences, because the PWI itself, in their eyes, suppresses them by not valuing who they are, despite how unnatural self-suppression may be (hence the push and pull of hesitancy and openness); however, it is important to note the possible implications of comfort and rapport. Considering that fact that I had no previous relationship with the students and the great depth of our conversations, my lack of rapport should not be ruled out from the finding of self-suppression.

### **Racism, Colorism and Space**

In addition to the components of non-being, racism, colorism and space also share a unique relationship with one another. As established in the literature, philosophically speaking, colorism is an offshoot of racism as it values whiteness in relation to blackness. In other words, just like racism values those who are white and devalues those the most who are the farthest from white, colorism values those with the lightest complexion while devaluing those with the darkest skin. Gordon (2017) contends that “racism requires denying the humanity of other groups of human beings through the organization of them under the category of a race and then denying the ascription of human being to them. (295)” Through the categorization of non-white students, the historical and contemporary forces of racism and colorism that pervade the spaces of LAU

and PWIs in general produce the visibility and invisibility that work to demean dark-skinned Black college students and strip away their humanity. The racist histories and the modern day implications of these histories serve as an ever-so-fitting backdrop for the professor not making eye contact and ignoring the raised hand when it is a dark hand. This backdrop can help us understand how a dark-skinned gay Black man at a party on campus cannot be a man, but a sex object instead. It can also explain how and why all of the experiences shared in the interviews came into fruition and do so regularly at PWIs. Although several spaces on the campus of LAU were explored in the study, it is important to note that the majority of instances of invisibility occurred in the classroom. This underscores various factors, including but not limited to professors and the ways in which their views on race and complexion manifest as barriers for dark-skinned students in the classroom, the factors that make PWI spaces so accepting of ideologies that devalue dark-skinned students and more. This also sends the underlying message that educative spaces in particular are only supposed to be accessed by lighter-skinned students, as those students are the only ones viewed with humanity and acknowledged as humans, in comparison to dark-skinned students. Referring back to Gordon (2017), in the context of whiteness and white supremacy, the fact that the being of particular groups must be asked about justifies the structure of racism or white supremacy in itself (296). In effect, the classroom space, along with other PWI spaces, mirror the structure of white supremacy, as the existence or being of dark-skinned Black college students in the classroom is a question rather than a statement. Ahmed (2006) reflects on Franz Fanon and his ideas on antiblackness to describe what lies just under the surface in our bodies, stating “Fanon is suggesting that attending to the corporeal schema is not sufficient as it is not made up of the right kind of element. Where phenomenology attends to the tactile, vestibular kinesthetic [...] Fanon asks us to think of the “historic-racial”

scheme, which is, importantly, ‘below it’ (110). The same historic-racial implications that lie just below the surface of bodies also live below the surface of spaces, helping to inform and influence the realities of students in those spaces. Consequently, we must deeply consider PWI spaces, including the forces we do not necessarily see like faces of history, white supremacy and more when examining the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black students. PWI classrooms could benefit from classroom observations and ethnographic research to get a more sensitive and nuanced assessment of classroom climate and culture, pinpointing the exact factors making the classroom unwelcoming to dark-skinned students.

### **RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS FOR THE PWI**

Considering ways to connect theory to practice, a professional development workshop on colorism and implicit bias could be beneficial for faculty and staff at PWIs. Addressing colorism head on with history, facts, research and more could help to open the eyes of faculty and staff to the possibility that they may knowingly or unknowingly treat the presence of dark-skinned Black students as something to ignore or something to fetishize. University-wide colorism programming shedding awareness on colorism and racism, events and representation on campus normalizing the positive presence of dark-skinned Black people and more could help to legitimize the acceptance of dark-skinned Black college students. Since the study revealed the relevance of intersectional identities to the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students, an intersectional approach to supporting dark-skinned students is necessary to promote the true authenticity and the complicatedness of Black dark-skinned identities and experiences. Programming led by university groups and organizations should be sure to attempt partnering with other organizations to address these needs and promote acceptance of these identities. For example, an LGBTQ group could partner with a Black student union organization to offer

programming surrounding dark-skinned LGBTQ experiences. Reflecting back on the importance of intra-categorical intersectionality, a multitude of organizations on the PWI campus should work together to thoroughly explore the richness and complicatedness of the experiences of dark-skinned Black students, as these experiences are multifaceted. Although intersectionality mainly focuses on the interactions of multiple categories, the testimonies of the interviewees themselves prove that intra-categorical nuances are just as apparent and important. In effect, if student groups come together to create programming and address all the factors of dark-skinned Black student experiences, the probing of the “depths within categories” required of intra-categorical intersectionality will occur and all of the needs and identities of these students are more likely to be addressed.

