Color (Sub)Conscious: African American Women, Authors, and the Color Line in Their Literature

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Color (sub)Conscious: African American Women, Authors, and the Color Line in Their Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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I dedicate this thesis to my family. Thank you for your love and support. This thesis is also dedicated to my TS. You keep me going. Thanks for believing in me and pushing me to believe in myself. 143.
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Abstract

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by Dikeita Nichole Eley

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2004

Major Director: Dr. James Kinney
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Color (sub)Conscious explores the African American female’s experience with colorism. Divided into three distinct sections. The first section is a literary analysis of such works as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker’s “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” an essay from her collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. The second section is a research project based on data gathered from 12 African American females willing to share their own experiences and insights on colorism. The final section is a creative non-fiction piece of the author’s own personal pain growing up and living with the lasting effects of colorism.
Introduction

I thought I had discovered something new sitting in a creative non-fiction class reviewing my piece with classmates and my professor. I thought I had discovered some new plight no one else knew about or at least hadn’t dared to share with the rest of the world. After describing the pains of being teased and taunted as early as second grade because of my dark skin, and the constant comparisons my peers made based on complexion, I found that this concept, this discovery of mine was not very new at all. In fact, this discovery already had a name: “colorism” – prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based on skin color. After realizing how not-new this discovery was, I somehow became obsessed with the concept. Everything, every word, every statement was potentially colorist. Take this example.

One Sunday afternoon in July 2003, cousins Robin and Rachelle take time to catch up on current events of their hometown. After discussing the decline of the local school system, Robin tells Rachelle that things are about to change, that the school system has just hired a new superintendent of schools and that he is known for his work reforming other declining school districts.

Rachelle asked, “White?”

Robin responded, “Naw, he’s a black man, light-skinned.”
As I listened to Robin's response, I waited for her to continue her description of the new superintendent, thinking she was describing his physical appearance to Rachelle, but the response ended with "light-skinned." I realized as they continued their conversation that acknowledging his skin color was not intended for descriptive purposes as much as for status or qualification purposes. What I wanted to know is "Does his light skin make him a better candidate for the job, closer to white and therefore more qualified for the position?" Because of his credentials, Rachelle had already assumed that these were a white man's accomplishments. Robin, although acknowledging this was in fact a black man still made an obvious reference to color when answering Rachelle's question about race. She had already said that he was a black man. Why was it necessary to further differentiate him, categorize him by the nature of his skin color?

Understanding the situation and believing this isn't uncommon in the African American community, my mind was now uneasy. I wanted a deeper understanding of how and why this colorism exists and how it continues to thrive in society and particularly in a community that must fight the ugliness of racism on a daily basis. I, along with the rest of the African American community and the American community at large, needed to know how deep this "color complex" goes and how its roots continue to affect the African American community today. Exploring this issue and gaining a better understanding of this phenomenon exposes the deep, infinite effects that a subcategory of racism, which is still a problem in this country, can have on a community and ultimately society.
When mentioning the mixing of black and white blood, our minds often wander to slavery when white masters would have sex with the black female slaves. According to James Kinney, however, the roots of miscegenation do not simply begin there. During the Colonial years, the most common miscegenation was between black slaves and white indentured servants. Basically servants, convicts, and slaves at the time took solace where they could find it. And it was usually with each other since the groups found themselves in similar predicaments and no emotional ties to their masters. Although the mixing was among the laboring class at that time, governors and other prominent persons in society tried to stop intermarriage as early as 1630 (4-5). Of course, the white master’s sex with his black slaves soon became a common practice. Kinney, author of *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century American Novel*, sums up the battle against miscegenation in the Colonial era:

> In the end, their nearly two-century struggle to contain miscegenation amounted to this – they prohibited legal intermarriage, punished illicit unions between black men and white women, but tolerated those between white men and black women as long as the mulatto children followed the condition of their slave mothers. (6)

This behavior continues so that, by the time the Colonies become the United States, more than 60,000 people who lived in the newly formed country were of mixed black and white ancestry (4).

Issues began to rise when mulatto offspring of white women and black men increased. It then became necessary to differentiate between the free white citizen and the mulatto slave population. In 1785, Virginia defined black as anyone with a black
parent or grandparent. Anyone with less than one-fourth black ancestry was considered legally white and therefore free (8).

Because sex between a white slaveholder and his black female slaves was tolerated, it was common for the white fathers to be in close proximity to their offspring. Many of them freed or tried to free and “safeguard” their children and gave them opportunities for freedom, education and even property in their wills. If a white father decided to keep his mulatto children slaves, he often held them in higher regard than other slaves. This fact could very well be the very beginning of elite thinking among lighter-skinned and mulatto individuals that was common in the time following the Civil War.

Though many mulattoes were at first considered white based on the different regional definitions of black, by 1850, the definition of blackness had to change. Cotton had become the one major crop of the South and slave labor was essential to the cotton industry. Slave states basically needed every slave they could get for labor. Slave states couldn’t “afford” mulattoes the luxury of being considered white. During the 1850s, mulatto slavery increased 66.9 percent (Kinney 24). To deal with this decision, the South committed itself to the “one-drop rule.”

The “one-drop rule” destroyed the hierarchy that existed between the races in the South. Before the Civil War, lighter-skinned mulattoes were treated as the second tier of a three-tier hierarchy, with whites on top. The hierarchy gave mulattoes and other individuals of mixed decent a status higher than that of the average darker-skinned African slave. But this hierarchy crumbled under the “one-drop rule” and all slaves
gained the same inferior status. Post-Civil War the former elite that had consisted of those on the second tier sought to maintain their status in society by forming social clubs. These clubs included Blue Veins societies and mulatto churches where admission was offered based on the lightness of the skin.

Such attitudes over skin color still exist in the African American community. Angela M. Neal and Midge L. Wilson, authors of "The Role of Skin Color and Features in the Black Community: Implications for Black Women and Therapy" quote a rhyme from the early part of the 20th century to summarize common attitudes about color at the time:

If you’re white, you’re all right.
If you’re yellow, you’re mellow.
If you’re brown, stick around.
If you’re black, get back. (326)

These ideas and feelings continued throughout the 20th century and were even modified when class and gender were figured into the equation. Although many researchers address the issues that could arise for males with extreme skin tones, those males could somehow also find a way around those issues. A darker-skinned male in a professional occupation was still viewed favorably and could even enhance his status if he married a light-skinned female (326). And although it would still be a hard path for all black males to climb the socio-economic ladder, advancement is considered easier for the lighter-skinned male since lighter skin had been historically established as a high status symbol (325).
Color weighs in a little differently, however, when it comes to women. The belief that women get hit the hardest with ideas of colorism only needs to be supported by one fact: women are looked upon as objects of beauty. A woman has always had to concern herself with appearances and beauty more than a man. Women are considered soft, gentle and refined creatures. These characteristics are often used in conjunction with beauty. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be objects of physical strength rather than objects to be admired for their aesthetic characteristics. In the research I’ve encountered, most researchers seem to focus their concerns on the difficulties darker-skinned women face when it comes to skin color, which tends to trivialize the plight of the lighter-skinned woman. Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson and Ronald Hall, authors of *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* insist, “While many Blacks can sympathize with those who are ‘too’ dark skinned, fewer are willing to acknowledge the pain of those who are very light skinned, like the green-eyed, light-skinned Chicago woman who says that she has had people accuse her of being phony or of having a superiority complex simply because her skin is light and her eyes are not brown” (68). However, Neal and Wilson assert that based on previous research “black” and “yellow” seemed to be the least desired skin tones and either warranted some type of negative experience for women: “Feelings of resentment and anger about the possibility that perhaps one is too dark or too unattractive to males are just as common as feelings of guilt and shame about the possibility that perhaps one has enjoyed unfair advantages because of lightness of skin color or straightness of features” (330). They also cite studies that indicate children are aware of the positive and negative aspects assigned to
Black and White racial groups. In fact, Russell, Wilson and Hall present research by psychologist Cornelia Porter that suggests that girls as young as six are twice as likely as boys to be sensitive to the social importance of skin color (68).

As Neal and Wilson discuss group and individual therapy for women who are dealing with complexion and feature issues, they note that “many black women report that difficulties with these issues initially arose not from within themselves but from other Blacks within the community who too frequently commented on their color and features” (330). This fact links directly to T. Joel Wade’s article “The Relationships Between Skin Color and Self-Perceived Global, Physical, and Sexual Attractiveness, and Self-Esteem for African Americans.” Wade cites prior research that suggested “we evaluate ourselves similar to the way observers perceive us” (362). His research hinges on a premise found within Elder’s (1969) “Marketplace Theory,” which can be used to explain the effects of attractiveness for and among African Americans:

This theory is derived from social learning and social exchange theories . . . and argues that attractiveness is an asset . . . if one is considered attractive, then one has a valuable asset and will be evaluated as such . . . [extrapolating to skin-color biases and self-perceived attractiveness, one can argue that if fair skin is considered more attractive than dark skin and that dark-skinned men can elevate themselves in the eyes of social perceivers by marrying fair-skinned women, fair skin must be considered a valuable asset in the African American attractiveness marketplace for women, whereas dark skin may be an asset for African American men. (362)

This idea about dark skin being advantageous for African American men relies on the assumption that lighter skin is considered beautiful and a feminine quality, thus making dark skin a masculine asset. Both Neal/Wilson and Wade’s findings and theories play a
role in the present research. As colorism goes on, some attitudes have changed, while others have stayed the same. Some individuals see a difference in the handling of the color complex, while others see the problem expanding. It is this discrepancy or contradiction that drives the present research.

I have chosen to approach this phenomenon in three distinct sections to give it the plurality it demands, and the multi-dimensional perspectives that cannot be ignored. In section one of this work, I will discuss African American women writers’ exploration of colorism, the color line and its relationship to beauty, status, class and financial security within the African American community in general and African American women in particular. In this discussion I will include authors who use their writing as forums to express the African American woman’s experience from all angles: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, bell hooks, J. California Cooper, Maya Angelou, and Zora Neale Hurston. Such a literary analysis will show how this topic has been a long-running theme in the works of African American women’s writings. In the second section, I will introduce data taken from twelve African American women in a recent survey that highlights their own personal experiences with colorism to illustrate how this phenomenon continues to affect African American women even today. In the third and final section, I will narrate my own experiences with this phenomenon, exploring how it has affected me so deeply and infinitely that it became the topic for my master’s thesis, which brings this exploration of colorism full circle.
Color Complex(ity) in African American Women’s Writing

Barbara Christian spends a lot of time and paper exploring the works of African American women writers and depicting a writing tradition prevalent in those works. In an essay, “Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women’s Fiction,” she asserts that the fiction of the early 1970s represents a phase “in which the black community itself becomes a major threat to the survival and empowerment of women, one in which women must struggle against the definitions of gender. The language of this fiction therefore becomes a language of protest” (178-9). Definitions of gender include what society considers feminine or how it defines a woman, what it sees as valuable for a female to possess, which in this Western society begins with beauty. Thus, criteria of beauty are necessary. These criteria according to Western society is where the language of protest comes into play because this threat to the survival of the African American woman shows up in the form of colorist attitudes. These authors’ literary works comment on the African American condition in response to colorism (along with other –isms) and its present standards of beauty, which have been adopted from the Western ideals: long (blond), straight hair, light (blue) eyes and a fair complexion.

In another essay, “The Concept of Class in the Novels of Toni Morrison,” Christian sees America’s conception of woman (past and more than likely present) as
beautiful in an ornamental way, pious, married, eventually a mother, respectable in that she does not work. Black women could not achieve this ideal because they had to work, couldn’t be withdrawn, and, by the country’s standards, were not (are not) beautiful. So on the one hand they could not (cannot) achieve true womanhood, but on the other hand, biologically they were females so they were also continually restricted by the limitations of their gender.

Christian also notes about the works of black women writers of the 1970s that “there is always someone who learns not only that white society must change, but also that the black communities’ attitudes toward women must be revealed and revised” (“Trajectories” 179). We find these elements present in the works within this project including Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and Alice Walker’s essay, “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” so that once their women characters are introduced to the attitudes of the world and their communities, they then “possess the possibility of constructing their own self-definitions and affecting the direction of their communities because they have witnessed the destruction of women in the wake of prevailing attitudes” (“Trajectories” 179), i.e. racism, sexism, classism, and especially colorism. Thus, we find that the African American woman writer must define or rather redefine herself by first defining herself by the popular standards and then recreating those standards to fit her true identity. Christian writes, “Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism, and class [and colorism] that characterize our existence, whatever our
individual personalities, backgrounds, talents” (“Creating” 159-60). This confrontation seems the aim of each of these authors.

Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place takes an interesting perspective on color. The book focuses on the lives of several women all living on the same street dealing with all sorts of seemingly hopeless situations. The diversity doesn’t end, however, with the women’s separate dispositions in life. Diversity is also illustrated through the complexions women wear and respond to everyday.

Naylor for the most part provides positive re-enforcement when choosing the descriptors she uses when assessing skin color in the novel. These positive descriptors, or adjectives seen consistently throughout the novel, sound very positive or at least non-derogatory. One of the earliest references in the book refers to complexion with adjectives such as “cinnamon-red,” “ebony,” “golden,” “copper,” “nut-brown,” and “saffron.” They have been set apart from the typical “light,” “dark,” “black,” and “yellow.” The descriptor words when taken out of context are exactly what they should be – physical descriptions to help paint a physical picture. But, once they are placed back into their context, they may become stigmatized again with stereotypical negativity.

For instance, the cinnamon red character, a man named Butch, is quickly proven to be a womanizer, which is a common stereotype about lighter-skinned men. One of the characters, Mattie, accuses him of being a womanizer and he explains in his stereotypical smoothness, “Mattie, I don’t run after a lot of women, I just don’t stay long enough to let the good times turn sour” (16).
Interestingly enough, Naylor takes a dual approach to handling the color line, the same approach she takes in her writing in general. Naylor switches easily between her narrative voice and that of the characters in her novel, sometimes even in the same sentence. For the two voices she utilizes, she has two distinct approaches to the color line. When the narrator speaks in *The Women of Brewster Place*, there is a more positive tone and use of color as it relates to complexion. She uses beautiful descriptors to describe the diverse skin tones of the people represented in the novel. She writes, “Children bloomed in Brewster Place during July and August with their colorful shorts and tops plastered against gold, ebony, and nut-brown legs and arms; they decorated the street, rivaling the geraniums and ivy found on the manicured boulevard downtown” (56). She uses non-derogatory or positively connotated descriptors for several skin tones. She goes on to use these descriptors in conjunction with such verbs as “decorated” and to compare the tones with such pleasantries as geraniums and ivy.

This narrator’s description is in direct contrast with Naylor’s characters’ comments or every day dialogue, however. They use the more common, stereotypical color words, categories that can be connected to negative connotations. She writes, “Mattie saw that the evening light had hidden the yellow undertones in the finely wrinkled white face, and it had softened the broad contours of the woman’s pug nose and full lips” (30-1). Even though Mattie is not speaking aloud, Naylor is tracing her thoughts at this point. And Mattie along with other characters speak and think in terms of the color line. The woman Mattie is describing, Miss Eva, asks Mattie a few sentences earlier, “Where you headin’ with that pretty red baby?” No cinnamon-red or golden
browns here in the minds and words of Naylor’s characters. Here Naylor holds up a mirror of reality to her audience’s faces while countering such thoughts and mental conditioning with her own personal preferences to convey complexion. I certainly see the elaborate adjectives she chooses to use with her authorial voice as a conscious effort to acknowledge and address the issue of the color line.

In African American literature, wealth has a way of showing up as a specific color, and it is not green. For instance, in Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, Naylor writes about Etta Mae’s love interest, “The tone of his skin and the fullness around his jawline told her that he was well-off, even before she got close enough to see the manicured hands and diamond pinkie ring” (66). The fact that Naylor doesn’t specify which skin tone suggests wealth means that somehow it is already implied in the fact that the individual is “well-off.” One could bet that this individual is not dark-skinned. Although a dark man can “get along” when it comes to his marketability in attractiveness and relationships, it is usually the lighter-skinned individual who prospers in matters of economic wealth.

bell hooks addresses economic wealth and its relation to color as seen through the eyes of herself as a young girl in Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood. In chapter three, she writes, “The people with lots of money can buy many [raffle] tickets – can show they are ‘big time.’ Their flesh is often the color of pigs in the storybook. Somehow, they have more money because they are lighter, because their flesh turns pink and pinker, because they dye their hair blond, red, to emphasize the light, lightness of their skin. We children think of them as white. We are so confused by this thing called Race” (7).
hooks looks at this through the eyes of a child, but also seems to insinuate something more with her confession about racial confusion. The light-skinned adults, too, are confused since they not only try to assimilate into the white culture, but also have come to think of themselves as white. hooks makes the connection between economics and aesthetics, and aesthetics and status and opportunity. Thus there is a connection between economics and status and opportunity. In the same chapter, a page later she tells of a mock wedding to be performed by her school. She insists, "Like every other girl I want to be the bride but I am not chosen. It has always to do with money. The important roles go to the children whose parents have money to give" (8). She has been rejected because of her economic situation, but is "saved" by her aesthetic "luck": "They tell me that I am lucky to be lighter skinned, not black black, not dark brown, lucky to have hair that is almost straight, otherwise I might not be in the wedding at all, otherwise I might not be so lucky" (9). So even though her economic situation restricted her, her lighter skin and almost straight hair still afforded her opportunities she otherwise would not have gotten. In other words, light skin is an asset. She sums up this notion in chapter eleven as she writes of herself in the third person, "She and the other children want to understand Race but no one explains it. They learn without understanding that the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that black people who most resemble white folks will live better in that world" (31). The children come to learn that life is easier, better in lighter skin through their own naïve yet incredibly perceptive observations and logic.
As hooks grows a little older and wiser, she resubmits her more educated analysis of white or light skinned black people. We notice the difference and yet can acknowledge the similarity between a more adult analysis and a child’s logic. With ease, she makes the comparison and acknowledges the problem between light and dark-skinned individuals.

[Miss Rhobert] comes from a long line of folks who look white. When we were small children we thought they were the color of pigs in storybooks. We know now that they are the black landowners, business people. We know now that they stand between white folks and real black folks. Like gossip, white folks spread their messages to us through them. They hate both white folks and dark black people. They hate white folks for having what they want. They hate dark black folks for reminding the world that they are colored and thus keeping them from really getting what they want. (103)

While summarizing the root of the hostility and animosity that can be manifested even today between light and dark skinned people, hooks also acknowledges the three tier hierarchy that was created in the South before the Civil War.

hooks chooses to affirm her faith and love of black beauty with one of the same tropes Morrison uses: a baby doll. hooks’ affirmation, however is much less violent, yet equally insistent. After describing her favorite “brown like light milk chocolate” baby doll Baby, she explains why it was necessary to demand a doll that looked like her.

Deep within myself I had begun to worry that all this loving care we gave to the pink and white flesh-colored dolls meant that somewhere left high on the shelves were boxes of unwanted, unloved brown dolls covered in dust. I thought that they would remain there forever, orphaned and alone, unless someone began to want them, to want to give them love and care, to want them more than anything. (24)
As with Morrison, this is a metaphor for little black girls and their lack of love, acknowledgement of beauty, and acknowledgement of their existence in general by others because the standard of beauty is white skin.

hooks makes a very direct commentary on the standards of beauty in the African American (female) community. Accompanying color in the field of aesthetics are facial features and hair. hooks uses hair to acknowledge that the African American standards of beauty were not constructed by African Americans, and yet they are necessary and important in the African American community to achieve. hooks writes,

Good hair is hair that is not kinky, hair that does not feel like balls of steel wool, hair that does not take hours to comb, hair that does not need tons of grease to untangle, hair that is long. Real good hair is straight hair, hair like white folks' hair. Yet no one says so. No one says Your hair is so nice, so beautiful because it is like white folks' hair. We pretend that the standards we measure our beauty by are our own invention — that it is questions of time and money that lead us to make distinctions between good hair and bad hair. (91)

It is these standards that plague and penetrate the pages of African American women's literature studied in the present analysis and in African American female life in general. And like the other authors, hooks' authorial voice goes against that norm, goes against that expectation, and in its stead embraces the overlooked beauty of the African American culture. After hooks gets her hair straightened and pressed for the first time, she expresses her disappointment with her decision. She writes, "secretly I had hoped that the hot comb would transform me, turn the thin good hair into thick nappy hair, the kind of hair I like and long for, the kind you can do anything with, wear in all kinds of styles" (93). She proudly claims the heritage, the "wrongness" of African American
beauty. As with the brown dolls, she is willing to realize and recognize the beauty of her own skin and features despite the standards set in a white dominated society.

J. California Cooper on the other hand seems to avoid color as much as possible in her collection of short stories, *Some Soul to Keep*. This avoidance also seems a conscious effort, for even in her mere physical descriptions of individuals, color and complexion rarely are mentioned. While in many cases African American authors in describing their characters – and African American people when describing themselves (or others) – tend to refer to color or complexion early in the description, Cooper rarely addresses it. In one short story, “The Life You Live (May Not Be Your Own)” the narrator Molly describes herself without using color, saying, “I looked, by accident, in the mirror one day . . . and I cried! I was a fat, sloppy-dressed, house-shoe wearin’, gray-haired, old-lookin’ woman!” (48). Even when Molly describes her husband’s mistress in contrast to herself, she does not include complexion: “She was slim. Wasn’t no potatoes, biscuits and pork chops sittin’ on her hips! She had plenty make-up on. I’d say a whole servin’! Black hair without one spot of gray in it! High-heeled shoes and a dress that kept bouncing up so you could see that pretty underwear she had on” (49). As with Molly’s description of herself, she totally avoids complexion and *any* facial features for that matter. It’s almost as if she avoids the entire face in order to avoid the issue of complexion.

This approach seems a conscious effort to avoid distinctions between color as well as race as she alludes to in one of her short stories, “About Love and Money or Love’s Lore and Money’s Myth.” The narrator, Bessy, talks directly to the reader as if
having a conversation. Through Bessy and the telling of one of her stories, Cooper explains the virtual absence of color in her stories: “I told you about my neighbors on each side of me. Black on one side, white on the other. Not going to tell you which was which cause I don’t blive it makes no difference noway” (132). Cooper uses Bessy to describe the true feelings and motives and opinions of the author. The ambiguity of the character’s voice and author’s voice being in a sense one and the same and yet somehow different allows the author to use her characters as a mouthpiece for her own personal beliefs. We know these beliefs are really Cooper’s because they permeate many of her stories. Several of her works address the color line in much the same fashion.