Taking into consideration that dark-skinned Black college students may be inclined to suppress or minimize themselves, campus counseling services should consider the possibility of creating a support group centered on coping with colorism and its effects. To assess the need, PWIs should survey students who identify as Black, and if the need is apparent, they should create a student support group led by a counselor or another informed staff member. In the group, students could share their experiences with colorism and learn about self-esteem building from fellow group members and the informed staff member. This supportive space would benefit dark-skinned students who lead lives of suppression on campus, ultimately encouraging them to embrace their selves -- their experiences, their agency and their being.

The implementation of brave spaces at PWIs could help to encourage honest, courageous conversation surrounding colorism and the experiences of dark-skinned Black college students within a social justice framework. Arao and Clemens (2013) find that college students “conflate safety with comfort” when it comes to addressing challenging issues dealing with social justice

and diversity in safe spaces (135). Safe spaces are supposed to ensure security and, as the name itself indicates, safety. Consequently, students often take the security promised by safe space as an excuse to avoid dealing with the challenges of courageous conversations. In response, scholars and higher education practitioners contend that the difficulty many students wish to avoid is needed for healthy and productive engagement with tough issues as “authentic learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficult and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety” (139). Creating brave spaces for students to address colorism and the experiences of dark-skinned Black college students at PWIs can help students to openly and honestly discuss and critically analyze issues and experiences without inhibition. Brave spaces privilege the thoughts and experiences of all participants and encourage a “challenge by choice” atmosphere, all working toward critical, student-centered spaces. Such spaces could ultimately take participating students outside of their comfort zones in an effort to spread awareness and work intentionally toward solutions to address the phenomenon of not-being dark-skinned Black college students.

When discussing interventions, it is important to take into consideration not only the potential benefit, but also the potential damage such interventions could present and ways to grapple with it. Theoretically, following Gordon (2017), the very questioning of the being or existence of non-white groups reifies the ideology of white supremacy. All the recommended interventions question the marginalized being of dark-skinned Black college students. PWIs must be cautious when implementing these interventions, making sure that dark-skinned Black college students are legitimized instead of being further demeaned by the implementation of interventions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

Although the study was able to unearth details of a majorly overlooked phenomenon and illuminate possible implications of intersectionality, it could have been improved. Hopefully, this research is continued in effort to gather even more details on the phenomenon of being a dark-skinned Black college student. Future study should be sure to recruit more participants in order to investigate more definitive implications of intersectionality. Although the details of the lived experiences and their nuances from a smaller samples trump the generalization of research that can come from large sample sizes, just a few more participants could have added more breadth to many areas of the study, particularly to the theoretical framework of intersectionality. In the study, only one participant identified as gay, while only two identified as coming from a low-income home. A larger sample could provide more insight into how intersectional identities influence the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students, as it may include a more diverse pool of participants. To add, future study should start data collection earlier in the semester. It was quite difficult gathering participants since recruitment took place at the end of the spring semester. Many students were taking final exams or had left early for summer break, job opportunities and more. Since recruitment started so late, data collection was pushed back to the early summer (end of May-middle of June). This also made scheduling interviews with participants a challenge, since so many who agreed to participate were not on campus. In brief, a larger sample size and an earlier start to participant recruitment (and subsequently, data collection), would not only make a more detailed study, but would also produce more specific information for PWIs, which would help them to make the PWI itself an even more supportive environment for dark-skinned Black students.

## CONCLUSION

Colorism in general has rich, deep roots in American society. Since the inception of chattel slavery and the institutional degradation and subjugation of enslaved Africans, blackness has been otherized and demonized. Even today, research shows that dark-skinned Blacks are often assumed to have bad, negative or even criminal characteristics by societal institutions because of a decades-old ideology that insists on the devaluation of blackness and dark skin. The social institution of the PWI is not exempt from devaluing dark skin.