Although Cooper doesn’t seem to have a preoccupation with color, she doesn’t completely ignore it in all her narratives. In her short story, “Red-Winged Blackbirds,” Cooper describes two of the main characters using color and hair, but she totally defies the stereotypes. This is how she describes the two girls Reva and Jewel who happen to be twins: “The twins were about fifteen years old. They did not look alike. Reva was thin, light-skinned, with kinky hair. Jewel was plump, brown-skinned, with long curly hair. Jewel was snotty, spoiled, selfish and lazy. Reva was reserved, shy, always ducking from some slap, fearful, but very sweet” (78). Because she is describing the physical differences between individuals who would typically look the same, it is plausible for her to use color in this case. However, she is still careful not to perpetuate any stereotypes here. Typically, the light-skinned character would have the fine or curly hair courtesy of the white bloodline. In this case, the light-skinned girl has kinky hair and the darker of the two has the long, fine “good” hair. Likewise, the history of
organizations such as Blue Veins Society shows that the lighter-skinned population (along with others of the African American population) view themselves as a privileged elite and both better and better off than Blacks darker than them. One would then probably look to Reva, the light-skinned twin to be snotty, spoiled and selfish, while the darker twin’s inferior disposition would have left her reserved, shy and fearful. However, Cooper totally switches these expectations around in order to say \textit{color is just what they look like, not a symptom of a characterization or generalization I am trying to make here.}

Toni Morrison explores color and complexion as one of the strongest themes in \textit{The Bluest Eye}. Like Naylor, Morrison uses her writing to show us – and the world – how we African Americans compare our beauty to someone else’s standards. She shows us how we \textit{should} react or think of the situation in characters like Claudia, and shows us how we actually are in our own consciousness through characters like Pecola. She also demonstrates how we actually respond to each other’s “blackness” in situations like the ones Pecola is constantly placed in.

Morrison freely comments on the issue of color and the African American experience with standards of beauty and manifestations of self-loathing. Early in the book, Morrison makes a preliminary, almost foreshadowing, comment on the very typical opinions and/or standards of what people – African Americans in particular – have come to consider beauty and how it is the antithesis of all that is generally part of African American community and culture. In the same instance, she comments on her sheer disbelief and disgust with such a notion through the voice of one of her narrators, Claudia. Claudia who continues to receive white baby dolls as gifts admits her hatred of
them as well as the idea that everyone else considered them most beautiful. She mocked the adults who gave the dolls, “‘Here,’ they said, ‘this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.’ I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows, picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it” (21).

Claudia, bewildered by everyone’s admiration for such a thing she loathed wanted only one thing of the doll: “. . . to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me” (20). She could not understand what people saw so beautiful about the white baby dolls so she dismembers them to find the secret. Claudia’s hatred was extended onto little white girls. “. . . the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls . . . [i]f I pinched them, their eyes – unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll’s eyes – would fold in pain and their cry would not be the sound of an icebox door, but a fascinating cry of pain” (22-3). But what we soon discover is what Claudia – and Morrison – truly hated: “What made people look at [little white girls] and say, ‘Awwwww’ but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached [little white girls] on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them” (22-3, italics mine). What the reader finds is that Claudia’s hatred of the little white girls is a symptom of what she truly hates: the rejection of her color, her race by others, the lack of being perceived as beautiful even in the eyes of her own people. This is an early attempt by Morrison to
assert her own pain and/or disgust for our treatment of each other. She uses a child as a mouthpiece, most appropriate since Claudia’s mind’s “programming” is not complete at this stage. She is still learning from the people in her environment so her inquiry is genuine and believable. And though that conditioning of Claudia’s mind to finally understand the “politics” was absent at the time of her questioning, Morrison completes the section with Claudia’s eventual understanding of everyone else’s conformity to what I believe is an accurate commentary on the African American community’s condition: how instead of truly coping with such inquiries, thoughts and questions, it eventually becomes a matter of conforming to the popular opinion after time and experience have revealed the reality. Claudia, no doubt a little older and wiser and in a mode of reflection, says, “Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love . . . I learned much later to worship her [Shirley Temple] just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (23). Claudia realizes that she must adjust her own wonderings, questions and opinions rather than expect change from those and that which she questioned. This eventual acceptance seems Morrison’s partial explanation for the perpetuation of contradictory aesthetic standards kept alive in the African American community.

Claudia extends her animosity elsewhere as well. Claudia holds the same disdain that she has for white girls for a girl from her school named Maureen Peal. Morrison describes Maureen as “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care” (62). Right off the bat, we’re
clued in to several factors that resonate in other African American works. Morrison makes an apparent connection between Maureen’s light skin and her financial wealth when she first describes her skin complexion and the fine texture of her hair. Morrison then takes the financial wealth and connects or compares it to that of the rich, well-off white girls. In the next paragraph, we are let in once again on the “secret magic” of perceived beauty as we are told how Maureen is treated by the school community. Morrison writes, “She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her; white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids” (62, emphasis mine). White students did not necessarily think of Maureen as an ordinary black girl. She was less threatening because she was more like them with her light skin, green eyes, expensive clothes and nice house. She was better than what is represented as blackness (poverty and ugliness) with other black students.

These scenes are an open comparison between African Americans’ (and even whites’) regard for light-skinned Blacks and whites, which would explain the light-skinned population’s regard for themselves as superior to other African Americans and their passive approval from whites. Maureen embodies, however, the double-consciousness of the light-skinned (mulatto) Black individual. She is accepted and even revered in the African American community until she herself draws and commits to the line of physical distinction, a fact to be traced back to ‘house’ slaves and post-Civil war
elite clubs. Maureen draws that line when she gets into an argument with Claudia, Claudia’s sister Freida, and Pecola. The argument could be considered rather typical among kids until Maureen brings color into the dispute:


Maureen at that moment disassociates herself from the Black (capital B) experience by drawing the line between light and dark Blacks. It is an example of the initial acceptance by Blacks of the mulatto or mixed heritage until the line is drawn by that mulatto or mixed heritage individual, which opens an option to them that darker skinned Blacks do not have. In addition, this scene simultaneously illustrates the definition of black as synonymous with ugly. We get this impression throughout the book, but when Maureen attacks with color, Claudia immediately references Maureen’s perceived beauty as a counter. It demonstrates the idea that even subconsciously, “cute” is the opposite of black and black is synonymous with ugliness, which is a main theme throughout the novel.

That line of distinction shows up later in Morrison’s novel when the character Soaphead Church is introduced. Soaphead’s family was so proud of its mixed blood that they were willing to marry within their own family in order to keep the bloodline as “pure” as possible. His wife, Velma, was said to learn from her husband “to separate herself in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa” (167). Morrison implies
that this thinking, this obsession, was mentally "sick" as she refers to the obsession as "Anglophilia," a word sounding so clinical, like a diagnosis for a mental illness. We also find out that Soaphead is guilty of pedophilia as well. Between incest and pedophilia, Morrison suggests that Soaphead and his mind's programming, the things he's been taught or has learned, are twisted and sick, and thus his obsession with lighter complexion and thinner features is also a product of his sick thinking.

The notion of inferiority and ugliness due to being black (lowercase b) that permeates this novel is most apparent in a little girl, Pecola Breedlove. Pecola believes that if she were beautiful, it would change her life: "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly [her father] would be different and Mrs. Breedlove [her mother], too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (46). It is not, however, the child's logic that beauty will solve all her problems that is so unsettling for Morrison or the reader. The bigger message here is the young child's definition of beauty: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (46). Blue-eyes found on blond-haired little white girls that, according to Claudia got the gentle touches and smiles and general admiration of adults. She did not love her skin, embrace her blackness because others had not. They loathed her skin, even those who were also black (lowercase and capital b). Morrison comments on the power of color and complexion, and its power as an insult, with a scene where Pecola is being teased by a circle of boys. The commentary comes through Claudia's narration,

"Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo . . ."
They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. (65)

What followed was a beautifully written sequence of completely accurate, analytical monologue that was certainly a direct commentary from Morrison's own consciousness:

They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds – cooled – and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (65)

Morrison is no longer speaking of the taunting boys; she is speaking of this “condition” in the African American community where we look at ourselves and hate what we see, a condition that she asserts has been “learned” and therefore passed down through the generations. This condition is explained through a metaphor reminiscent of an active volcano, which can lie dormant, “burning for ages” and eventually erupt, spilling over after smoldering in, as Claudia said “adjustment without improvement.”

Morrison's final words in the novel make a final analysis of this condition. She utilizations a metaphor that speaks to a cycle, a routine of learned thoughts and behaviors that although diagnosed as needing to change, seems to be never-ending. She speaks in terms of planting flowers but is actually addressing the African American position in America as a minority, and by interpretation, inferior race. If in your community, if in your country, the authenticity of your racial identification is measured through physical attributes, and your racial identity is perceived by those outside as well as inside that race
as inferior, then the less physically identifiable that race is within an individual, the less inferior that individual is perceived. This is the climate that African Americans live in and this is Morrison’s final acknowledgement of it:

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of this entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. (206)

Madhu Dubey, author of *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* understands that novels such as *The Bluest Eye* reveal the black community as being “committed to white middle class values, and is divided by color-bias and sexism” (33). Dubey cites Ruby Dee’s review of the novel which charged that “Morrison performed the crucial task of showing the black community the problems it must work through before it can truly believe Black is Beautiful” (qtd. in Dubey 34). Dubey also cites Dellita Martin who believed “*The Bluest Eye* helped propel Afro-American literature towards total liberation from the constraints of the Western aesthetic by exposing its damaging psychological effects” (qtd. in Dubey 34). Other authors follow Morrison’s lead to expose damaging attitudes that prevail in the African American community.

Maya Angelou seems to share the same major sentiments of Morrison. However, in Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, instead of exhibiting two distinct voices to illustrate two points of view, the two perceptions are embodied in one little girl, young Maya herself. At the beginning, it is Easter, a holiday when Maya would get the opportunity to dress up extra special for the occasion. Angelou exhibits her own
perception of beauty at a young age while, like Morrison, illustrating a bit of the typical thinking of those around her as well. Angelou writes, “I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (1). Understanding this general (everybody’s) common perception, she herself falls also into the “dream” of becoming “right” (white). “Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mess that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them” (2). Once again we are faced with black and ugly as synonyms, depending on each other to help define a helpless, hopeless, and undesired existence. Again, as with Morrison, we get an emphasis on blue eyes as a catalyst for this big change. Angelou would merely possess long hair, but her blue eyes would hypnotize people, stop them in their tracks and end their disappointment with the little black ugly girl.

Despite that Angelou at an early age despised her own skin and considered herself “black” and “ugly,” she thought her family to possess beauty. Interestingly enough, she considers her brother, father and mother to be incredibly beautiful and handsome people while she, along with other members of her family don’t consider her pretty. What is most interesting to find is that even though she sees color as an indication for beauty and acceptance, she handles it very differently for certain individuals. Research asserts that color/complexion is a bigger concern for women because we have always had to concern ourselves with physical appearance and attractiveness (Neal 323). This notion is perpetuated as Angelou introduces and describes her parents for the first time.
Angelou describes her father in chapter nine, “His bigness shocked me. His shoulders were so wide, I thought he’d have trouble getting in the door. He was taller than anyone I had seen, and if he wasn’t fat, which I knew he wasn’t, then he was fat-like . . . And he was blindingly handsome” (44-5). Angelou doesn’t mention his complexion until four pages later when she calls him “the only brown-skinned white man in the world” (48). Angelou immediately acknowledges what speaks to a man’s attractiveness: his masculinity, i.e. his size and stature. When she describes her mother, I assume she does the same for her: acknowledge what obviously speaks to a woman’s attractiveness, i.e. her facial features and, of course, her complexion. “Her red lips . . . split to show even white teeth and her fresh-butter color looked see-through clean. Her smile widened her mouth beyond her cheeks beyond her ears and seemingly through the walls to the street outside” (50). She calls them both physically beautiful, though their physical attributes are measured quite differently.

Angelou goes further up the family tree when she describes her maternal grandmother as a white “quadroon or an octoroon” and “having no features that could even loosely be called Negroid” (50). She then goes on to mention the kind of prestige her grandmother has in the community which Angelou mostly attributes to her color. “Her white skin and the pince-nez that she dramatically took from her nose and let hang free on a chain pinned to her dress were factors that brought her a great deal of respect” (51). In that description, color comes first, which suggests it is a primary factor for her grandmother’s level of respect in that town. Everything else is secondary.
Zora Neale Hurston's one-act play, *Colorstruck*, is a direct comment on the implied significance of color in the African American community. The play was published in several periodicals including *Fire!!* in November 1926. The play itself sends a powerful message and acts as a mirror for the African American community, a most extreme example of colorism used to expose its ridiculous nature. Two of the most powerful statements are phrases that show up even before we are introduced to the cast of the play. Hurston gives the time of the play as "twenty years ago and present." There is no particular year set for the play, which gives the impression that this situation, this issue is timeless. It can't be dated because it is not one separate occasion or event to be separated from any other time frame. Times and dates are irrelevant.

The second phrase is the place given. The place is simply "a southern city," which gives significance to the geography of the current situation. This play on colorism that is about to be addressed in one act can and will occur in any southern city. Thus, Hurston is implying that colorism is based on southern culture, mentality and (psychological) programming. The south, of course, is where such ideas of color originate, beginning with slavery. So it gives way to the significance of geography, any southern location in the origins and perpetuating of colorist ideas.

In the play, Emmaline, a black woman, consistently accuses her boyfriend of lusting after other women, but not just any women, only lighter-skinned women. This play demonstrates the insecurity a dark-skinned woman feels when posed against a lighter-skinned woman. This insecurity shows up as jealousy in the first scene of the play. John, Emmaline's boyfriend, asks her, "What makes you always picking a fuss with
me over some yaller girl? What makes you so jealous nohow?" (83). The question haunts the remaining scenes. John continues to try to convince Emmaline that he loves her and doesn't want any other woman, "Ah keep on tellin' you Ah don't love nobody but you. Ah knows heaps uh half white girls Ah could git ef Ah wanted to. But . . . Ah jus' wants you! You know what they say! De darker de berry, de sweeter de taste!" (85). His last statement is an ancestor to the more recent modified version, "the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice." It is a saying to help darker – black – individuals be proud in their dark skin and not be ashamed of their color. The saying, however, is usually attributed to dark women. Emmaline continues to be jealous no matter what is said or done. "Naw, youse jus' hog-wile ovah [Effie] cause she's half-white! No matter what Ah say, you keep carryin' on wid her" (86).

As the play goes on, readers get a deeper look into the core of the issue, not just the surface difference of color and/or the alleged lust of a boyfriend. Emmaline asks John to leave with her from the social event they have traveled to, a cakewalk between two competing towns. They are the best and everyone up to that point has been counting on them to bring the town a victory. Emmaline doesn't care about any of that anymore; she just tries to get John to go home with her. She pleads, "Come on John. I can't, I just can't go in there and see all them girls . . . oh – them yaller wenches! How I hate 'em! They gets everything they wants" (87). Emmaline is referring to the status given to lighter-skinned blacks – their perceived beauty, intelligence, and all-around superiority to darker blacks, this perception being held by blacks as well as whites. This perception gives them opportunities not offered to darker blacks. This fact is Emmaline's true
jealousy: "Oh, them half whites, they gets everything, they gets everything everybody
else wants! The men, the jobs – everything! The whole world is got a sign on it.

Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones" (88). For Emmaline,
John symbolized the only thing she wanted in the world that she was able to obtain in
spite of her dark skin and she could not bear to have him taken away, losing him to a
lighter-skinned woman.

But this is the logical, rational portion of the play. We find out later that
Emmaline is so color struck herself that she can't trust anyone to honestly like or love her
because she is so dark. The insecurities of the black black woman are shown in their
most extreme form in the final scene of the play. Twenty years after the social event,
John comes back to find Emmaline because although he left her that night, he wants to
marry her now. Emmaline tries to hide her daughter from him because she is very white.
She even hesitates to go get a doctor because she would have to leave him alone with her.
When she finally leaves to find the doctor, she comes back to "catch" John placing a cold
cloth on the girl's head. Hysterical, Emmaline hits him, "I knowed it! A half white skin"
(94). She accuses him of being so color struck that he would advance on her daughter, a
young girl that moments before he insisted was his daughter, their child. It is at this
moment that the play comes to its crashing climax and the question that loomed over the
production is finally answered. John declares, "So this is the woman I've been wearing
over my heart like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can't
believe anyone else could love it" (94). With that, he leaves Emmaline again, this time
for good realizing that it is she who is color struck and unable and unwilling to see past complexion.

Even in her most extreme reactions, the symbolic language in one scene in particular justifies Emmaline's insecurities. John, who loves her so much and loves her dark skin referred to Emmaline in scene four as a "handsome girl" while when he looks at Emmaline's daughter, a white-skinned girl, he describes her as "pretty." Pretty is an affirmation of beauty and femininity while handsome is an adjective reserved for men. By calling her handsome, he strips her of her femininity as a dark woman though he feels he is paying her a compliment. The same can be said for those individuals who even today make statements such as "She's pretty for a dark girl" which suggests that typically dark girls aren't pretty. It is as if Hurston wants to show readers that as much as we can appreciate and love our skins, we still to some extent, buy into the conditioning and programming of colorist notions in our environment.

Alice Walker addresses this exact phenomenon in a letter that preceeds an essay in a piece called "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like" from her book In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. She writes to a light-skinned friend, bringing her attention to a previous conversation they had had,

You may recall that we were speaking of the hostility many black black women feel toward light-skinned black women, and you said, "Well, I'm light. It's not my fault. And I'm not going to apologize for it." I said, apology for one's color is not what anyone is asking. 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; and that unless the question of Colorism – in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color – is addressed in
our communities and definitely in our black "sisterhoods" we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us. (291)

Walker goes on to introduce a different perspective on the idea of authentic blackness originally spawned from the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960s seeing it as just as colorist as disassociating one's self from "black black" individuals. Walker's use of black to describe African Americans in the beginning of the letter seems to affirm authentic blackness in its repetition – black black – as opposed to light black, light-skinned black or whiter black which suggests a disrupt in blackness when it comes to lighter skin. At any rate, she sees the black black woman as authentic, writing, "To me, the black black woman is our essential mother – the blacker she is the more us she is" (291).

"Still," she continues in the letter, "I think there is probably as much difference between the life of a black black woman and a 'high yellow' black woman as between a 'high yellow' woman and a white woman. And I am worried, constantly, about the hatred the black black woman encounters within black society" (291). Though Walker recognizes the programming of the past, she acknowledges that such programming can go either way, the "entreaties of parents or grandparents standing behind [women] whispering 'lighten up' or 'darken up' the race" (294). She acknowledges the double-edged sword of colorism with the same vehemence as racism and reverse-racism: it doesn't matter who or how it originated, neither can be justified.

Walker summarizes the disease, the absolute root of colorism, and its need to abandon authentic blackness, writing, "And yet, what have we been escaping to?
Freedom used to be the only answer to that question. But for some of our parents it is as if freedom and whiteness were the same destination, and that presents a problem for any person of color who doesn't wish to disappear" (291). This mentality has trickled down through the generations as suggested by Walker's references to our parents and grandparents, those before us. And it shows itself even still in today's generations, sometimes filtered down, sometimes acknowledged but consciously abandoned and sometimes totally intact.
Color Confess(ions): The Color Line in the Lives of African American Women

My discussion to this point has focused on fiction. Regardless of how true to life it may be, the stories, the characters have all been crafted by the minds of brilliant African American women writers to include themes and commentaries addressed to the world and, more specifically, the African American community. But these themes from years ago are still very much alive in the African American community, and they are very real. To further prove this point, I collected data from 12 African American females ranging in age from 20-33 years who were willing to share their personal and/or professional experiences (past and present) with colorism as well as their current insights on this phenomenon in the African American community. These women responded to a six-question survey with multiple choice and short answer questions, with one question asking for a short essay on an experience related to colorism. (See copy of the survey instrument in Appendix)

With this portion of my research, I incorporated surveys aimed to individualize colorism's effects on the African American community in an attempt to show the full ramifications of this thinking for individuals. In the discussion, I am interested in uncovering even the most subconscious thoughts and actions that are exercised by these individuals to help prove that whether passive or aggressive, colorism is infectious and can fester in many facets of life, and thus be passed along to future generations to be
further perpetuated. For instance, one participant continually made the “mistake” of excluding men from her discussion and had to go back and insert men into the discussion. She is likely unaware of the research that suggests that colorism is more of a woman’s issue than a man’s, but certainly her subconscious agrees. “Why do I keep doing that?” she asked me. I simply smiled, afraid to taint the data, but silently I knew that it was this passive thinking that could be passed along to others on a daily basis without our knowing. If she isn’t aware of her own thinking, quirks or conditioning, she has no choice but to pass them down to other unsuspecting ears, anyone open to be influenced.

A twenty-one year old from Lynchburg, Virginia, whom I’ll call Tammy, declares that she has a positive attitude and a pretty smile. A mass communications student, she models and even does commercials. She proclaims that she is pretty, but that she has some insecurities about herself: “I would like to be a shade lighter because I am the darkest person in my family.” Immediately, I am shocked. Assuming that extreme colorist ideas were outdated and that what I would be dealing with in this research was a passive, subconscious colorism, I was not prepared for such a statement. As I read on, my shock escalates into hurt. This young lady insisted that although she doesn’t like light-skinned men, she will probably end up with one because “I really want my children to be lighter than me.” Her need to have lighter-skinned children probably comes from the assumption that lighter means better.

Intrigued by Tammy’s candor, I checked her consent form to find that she had asked for complete anonymity for this project. Her unwillingness to be known even by
just her first name revealed that color is still a sensitive issue within the African American community, one that could have some consequences and repercussions that Tammy obviously was not willing to deal with.

Curiously enough, while many of the other participants had teased those individuals with the same complexion as theirs, Tammy teased individuals darker than she although those who teased her were lighter than she. One would assume that the teasing would be retaliatory, but Tammy shows an obvious discontent with being dark, or at the very least darker than those who are light, and therefore chooses to initiate teasing and to target those darker than she. Tammy indicated that most of her family is light-skinned with light-colored eyes, curly [what I imagine to be considered “good”] hair, which made her feel out of place since her skin is brown and she is the darkest person in her family. Ronald Hall, in his essay “The Bleaching Syndrome: African Americans’ Response to Cultural Domination Vis-à-Vis Skin Color” cites W.E.B. DuBois’s study on the “psychic conflict indicative of his people in their attempts to assimilate” for which DuBois coined the term “double consciousness” (175). Hall notes, “The implication of this double consciousness was that the ideal for skin color in America was so potent that it required anyone whose skin color did not approximate that of the dominant culture to assume a passive social demeanor in order not to further offend” (175). Tammy’s assimilation into dominant culture is even closer to home than the “America” Hall speaks of: “My mom used to say that she wondered how I am brown skinned when she and my father are light.” With her immediate dominant culture, i.e. family, noticeably different from her, she decides she will conceive children with a light-skinned male so that their
skin will be lighter than hers and thus light enough to assimilate and be accepted in the immediate environment of her family.

Jasmine, a twenty-year-old from Mechanicsville, Virginia, admits that she puts on a façade that projects that she is comfortable in her skin. She describes herself as very fair and insists that she is a strong individual because of the challenges she has had to face in regards to black and white people: “I’m too light for my own race and too dark for others.” Jasmine has dealt with the lighter-means-better assumption in her life: “I know individuals who are darker than myself and believe that I have more advantages and opportunities than they do. There is more discrimination among African Americans than there is with white vs. blacks.” However, being lighter for her has not fulfilled this assumption. In fact, she shares one incident she says sticks out in her mind:

My mother and I are very light. My mother often gets mistaken as a white woman and people often think I am of Asian or Hispanic descent. My father and sister are darker than my mother and I. When I was about 11 or 12, my family went to a restaurant. My dad and sister parked the car and my mother and I went to get a table. The hostesses (one black, one white) sat us in the front. My father and sister came in and told the black hostess that he was with us. She immediately came to my mother and I to receive “confirmation” that my dad was really with us. She was my complexion. We told her yes. She then looked upset and disgusted and said that the section she initially sat us in was being closed down and we would have to move. My mother said “okay” at first, but when she realized that the hostess wanted us to sit by the kitchen door in an almost empty restaurant, we left.