Dark-skinned Black college students are at the front lines in battle for their own selfhood, according to the lived experiences explored in this study. The participants describe “being” being taken away from them in the classroom, other parts of the campus, and the social scene at LAU. From a phenomenological standpoint, little research has taken place specifically exploring the lived experiences of dark-skinned Black college students. Not only does this study do just that, it also takes into consideration the intersectional identities of the participants and the ways in which they influence of being a dark-skinned Black college student. Hopefully, the thick description and rich data that result from this study can take the first steps toward true understanding of what it looks like to live and to be in a dark-skinned Black body at the PWI. An intentional and explicit effort to best support dark-skinned Black college students at the PWI must be made in order to not only best accommodate them but to also help them fight the battle they face on a regular basis. Hopefully, this research can serve as a path to the front lines. Hopefully, professors, administrators, students and other stakeholders at the PWI will consider fighting alongside dark-skinned Black college students who fight to “be” each and every day.



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## APPENDIX A Interview Protocol

### Opening question:

- Considering that you go to a PWI and that you self-identified as a dark-skinned Black student, I'd really like to know what is it like being a student at University of Richmond?
- Have you had any experiences related to the phenomenon of colorism or not and if so, could you tell me a little about it?

### **Themes to target RQ1, RQ1a and RQ1b -- What are the experiences and perspectives of Black students who identify as dark-skinned at a predominately white institution (PWI)? How does being dark-skinned mediate their experiences?**

- *Behaviors and consequences*
  - Perception of dark skin (from self, from others)
  - Dating life
  - Expectations (of self and others)
  
- *Dynamics of Black student life*
  - Places, spaces and social settings on campus (consciousness and awareness informed by complexion in settings, most and least comfort)
  - Access to opportunities on campus and having dark skin
  - Movement through campus and the city at large (how complexion affects it)
  - Authenticity of self
  - Places, spaces and social settings on campus (consciousness and awareness informed by complexion in settings, most and least comfort)
  - Access to opportunities on campus and having dark skin (i.e. likelihood of trying out for certain teams, homecoming court, etc.)
  
- *Intersectionality*
  - Gender (possibility of experiences of having dark skin differing by gender)
  - Sexuality (its role in perception of dark skin)
  - Socioeconomic status (potential to increase or decrease darkness)
  - Ethnicity (its role in perception of dark skin)
  
- *The existential*
  - The feeling of dark skin (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual)
  - The feeling of mistreatment if it happened (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual)
  - Authenticity of self (your actual self versus intended self)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Focus Group Protocol**

#### **Opening question:**

- What is it like living out your full identity (including all intersections and categories) and being a dark-skinned Black college student at Liberal Arts University?

#### **Emerging meanings from individual interviews related to RQ1, RQ1a and RQ1b:**

- Behaviors and consequences
- Dynamics of Black student life
- Intersectionality
- The existential

#### **Key Questions:**

- What does it look like when these intersections and others combine (how, when, why?)  
What does it feel like when these intersections and others combine?
- How do you view yourself in relation to these intersections and having dark skin?
- How do others view you in relation to these intersections and having dark skin?

## APPENDIX C Consent Form

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

#### **Dark on Campus: A Phenomenological Study of Being a Dark-Skinned Black College Student**

**VCU INVESTIGATOR:** Adai Tefera, PhD

#### **ABOUT THIS CONSENT FORM**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. **It is important that you carefully think about whether being in this study is right for you and your situation.**

This consent form is meant to assist you in thinking about whether or not you want to be in this study. **Please ask the investigator or the study staff to explain any information in this consent document that is not clear to you.**

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in this study. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

#### **AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND KEY INFORMATION**

The purpose of this research study is to find out more about the experience of being a dark-skinned Black college student at a predominately white institution (PWI). We think that intersectional identity categories (i.e. gender, sexuality, socioeconomic statuses, etc.) may influence this experience. This study will allow us to learn more about it and the phenomenon of colorism.