What could have made the black hostess react so harshly to other black patrons? She was as light as the narrator, Jasmine. Jasmine believes she seems to have reacted based on some assumption that incorporated skin color. Could it be the black woman’s frustration with interracial relationships, particularly the white woman and the black man? Although
Jasmine identifies her family as black, she admits that her mother is often mistaken as a white woman. If this is the case, understand that the frustration lies in the perception of beauty the black man (Jasmine’s father) has for this “white” woman, which in essence must somehow disregard the beauty of a black woman. These ideas and perceptions are rooted in colorism.

Curious to know what types of adjectives would be used, each participant was asked to describe herself. Brown, light and dark were used to describe their own skin color, and for most participants these adjectives were used to describe other people’s skin colors as well. However, two participants in particular used adjectives that possibly suggest a bias for or against those skin tones they were describing. A twenty-year-old woman from Bronx, New York, whom we’ll call Dana, admitted that although skin color didn’t matter when it came to friends and co-workers, that she simply wasn’t attracted to “yellow or red-bone” men. And Lachecia, a 24-year-old female who was raised in Scotland Neck, North Carolina, from age 11, says she used to dislike light-skinned males because she didn’t want any “yellow” babies. She also says that she hates for men to call her chocolate although she says she loves her complexion. Dana considers herself brown-skinned and Lachecia describes herself as dark-skinned. Adjectives such as these are not uncommon in the African American community. Russell, Wilson and Hall cite Charles H. Parrish as one of the first to explore skin color stereotyping: “[Parrish] discovered in the 1940s that junior-high students used as many as 145 different terms to describe skin color, including ‘half-white,’ ‘yaller,’ ‘high yellow,’ ‘fair,’ ‘bright,’ ‘light,’ ‘redbone,’ ‘light brown,’ ‘medium brown,’ ‘brown,’ ‘brownskin,’ ‘dark-brown,’
'chocolate,' 'dark,' 'black,' 'ink spot,' 'blue black,' and 'tar baby.' Each term was associated with a particular personality type: in general, light to medium skin tones were linked to intelligence and refinement, while dark skin tones suggest toughness, meanness, and physical strength" (66). It could be this sort of stereotyping that makes Lachecia so uncomfortable with comments from the opposite sex. Such stereotyping pushes a positive and feminine personality out the window. Hall states, “For African Americans, the application of light skin as a point of reference for attractiveness is an obvious fact . . . [but] light skin may not always coincide with the ethnic concept of masculinity” (177). Light skin is seen as a feminine quality, and if one does not possess it, her femininity might be questioned by some and overlooked by others.

Another participant, twenty-year-old Michelle from Plainfield, New Jersey, referenced such adjectives while sharing her insights on the colorism phenomenon: “The complexion issue has been played in movies, plays, literature and real life. From ‘lighter than a paper bag’ to ‘tar babies’ I’ve seen it. People who are prejudiced [against] their own race, to me, are insecure about themselves and don’t know how to deal with it, so they take it out on others.” Interestingly enough, she begins a story of an experience with colorism speaking of a friend she describes as “dark as midnight.” Is this description offensive or a matter of using descriptors to accurately convey a picture? In high school a friend of mine was called “twelve-o-two” by other mutual friends as a joke because “that’s how dark she was” (two minutes after midnight was supposed to accurately convey how dark-skinned she was). Although that was a running joke between friends, it was something that otherwise would be considered offensive in another context.
Michelle didn’t seem to be telling a joke on the page, but at any rate her choice of words sparked my curiosity. This may be another example of that passive, subconscious colorism at work.

Three participants in particular stood out when asked if they preferred any one skin tone over any others in any capacity. After indicating some of those capacities could include friends, family, dates and co-workers, most participants chose to comment on people they date. These three participants each preferred dating dark-skinned men for their own personal reasons. Precious, a “lighter-colored” twenty-year-old from Baltimore, Maryland, said there was no particular reason that she dated darker men except “that’s just who I am attracted to.” Although she doesn’t offer much else in the way of a reason, she does go on to mention in response to another question that “there are some people who believe light-skinned people are prettier. Then you have some darker people who say that light-skinned people are played out [no longer en vogue].” The other two participants had a much more psychological purpose behind dating dark men.

Heidi, a twenty-one year old from Martinsville, Virginia, admits that she prefers dark-skinned boyfriends to light because they give her a sense of security. This thinking could be easily linked to Ronald Hall’s comment in his essay, “The Bleaching Syndrome”: “Those who have light skin are believed to be most physically appealing to the eye (Hernton, 1965). But that belief alone does not always determine overall appeal particularly for males because light skin may not always coincide with the ethnic concept of masculinity” (177). This could very well explain her belief that darker men seem to offer more security; the dark skin is seen as masculine and therefore, she will feel more
protected. Another possibility, however is a common belief that light-skinned “pretty boys” are players who bounce around from one woman to the next, leaving them all heartbroken. This could also explain the security that Heidi comments on. At any rate, they are both stereotypes that obviously have not been broken.

Finally, twenty-four-year-old Charisse from Brooklyn, New York, prefers to date dark skinned men based on a bad experience with a light-skinned male: “I prefer dark-skinned men because when I was younger I dated a light-skinned man whose mom made him break up with me because she said I was too dark. I eventually grew out of dating light-skinned men.” Charisse had encountered ideas such as those promoted by elite societies post-Civil War, when the lightness of your skin “qualified” individuals to think and act superior to other blacks. These ideas are still alive and well, and they still affect later generations. Now, Charisse is turned off from dating light-skinned men. I wonder how this bad experience and every subsequent decision will affect her mental and emotional health and that of her children, just as I wonder about Tammy and how her ideals will be handed down to her children.

Angel from Fayetteville, North Carolina, insists that she doesn’t prefer any skin tone to another. The twenty-two year old says that she is open to all colors as well as nationalities because she doesn’t like to limit herself. Yet, even in her maturity and acceptance of diversity, she knows and is around individuals who think differently: “A good girlfriend of mine will not date dark men. She thinks they fib and carry odor. We argue when she speaks in such a manner.” With two very different points of view, who will eventually influence whom? Which mentality will prevail over the other?
Hopefully, it is the one that revolves around acceptance. But if that one doesn’t prevail, and even if they continue to be deadlocked in their views, one individual with that type of thinking can be detrimental to future generations and their ideas about complexion.

Kristin, a twenty-year-old from Charlotte County, Virginia, also insists that she has no preference for whom she dates although she admits that physical aspects play a role in her decision. Interestingly enough, she is the only participant who did not include complexion as she described herself. She only says later that her nickname at home is Red, and she was called “redbone” in elementary school. This is what Kristin had to say about colorism: “I know that some people judge based on color, but I have no problem with how people are textured although I think some people generalize dark as ugly, more so men than women.” This supports much of the research including the Marketplace Theory that places emphasis on skin color as an asset when looking for a mate. Men can enhance their status by marrying the skin tone that has more value, which at the time was light skin, but there is no way a woman could really enhance her own status, for she is the marker, that by which the men are being judged. To support Kristin’s claims about men’s perception of color, she tells a short story about a friend who recently asked her to hook him up with a “light-skinned girl with long hair and light eyes.”

Although they wouldn’t know each other, Jenee may have been an acceptable catch for Kristin’s friend. Jenee, a twenty-four-year-old Baltimore native, describes herself as light-skinned, mentally strong, and voluptuous and attributes the influence for seeing herself as these things to other people’s comments. This relates to T. Joel Wade’s citing of prior research that suggests that we evaluate ourselves similar to the way we are
perceived (362). How does she see colorism playing out in the African American community? Jenee insists that although colorism still exists, it is not as “serious” as it has been:

People who were born in the 70s, 80s, [and] 90s . . . have a different value system. Color is not a big deal anymore. On TV, we see darker men and women, especially in music videos and sit-coms. Darker models are making the big bucks. Sex symbols such as Morris Chesnut, Michael Jordan, Gabrielle Union are darker skin tones. Basically, we are moving away from “lighter is better.” If anything “darker is better.” These days, children are moving away from the “color issue.” They would probably talk about your hair or clothes or shoes before your color. Times are changing. Although the color issue exists, it is slowly going away.

This positive outlook on the colorism issue could very well be linked to Jenee’s own perception of skin tone. She says she “loves” dark and medium brown skin tones and think that those skin tones are “beautiful and just getting the attention that [they] deserve.” Lachecia also likes darker skin tones, admitting, “I love my complexion . . . It’s something about my dark skin that makes me happy. My parents are dark-skinned.” And though Lachecia agrees with Jenee that the colorism issue is not as serious as it used to be, she asserts that it is somehow still very present in the African American community and won’t just “go away”:

The color complex theory or issue isn’t as heavy as it was when my 53-year-old mother was a child, but slavery has left an everlasting scar on the black race. We will never stray completely away from just seeing one another as black, but as light-skinned, red, brown, caramel, Hershey black, black-black. We have color in our black novels, color on the cover of our magazines. The issue will never cease to exist.

Teisha, a thirty-three-year-old from Farmville, Virginia, believes as I do, that “[colorism] is a learned behavior that is passed down from generation to generation.
People will believe anything if no research is done. Americans are so quick to judge others, even themselves.” Described as a fair-skinned female, Teisha remembered a time around the age of 18 or 19 when she along with her sister, went to a basketball game and were called “light-skinned bitches” that “think that they are cute.” Teisha states at the end of her narrative that “people need to grow up.” But is it really that simple when, as she suggests herself, this is a learned behavior passed down from generations of people who believe this is the right mentality to have? As she says, people will believe anything unless more research is done.
Surveys give only edited accounts of colorism that are very specific to the questions asked. They show correlations between what writers write and how the participants feel. But on an even more personal note, the narratives that I could submit on my personal experiences with colorism could stand alone as evidence to further exemplify and document what each author has addressed in her works. Many parallels exist between the fiction written by these African Americans and work I’ve written of my own non-fictional, personal experiences. Many of the same tropes and questions that show up prove the prevalence of colorism and its penetration into the lives of African American women everywhere, including myself. Their fictions, those novels are my own personal stories told at different angles with different approaches in different times. Yet, they all belong to me. Their fictions are my reality. I came to realize that I had lived their words and their creations during my first semester of graduate school. My first big assignment was to write an extensive creative non-fiction piece that eventually evolved into the following revelations.

Research has shown a sort of sympathy to darker-skinned black women, suggesting that when it comes to the color line, they – or rather we – are at the bottom of the totem pole. I can’t say I disagree.
I spent my 21st birthday in Florida on a summer internship in a news room without family or friends to celebrate. My roommates and co-workers bought me a cake and cards, which was nice, but it's not the same as celebrating with family and friends. So when I returned home in August, my family threw a small welcome home/surprise birthday barbeque for me. I knew about the barbeque, so when my mom asked me to go inside the house and bring out a tray for her, I didn't think much of it. I was walking to put the tray on one of the picnic tables behind the house when everyone yelled "Surprise!" On the table where I was going to set the tray was a birthday cake with a 21 candle lit on top. I was smiling uncontrollably and went to admire my cake before I saw the banner that was hanging against the house.