In this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in one individual, 60 to 90-minute one-on-one interview about being a dark-skinned Black college student at University of Richmond. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or question(s). You will be asked about the following general topics pertaining to your experience being a dark-skinned Black college student: behaviors and consequences, dynamics of Black student life, intersectionality (the interrelations of various aspects of your identity), and the existentiality (or feeling) of being dark-skinned.
2. Participate in one 60 to 90-minute focus group with all participants, exploring themes that emerged from the interviews (discussion of themes from interviews will not reveal personal or sensitive information). You will be asked about themes that emerged from the following general topics pertaining to your experience being a dark-skinned Black

college student: behaviors and consequences, dynamics of Black student life, intersectionality (the interrelations of various aspects of your identity), and the existentiality (or feeling) of being dark-skinned.

Your participation in this study will last up to about 3 hours in total. Approximately 6 individuals will participate in this study.

There are both risks and benefits of participating in research studies.

<b>Risks and Discomforts</b>	<b>Benefits to You and Others</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participation in research might involve some loss of privacy. There is a small risk that someone outside the study could see and misuse information about you.</li> <li>- The study interview and focus group ask personal questions that are sensitive in nature and may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any question or questions, if you feel inclined to do so.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is no guarantee that you will receive any benefits from being in this study. However, possible benefits include having an opportunity to vent and think through difficult and complicated experiences. We hope the information learned from this study will provide more information about the experience of being Black and dark-skinned in college and colorism.</li> </ul>

In general, we will not give you any individual results from the study.

**Please read, or have someone read to you, the rest of this document. If there is anything you don't understand, be sure to ask the study staff.**

**CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?**

You can stop being in this research study at any time. Leaving the study will not affect your academic standing at University of Richmond. Tell the study staff if you are thinking about stopping or decide to stop.

**HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME BE PROTECTED?**

VCU and the VCU Health System have established secure research databases and computer systems to store information and to help with monitoring and oversight of research. Your information may be kept in these databases but are only accessible to individuals working on this study or authorized individuals who have access for specific research related tasks.

Identifiable information in these databases are not released outside VCU unless stated in this consent or required by law. Although results of this research may be presented at meetings or in publications, identifiable personal information about participants will not be disclosed.

Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized representatives from the following organizations for the purposes of managing, monitoring and overseeing this study:

- Representatives of VCU and the VCU Health System
- Officials as the Department of Health and Human Services
- VCU faculty members on the dissertation committee for the study

#### **WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research, contact:

Kiara Shanay Lee (leek29@vcu.edu)

Dr. Adai Tefera (aatefera@vcu.edu)

The researcher/study staff named above is the best person(s) to call for questions about your participation in this study.

If you have general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, you may contact:

Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Research

800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000

Box 980568

Richmond, VA 23298

Telephone: (804) 827-2157

Contact this number to ask general questions, to obtain information or offer input, and to express concerns or complaints about research. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or if you wish to talk to someone else. General information about participation in research studies can also be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have been provided with an opportunity to read this consent form carefully. All of the questions that I wish to raise concerning this study have been answered. By signing this consent form, I have not waived any of the legal rights or benefits to which I otherwise would be entitled. My signature indicates that I freely consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of the consent form for my records.

<b>Signature Block for Enrolling Adult Participants</b>	
<hr/>	
Adult Participant Name (Printed)	
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Adult Participant's Signature	Date
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Name of Person Conducting Consent Discussion (Printed)	
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Signature of Person Conducting Consent Discussion	Date
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Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)	Date
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APPENDIX D  
Recruitment Flyer

**PARTICIPANTS INVITED TO TAKE PART  
IN COLORISM RESEARCH**



**D**o you identify as a dark-skinned Black college student?

**A**re you interested in contributing to emerging research on colorism, or discrimination within an ethnic group based on complexion, in the Black community?

**Please consider participating in a study investigating and unearthing a form of discrimination many still view as taboo.**

**THE STUDY:** The study will explore the experiences of self-identifying dark-skinned Black college students at Liberal Arts University.

**TIME COMMITMENT:** Each participant will be interviewed once one-on-one and all participants will take part in one focus group with the rest of the study participants.

**LOCATION:** The one-on-one interviews and the focus group will take place on the campus of Liberal Arts University.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out the recruitment survey using this link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/3QBPKC6> by 11:59 PM on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Email the questionnaire and any questions or concerns to Kiara Lee, PhD student at the VCU School of Education, at [leek29@vcu.edu](mailto:leek29@vcu.edu).