My mother, being the craftswoman that she is, had created a banner entitled "21 Picture Perfect Years" complete with a huge camera that had a face, legs and arms snapping himself and flashing, all of which she had drawn, cut out and laminated. Pictures of me from birth until as current as that spring were plastered all over this long banner. My jaw dropped as I looked over those pictures, some taking me back to places I had forgotten I'd been. I remember looking at the picture taken of me while I was still in the hospital. I was very light with curly black hair and slanted almond-shaped eyes. I always say, "I was such a beautiful baby." That day was no exception. "Look at me," I said. "I was gorgeous." My eyes continued to browse the banner and I came upon a picture that made me frown.

I was looking at a picture of me at another one of my birthday parties when I was two years old. There was a big number two candle on the cake atop the table and I was
standing in a chair bending over to blow the candle out. All my cousins and friends from my neighborhood were gathered around the table, tiptoeing to see me and the cake. But that's not what struck me about the picture. What I noticed, and upset me, was my birthday outfit. My mother had chosen a light pink sundress for me to wear, which probably would have been okay except I wasn't light anymore the way I was in my baby picture. I was even darker then than I am now, which was made even more apparent with a pink dress on. I was so embarrassed.

Being Black for me is about more than being an African American. It's about being a dark-skinned African American, a struggle within a struggle. Racism still exists in this country. So, simply being African American is a struggle that cannot be escaped, constantly having to watch what one says or does because discriminating, stereotyping eyes are watching. Yet, it is colorism that makes the struggle – my struggle – all the worse. Colorism is internal racism, racism within a race. Both racism and colorism are issues of acceptance. I have battled all my life with acceptance among peers of my own race, a war which became an internal conflict with self-acceptance that I am forced to deal with before demanding respect and acceptance from others.

Growing up, it seemed that everyday someone let me know just how unacceptable my complexion was. Pretty early, while I was still in elementary school in the mid-1980s, I remember a day on the bus riding home from school when a girl and I were arguing about God knows what. Eventually, she said something she figured was very clever and ended it "wit' yo ugly black tail!" I raised my eyebrow, put my hand on my
hip and said, "Just 'cause you light don't mean you pretty!" The kids on the bus found my
comment more amusing than hers, began to "oooooo!" and embarrass her enough to keep
her quiet for the rest of the ride. But even though I had said it, I knew that I really didn't
believe what I had just told her. Neither did a lot of people. Light did mean pretty.
Research now suggests that this was the common conception, but I knew it for myself.

I'm not even sure where these impressions and equations first stemmed from or
which factor of colorism influenced me first. There are a few to consider.

I liked dolls when I was younger. Liked them so much that I played with them up
until I was about thirteen or fourteen, and I probably would have played with them longer
except my mother refused to buy me any more for Christmas. Although the first Black
Barbie, Christie, was released as early as 1968, most of my dolls were white. I guess that
was before black dolls were more heavily marketed. My Barbies mostly had blonde hair
and blue eyes. Although we called them light-skinned to justify owning the white dolls,
my sister Muffin and I did manage to get a few black Barbie dolls. We had one whose
hair was supposed to "curl" up when it was wet, but it actually kinked up; we never got a
comb through it. Whenever I would bring my Barbies to life, I noticed Ken didn't want
any of the black Barbies; he only liked the light-skinned ones.

Morrison and hooks used dolls as tropes, and wrote about how they or their
characters either loathed the little white dolls that were being forced on them, or how they
wanted dolls that looked more like them. I merely accepted what I was given. A small
part of me liked the lighter dolls, although I never specifically asked for one or the other.
As I got older, I realized that my naïve perception was telling me along with the rest of
the world that light is right. This is why Ken was only attracted to the light, white and right Barbie.

"Un-huh," my mother said, standing in the middle of our small Baptist church. Service was over and she was in the center aisle talking to my cousin Lia who had just given birth to a baby boy about three months before. The baby boy was born a dark brown but had since become very light. "Evelyn took one look at Michelle and said 'That ain't my baby!'" Momma sort of chuckled. On several occasions my mom has told this story of when her sister had her first baby with a laugh at the punchline. The story is told, it seems, rather often, always getting laughs from its audience. Hours after Aunt Evelyn had my cousin Michelle over thirty years ago, the nurse brought the baby back to the room to see my aunt. According to the story, she took one look at her new very dark-skinned baby girl and told the nurse there was some kind of mistake. The dark infant wasn't her baby. It turned out to be her baby, the one she had given birth to. The story itself is supposed to be about how a baby's complexion can change dramatically after it is born. But mostly what I hear is the disgust in my aunt's statement. I often wondered why that couldn't be her baby, why she didn't want it to be? But I knew the answer.

Both my brothers, Kenneth and James, were in high school while I was growing up. They are ten and twelve years older than I am, respectively. I can't remember their girlfriends ever being darker than a brown paper bag. In fact, most of them were lighter.
But I do remember I thought they were all so beautiful. I remember I wanted to be just like them.

After Kenny had gone to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, to attend school, he became seriously involved with a woman named Kendal who lived in Richmond. Kendal was a beautiful model and make-up artist. While my brother was away at school, she would invite my older sister, Muffin, and me to spend weekends with her at her parents' house because she had a little sister around our age. We would go to the mall, rent movies, make virgin strawberry daquiris that we pretended were laced with alcohol and walk around slurring our words and falling down. She was so sweet to us and so much fun. And dark! Her skin was dark like mine, but it never occurred to me that she was the role model I needed to convince me that dark black is beautiful.

Most of the negative attitudes about my complexion came from the kids I knew. My neighbor, Sheron, was probably one of my best friends growing up. He and I climbed trees together, pretended we knew karate, played Nintendo. One day while playing karate, Sheron kicked me hard in the stomach. I'm not very sure it was an accident, since when I doubled over in pain, he laughed and, turning to his younger brother Mario, said, "Look at her black tail!" He and his brother continued to laugh at me as I tried to stand up. The pain didn't matter too much, and I guess neither did the comment since that never stopped me from playing with him. The next day, I was right back over there trying to figure out the secrets to Super Mario Bros. II. He used to always, always, at some point in our play refer to me as black tail or Blackie. And even
though I never really took offense enough to actually say something, I came to carry his
and others' comments with me.

Like poor Pecola in the school yard, I endured many insults slung at me over
something I simply couldn't control: my complexion. I guess the small difference here
was that the insults were coming from people I considered my friends. And I endured
them, accepted them because they were my friends. They liked me and played with me.
But if this was the treatment I got from friends, what else could I expect from non-friends
except more insults? The biggest difference between Pecola and me though, is that I
wasn't always such a little girl when these insults would occur.

As late in my life as 1992 when I was about thirteen or fourteen, I was still being
called names. I would've liked to think that things would get better as my peers and I got
older, but that's not the case. High school began when I was in eighth grade. I'm from a
small country town in Virginia with only one high school in the entire county for four
different towns. Our graduating classes rarely – very rarely – exceeded one hundred. I
considered it to be pretty mixed with very close to a 50/50 ratio of Black and White
students. Race wasn't an issue in our school at all. The Black and White students got
along fine with each other. The problems – at least for me – were more Black on black.

In the mornings before homeroom, I would walk around the halls with my friends.
One particular morning, I was walking and talking, laughing about eighth grade
amusements when I slightly bumped into a senior, a girl they called Big Cat with good
reason. She was huge, took up about half the width of the hall anyway, so it was pretty
hard to avoid her. She turned around and looked at me with her nose turned up. She
raised an eyebrow as she said to one of her friends, "Did you see that little black dot that just bumped up into me?" She said that as if I had left, but I was still standing there, and she had just insulted me. Did I say anything about her being as big as she was with no room – literally – to sling insults? No matter what I thought about anyone's appearance or personality, I wouldn't insult them in front of everyone to intentionally hurt and embarrass them, especially unprovoked.

I left the scene and went to Muffin's homeroom, my Claudia and Frieda all wrapped in one because Muffin is what I call a natural-born intimidator. There is just something about her – and don't ask what because I honestly don't know – that makes people cower in front of her to this day. She's no bully. In fact, my sister never got into fights at school. She was an honor roll varsity athlete, respected by the entire administration and faculty. Maybe it's her fearless attitude that nothing or no one was bigger than she could handle. After I told her what had happened, we walked around the halls until we found Big Cat. My sister walked right up to the large frame that took up half the hall, interrupted her conversation and said, "Excuse me, but did you have something to say to me or my sister?" Big Cat looked at me, recognized the "black dot," looked back at my sister and realized she had messed with the wrong eighth grader.

"Naw, naw Sherri," she stuttered with a quivering voice. "I ain't got nothin' to say."

"I didn't think so," my sister rolled her eyes and we walked away. Yeah, she wouldn't mess with me again. Wouldn't call me black dot no more, at least not to my face. But though my sister intimidated the hell out of a senior all for my honor when she
herself was just a sophomore, it didn't really change how Big Cat saw me. And it didn't change what I had heard her say about me. Certainly wouldn't stop the next person from seeing what she saw me as: a black dot. Couldn't stop anyone else from insulting me and putting me down right to my face. I was glad my sister had helped me with Big Cat, but there wasn't much she could do about the way people saw me. Or for the way I saw myself. I looked in the mirror every day; I knew I was dark but it was people like Big Cat who taught me dark was ugly.

Recently I decided to skip a Sunday morning church service for some much needed rest and relaxation. I had decided I would lie around on the sofa, drink coffee and watch movies on Direct TV all day. I flipped through the channels and found a movie with one of my favorite actresses, Alfre Woodard. She and Loretta Devine were starring in a movie called *Funny Valentines*. In the movie, Alfre’s character goes back down south to her hometown to visit family and runs into old acquaintances. At the town store with her light-skinned daughter, friends of Alfre’s mother congratulate her for “doing well for herself,” and then advised the young girl with wide smiles, “And you need a sunhat young lady; keep that skin of yours nice and light.” This implied to me that one of the ways light-skinned people could do—or continue to do—“well” for themselves was to continue to be light-skinned.

Right after that movie went off, *Sprung* came on with Joe Torry and Tisha Campbell. Joe Torry, a very dark-skinned guy was preparing for a night out cruising for girls with one of his light-skinned boys. The light-skinned friend became impatient with Torry who was taking a long time getting ready. When he mentioned this to Joe Torry,
he responded that he didn’t have it easy like “you yella niggas;” he had to work a little harder to get attention and numbers from women. But he then declared that it wouldn’t be that way much longer because “yella” was going out of style and “real black is back.” There goes that idea of authentic blackness that Alice Walker speaks of in her essay “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” Within a little over two hours, I had witnessed at least two incidents that addressed colorism on the TV screen. I grabbed the remote and pushed the recall button to find out what channel I was watching: Black Starz. This was the station for Black artists to be showcased in Black movies, and this was what we, the African American community were being sold. I shook my head, realizing that colorism was far deeper than just a young country girl whose mind had been conditioned to perpetuate colorist attitudes and let those attitudes influence her own self-perception.

I don’t really know what it’s like for dark-skinned guys. Kathy Russell, author of The Color Complex, writes that while it is hard for dark men, they can use their intelligence to compensate for darker skin complexions. I don’t remember color being a problem for guys, but then again, could I really know? I do remember one of the guys I used to go to school with, Terence, who called himself “Black” and wanted everyone else to as well. He even amended it to “Black 10” for the number on his baseball jersey. Terence and I used to talk on a regular basis, but I don’t remember hearing anything about any run-ins based on his complexion.
Names like black dot were common place for me: Blackie, Smuttie, Charcoal, Burnt, Crispy Black, Tar Baby. Kids were creative. And none of these names were ever hurled at me by any white kids. They never said anything about how dark I was or how ugly my complexion made me. It always came from the black kids in my community.

My Uncle Marvin, a reverend who married a very light-skinned woman, stopped by to visit one Sunday after church. He picked up the book *The Color Complex* from the kitchen table and thumbed through it. He stopped to read a passage:

[Charles H. Parrish] discovered in the 1940’s that junior-high students used as many as 145 different terms to describe skin color, including *half-white, yaller, high yellow, fair, bright, light, red bone, light brown, medium brown, brown, brown skin, dark brown, chocolate, dark, black, ink spot, blue black and tar baby.*

He umphed and shook his head. “God Almighty,” he mumbled, still shaking his head. “It’s still like that, Nikki,” he said to me. “Just today another light-skinned minister was talking to me and my wife and he leaned over to her and said, ‘you know we light-skinned folks got to stick together.’ Just today!” he said sounding amazed. His wife is very light with very fine long hair. Her children have the same features. “And the other day,” my uncle continued, “she stood right in that house and told those children, ‘don’t you know you’re better than *them*?’” them being some children at their school. I don’t know the whole story behind that statement, but my uncle seemed to believe she meant that her light-skinned kids were better than the dark-skinned kids at the school. I heard echoes of the voices of those kids that had put me down so many times before, while my uncle left my house a bit irked.
During the summers, like most kids I knew, I spent as much time as I could in the pool. I loved to go swimming with my friends. Only none of them seemed to care about how dark the sun made them while they were saturated with chlorine. I did. Sun block didn't seem to help; I would still get darker than my already black complexion. One day when I was about thirteen I discovered a bleaching cream in the dollar store, which I bought and applied to my face and body before and after swimming. To be honest, I didn't know if it really worked or if I just wanted to believe it was working, so just to be safe, I would cut my swimming days two weeks short so that I could stay inside all day and get my normal black back before starting school again. I had to be really young when all this was going on, because when I got older, I just stopped going to swim all together. I used to get mad at myself for getting so dark while I was in the sun. My complexion just seemed to ruin everything.

During that time, I would look at myself in the bathroom mirror, searching for something, anything I could consider beautiful in spite of my blackness. I would turn my face every which way. I must have told myself aloud that I was ugly. My mother, always seeming to be around collecting clothes for the wash or cleaning, would wave a dismissive hand at me, saying, "You're my pretty chocolate baby" or "You are a beautiful black girl." At home, I was always told I was beautiful, but I couldn't believe those biased opinions. My mother, my family, was supposed to tell me I was pretty even if it was a lie. I knew I was too dark to be pretty. Pretty was long, good hair – that hair the texture and manageability of an infant's without the help of chemicals or other aids –
light-colored eyes and light skin. Forget what those features would actually look like put together on a face. This was the ideal image.

I remember writing stories very early. I remember some of my first stories in fifth and sixth grade about boyfriends and falling in love, stories I would compose as summer projects for myself and my friends to read and giggle about when school started again. I guess love wasn't an unusual topic for a girl my age. I usually wrote in first person. Whenever I got to the part of the story where I was describing myself to my readers, I was always light-skinned with long good hair. In some stories, I even wrote myself as a bi-racial child. Guess I can thank Barbie there.

So I thought I was ugly, which of course led to low self-esteem, which of course led to an even lower self-image. I couldn't appreciate myself for anything. I wrote stories my friends begged me to continue to write and poems they were willing to pay for to give to their sweethearts. I was in several gifted and talented programs at school. I was a great athlete, playing varsity sports in ninth grade. Still I felt like an ugly black nobody. Research suggests that being physically “marketable” and attractive to others is an asset, but it was an asset I didn’t have. This feeling of ugly black nothingness got stronger when I realized the guys all chose light-skinned girls – that ideal image – to be infatuated with. They obviously had a marketable asset.

No one really knew how much I struggled with my complexion. Muffin had helped me out that day in the halls with Big Cat, but she never knew about the arguments on the bus or Sheron or any of those things. My mother might have watched me examine
myself in the mirror, but she certainly didn't know that I was writing stories where I was lighter and therefore more beautiful.

I don’t know who set the standard of beauty and said that this was going to be the way it is, but I think this constitutes a general consensus of beauty in this society: If you light, you all right. If you black, get back. If you brown, you can stick around. A saying my Uncle Marvin told me about recently. I had heard variations of it, but it pretty much equated to the same thing: white/light is the best, top notch and the closer you get to it, the better you are, the more successful you are, the more beautiful you are. So beauty in this country is based first on whiteness and everything else follows: fine hair, light-colored eyes and delicate features as opposed to dark skin, coarse or kinky hair, dark brown eyes and exaggerated ethnic features. I am the opposite of what constitutes definitive beauty in this society.

But what is it about the eyes, then, that somehow make or is supposed to make the difference? Are these “windows to the soul” really able to help you see a different side of life? Pecola thought new blue eyes would change her entire world around, would get her noticed and buy her a better life. My eyes seemed to do a little of that for me. I discovered them one day in sixth grade – even in the midst of writing these stories where I am someone I could never be. I was fooling around in Muffin’s make-up bag – she was allowed to play in it but never wear it outside of the house – and found the mascara. I had seen Muffin put it on before, so I tried it. After putting on this hideous blue mascara, I looked at my eyes and fell in love. I found out that day that I liked their shape, how they looked on my face and the way the mascara made my lashes longer and more
glamorous above them. Didn't do that much for my self-image – if I could've walked
around with a veil covering the rest of my face I would have – but it did give me
something to like about myself, a very slow but definite start to accepting myself. By the
time I was a senior in high school, I had decided that maybe I wasn't that bad. That there
were things about me that I did like. And that maybe I wasn't ugly. I didn't totally
believe I wasn't ugly, but I tried to open up to that possibility. It was amazing to me how
attitudes around me just seemed to shift when I went to college.

The first person outside of family who ever said anything positive to me about my
complexion was a girl named Tanisha. Freshman year of college, I walked on to the
volleyball team. Tanisha was the middle hitter. I remember those first few days of
practice she would say to me, "You have such beautiful dark skin." And everytime she
said that, I wanted to look around the room to see who she was talking to. My skin was
beautiful? "You look like a little chocolate china doll," she would say and put her huge
hands around my face and then ask my teammates, "Doesn't she? She's so pretty." I
would smile a this-lady-is-crazy type of grin and keep warming up. And there was
Martinos, a senior business major who was always commenting on my skin and body.

Not everyone in college was as positive as Tanisha and Martinos about my
complexion though. One afternoon some of my teammates and I were sitting in Tanisha's
dorm room talking and Lu came up in the conversation. Lu, a rather sheltered, naïve girl
with a strong country accent and goofy, gullible tendencies was an easy target for
character analysis. Most of it was pretty harmless, since we had actually told her all these
things before that we were now discussing in private. All of a sudden, in the middle of
our laughter, Lu burst into the room and started this whole dramatic scene straight from
daytime soaps about how she cain't believe we would sit 'round an' tawk 'bout her
behind her back. She had been listening at the door. We were initially amused, but soon
annoyed by her presence. I shook my head from side to side as I said, “Just leave, Lu” in
the middle of her dramatic monologue.

She started into another speech and the only thing I remember from that one was
how she spat out the words country BLACK thang at me. Lu, a light-skinned girl who
thought she was beauty personified had tried to insult me with the one thing I had
struggled with my entire life. I was fed up. This time, I would do something about it.
My self-esteem was far from high, but it was enough for me to know that I didn't have to
allow someone to put me down without standing up for myself. I knew that I was worth
more than what I had previously thought and I was tired of being told otherwise.

I jumped up from the spot where I was sitting on the bed and started towards her.
My teammates grabbed my arms and hands as Lu began to back toward the door. After
Lu stepped outside of the door, Tanisha closed it. But it was too late. The damage had
been done. I was insulted, hurt and angry, not usually a good combination for me. I
broke away from my volleyball teammates’ hands. Tanisha held her 6’2” 200 plus pound
frame on the door. I put my hand on the doorknob and opened it with ease while she was
still pressing her weight against it. I could still hear Lu fussing from down the hall. I got
into the hallway and felt huge hands holding me again while I screamed for her to come
back and talk her shit right here in my face. She kept walking. I knew then that these
issues I had when it came to my complexion wouldn't just go away. I was willing to risk
my full academic scholarship and suspension, even expulsion to fight her over some words. But I don’t care what anyone says. Words can hurt you. See, Tanisha was from Philly and Martinos was from Texas. But Lu, she was from the South like me; she had more of a Southern attitude when it came to complexion.

I think complexion is very much a Southern way of thinking that has been spread and stretched throughout the U.S. because of relocation and migration. Southern in the idea of North and South during slavery when the North was a bit more liberal and the South was strictly conservative – liked their darkies to know their place. And I’m not alone in my theories. According to research done by Professor Trina Jones who published an essay called “Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color” in the Duke Law Journal, in areas reaching from the south of Pennsylvania to some parts of North Carolina referred to as the Upper South, mulattoes were treated the same as other Blacks. They were believers in the "one-drop" rule: anyone with just a drop of Black blood was considered Black. But in the Lower South, mulattoes had a bit of status. They made up an intermediate class between Whites and Blacks. Blacks with lighter skin were considered by Whites as well as Blacks superior to darker Blacks because of their White ancestry. And though the Civil War began to destroy these notions for White people in the Lower South – in order to defend slavery, strict distinctions between Black and White had to be made – these superior attitudes for light-skinned Blacks prevailed.

I think in a lot of cases, those ideas have been passed down through generations. Light-skinned was just better to be. A slave could lead a much better life if his or her skin was light enough. Light-skinned slaves could work inside the house instead of
sweating outside with the dark-skinned slaves in the field. Division began that early. If they were light enough, the light-skinned blacks would pass, that is live their lives as White citizens, associate themselves with the Whites, thus continuing to adopt the notion they were better than dark-skinned, field-working blacks.

I can't say that every light-skinned slave who worked in the plantation house was that way or thought that way because I wasn't there, but according to the evidence I see of it today, this attitude certainly wasn't unheard of. I have participated in jokes about "house niggers" and "field niggers" and we laugh and try to make it funny, but thoughts like that stick with us long after the laughter is gone, long after slavery is gone.

Do I still have problems with my complexion? It's 2004 and I wish I could say I didn't, but I do. Who can erase twenty-four years of brainwashing linked to hundreds of years of racism and colorism so quickly? My attitudes are evolving but I'm afraid that hasn't made much of a difference with the rest of the world. I was recently sitting in a restaurant with one of my co-workers when she mentioned that she needed to call one of her other co-workers whom she referred to as "Blackie." And after that name escaped from her lips, her face said, "I shouldn't have said that in front of her." That same week, I was talking to her and when she referred to this same co-worker again, she called her "Ugly Pam," which didn't make it much better because that only told me that she equated dark black skin to ugliness, an attitude I had hoped I had gotten away from. What really upset me was that this co-worker was thirty-one years old and still slinging grade school insults like it was a normal thing to do. I guess she just made it abundantly clear to me that we, none of us, can escape the mentality we as a race have created for ourselves. If
twenty-three years is hard to erase, try hundreds. Even in its most subtle forms, complexion still makes a difference in our race.

One night freshman year I went to dinner with my friends Tish, Tori, Angie and Kita. As the night went on, we talked about a lot of things and eventually got on the topic of pledging a sorority. Angie was already a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. Tish and Tori just smiled when asked what sorority if any they were considering because I had learned early first semester, this is information a girl should keep to herself until the pledging rush. So when the question came around to me, I followed suit and just smiled. Angie examined me. "You look like a Delta," she said referring to Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. All the girls at the table turned and examined me the way Angie had and chimed in, "Yeah, she does." I just smiled at a comment which I had heard several times before without even thinking about the implications of it.

How do you look like a Delta? The same way you look like an AKA. Complexion has a lot to do with these stereotypes. Deltas were usually associated with dark skin and AKA's with lighter skin. Rumor even has it that AKA's used to administer the paper bag test to its members. Looking at some of the members I knew, it seemed true enough. According to Professor Jones, this form of admission into elite clubs or associations was normal for post-Civil War color-conscious societies. In the paper bag test, individuals seeking membership into any of these elite organizations would have to stick their arms inside a brown paper bag. If the arm was lighter than the bag, then they were admitted. Other post-Civil War tests included the blue veins test: individuals were granted admission if the blue veins in their arms were visible.
Elva, Uncle Marvin’s wife, is part of a huge family where most of them—at least the most I’ve met—are very light-skinned. My family learned very early in their relationship that she had significant White ancestry. I was at her house one day, standing in the kitchen when I noticed a photo on the refrigerator. The picture had about twenty women in it, nineteen of which were very light-skinned and one brown-skinned woman at the front of the photo with rabbit ears being held up behind her head. I recognized the brown-skinned woman as one of my teachers at my undergrad university.

“This is Vanessa,” I said pointing to the picture. Elva looked up from her cooking.

“Yes, that’s my cousin. How do you know her?”

“She’s the Journalism Program Coordinator at my school.”

“Yeah, that’s my cousin. All the women in that picture and in my family are AKAs. She was the only one who pledged Delta.”

I studied that photo and silently pondered why that was. Did AKA not accept her? Certainly the family had a legacy going. Maybe she just liked Delta better, a personal preference she was willing to choose regardless of the extensive history of AKAs in her family. Is that why the rabbit ears were behind her head and no one else’s? Was she ever ostracized in her family for obviously being different? Elva told the story behind the photo and made the whole scenario seem very innocent, but for some reason all I could think about were those rumors of paper bag tests and stereotypes of dark Deltas. Even though, since that year in college that I had dinner with my friends, I have personally seen these stereotypes begin to dissipate within those sororities, we obviously
still use divisions – however abandoned the brown paper bag tests and other methods – like this even subconsciously to continue to segregate our own race.

What I find most annoying about stereotypes is the fact that a lot of black people I have come in contact with, without even knowing it, expect dark people to be ugly. And while most people will say, *no I don't*, that's because they themselves don't realize how unconscious and insidious this reality is. I have heard stories of people being told, "You're a pretty dark girl" or "You are so pretty to be dark." Yes, people actually say that as if it's a compliment. What it says is "I expect someone as dark as you to be butt-ugly and I am so surprised that you aren't that I just had to tell you about it and now you should thank me for my kind words." It is this expectation that follows me around and even plagues other people around me.

Ever since I've known my friend Dwayne – which is for as long as I can remember – he has always dated light-skinned people. He himself is light-skinned with freckles, "good" reddish-brown hair that curls up. Usually, that means he would gravitate to someone darker than he, at least that has been my experience. It's funny because it doesn't start off this way, but I guess after we grow up and mature a bit, a lot of dark people end up coupling off with light people and vice versa. I don't have much of an explanation for it; it just seems to happen that way. Could be preference, could be the color struck factor, could be that they just coincidentally love people on the other end of the spectrum. Who knows? Maybe opposites do attract. But, not for Dwayne. He likes light skin and "good" hair and accepts no exceptions. He was talking to me one day
about this hottie he had seen, and after going on and on, he ended the whole conversation with, "But, too dark."

Whenever he talks like this, I look at him like he is crazy.

"You are color struck, darling," I tell him all the time. He retaliates with, "Nikki, you date light-skinned people, too, so don't even act like I am the only one." And I normally respond with, "Yeah, I date light-skinned people, but the difference is I never discriminate based on complexion. You will not hear me say, 'but, too dark.'" That usually shuts him up.

Okay, so obviously something needs to be said here about the difference between color struck and preference. Pay attention; it gets sticky here. The way I see it, preferences work on principles of percentages, numbers, statistics. Based on a person’s dating history, one can calculate percentages and determine what preferences another person has. However, color struck deals with making prejudgments based on the opinion that someone is not worthy of your time or energy or even a chance because of their skin complexion. That is discriminatory, blatant colorism. Have I dated light-skinned people? Sure. Have I dated dark-skinned people? Sure. I do not look at someone and say, "Oh, you're too dark, sweetie. Next!" I do not let cuties pass me by because I don't want a dark-skinned husband or dark kids. Thoughts like that just don't enter my mind although those thoughts do exist for many people. Remember Tammy? Besides, Black men, light or not, are a precious but rare commodity. Who am I to continue to decrease my chances of finding a decent guy? Please.
Now just like with most rules, there are exceptions, loopholes in the name-calling arena. My friend Je is also light-skinned with freckles and you know what she calls me? BlackAss. Do I ever get mad at her for calling me that? No. Somehow, with her, it's different. Just like with Tanisha. It never bothered me that she always called me Blackgirl on the volleyball court in front of everybody. Now, Tanisha is considered dark-skinned so maybe that makes her the exception. But, Je? That's another story, right? Certainly if Dwayne called me BlackAss, I would probably go years without talking to him. So what is the difference? Je can appreciate dark skin. Yes, that's all. She knows the beauty of dark skin just as much as she knows the beauty of light skin. Her husband is as dark as I am. I know she isn't saying anything to try and insult me or make me feel ashamed of being dark. She just calls me what she calls me. It's loving when she says it. We even laugh about it. And why not? We understand each other. I even call her PaleFace. It's all in fun.

My complexion has played a major role in molding me into the person I currently am. One might ask, complexion can do all that? Yeah, I have a complex over my complexion. Because I got so much negative attention in school, I find myself craving any attention I can get my hands on, even if it is only positive on the outside. And that starts a domino effect. Now, Martinos was a senior business major from Texas who swore up and down that I was the sexiest thing he had ever seen. I had my suspicions. A senior hitting on a freshman could only mean one thing. And it couldn't mean that I was beautiful; as far as I knew, my skin was too dark for that. It had to be my body. But he
would constantly call me Chocolate and Thickness, whichever he felt at the moment. I didn’t really believe in his infatuation, but I enjoyed the attention. So we hung out in the lobby of the dorm a lot. Every once in a while, he visited me in my room, which was prohibited even though he lived directly one floor under me. We lived in the honors dorm, the only co-ed residence hall at the private Baptist-affiliated university we attended.

One day Je and I were in my dorm room with the television on, talking, when a knock on the door interrupted our laughs. I opened the door and Martinos marched in. He and Je shared a couple of laughs while I sat on my bed ignoring his presence. Martinos was all right when it came to giving me the attention I wanted, telling me things I liked to hear, but that was the extent of our relationship. I wasn’t too enthused about him coming to my dorm room. My cold shoulder must have chilled Je, though, because she excused herself to her room in spite of my eyes pleading for her not to leave.

Martinos, my cold shoulder, and I were left alone in my dorm room. At first, he was on my roommate’s bed; then he eased his way over to mine. I kept insisting he leave because I was going to sleep. In an attempt to totally ignore him and hoping he would get the picture, I stretched out across my bed and covered myself with my comforter, closed my eyes to sleep. I wasn’t thinking – I had basically put myself in a most vulnerable position: one, I wasn’t watching him and two, I had left my neck easily accessible. And my neck was pretty much Kryptonite to my most frigid cold shoulder. I like to think someone whispered this secret to Martinos just before I surrendered to him.

Fool.
I felt like the biggest idiot. The last thing I wanted to do was sleep with him. I didn’t even like Martinos that much and that easily I had allowed him to become a permanent part of my life. And it all began over needing some attention? Someone to say, "You're pretty. Oh look at your dark chocolate skin." It was all a little too much for me to handle. So I stopped talking to Martinos. Not speaking to him didn’t really help my need for attention, but it made me feel better.

People say I look like Muffin. They have been saying that probably since we were in elementary school together. We'd go to the restaurants or parties, and upon meeting people their eyes would shoot back and forth between the two of us just before they ask, "Are you two twins?" No, we're actually two whole years apart. But we got asked so much, we just started saying yes, which works pretty good when clubbing. For some reason, guys think twins are sexy and are willing to run their wallets dry for the smallest inkling of a possibility of a fulfilled fantasy. Anyway, I could never see the resemblance. I stood myself up beside Muffin in a mirror one day and examined our faces closely. My eyes are more almond-shaped. My nose is bigger. I have bigger lips. And of course, I am darker than she is. She is a nice even brown. This is probably what kept me from seeing our resemblance. She is brown and everyone, especially all the guys at school, thought she was beautiful. So we couldn’t look alike; I was dark and ugly as far as I knew. There are certainly similarities that even my two-year-old niece can see – she saw a picture of me and then a picture of Muffin; both times she called the woman in
the photo "Nikki" – but that resemblance was overshadowed by my dark complexion; unfortunately, I still can’t see it.

Freshman year, I was walking from one of my classes. It was still pretty early in the first semester and the only people I really knew were my volleyball teammates. Walking from class to my dorm I heard someone yell "Me-Me!" across the yard. "Me-Me!" a male voice bellowed again. The third time, it seemed the voice was getting so much closer, so I turned to see who was yelling and some guy was running up on me, still yelling "Me-Me!" I stopped when I realized he was calling me. When he finally caught up, he goes into, Why you ignoring me, Me-Me. I looked at him and asked,

"Who are you?"

"Stop playing, Me-Me," he said. He was laughing at my absurdity.

"My name is not Me-Me."

"Stop playing, girl. Why didn't you call me last night?"

Maybe because I don't know you. "I'm sorry, but my name is not Me-Me. I'm Nikki." He laughs a bit again, but then stares at me long enough to either see that I wasn't Me-Me or that I'm a schitzo. He says, "Oh, my bad." I turn and keep walking.

One day, I'm walking into my dorm and I walk past some girl and immediately stop in my tracks. We both kinda backtrack and look at each other. This girl has my complexion with almond-shaped eyes, long dark hair, full lips and a slender face. I think I am looking in a mirror. We just stare at each other for a while, amazed at our resemblance then I finally say, "Is your name Me-Me?" She replies, "You must be Nikki." Apparently, people had been getting us mixed up all week. We began to call
each other Twin – even my parents were amazed at how much we looked alike – and became good friends. But I always wondered, she and I being twins and all, if she had ever been through any of the name-calling stuff I had gone through, the feeling like an ugly, black nobody like I had felt. I didn't ask Me-Me about that – probably from embarrassment; what if I was the only dark girl teased and called ugly and blackie? But time would eventually show me that I am no isolated case.

Chandra and I were both in the same classes most of the time because we were in the same majors. We were good classmates to each other and were even on the newspaper staff together. But it was nothing more than assignments that caused us to have conversations. One day while having a discussion in one of our classes, Chandra told the class about how she was teased in elementary school. How the kids called her some of the same names I had heard and even called her a black Chink because her eyes were very slanted. She told us how much it bothered her and how it affected her self-esteem until she looked into the matter and did a little history. Chandra's family on both sides were from Jamaica and as it turns out, she actually has Chinese blood in her family line. Learning this, instead of being offended, she became proud of the names. Though they didn't stop until much later, names didn't bother her again.

Lucky her.

I envied Chandra for finding a way to cope with the name-calling, the low self-image that sticks with me because of the name-calling. And I was glad she had found a way to deal on her own and that those names just bounced off her. But it wasn't that easy for me. I still had issues, even after I had figured out that maybe I wasn't so bad after all.
My junior year in college, I was offered a scholarship/internship that would allow me to work all summer in a news room. I was especially excited that I would be in Florida working with Florida Today. I would spend the summer living in another state! There, I had roommates, co-workers, friends from school I was around all summer long and I can't remember a single day I felt black or ugly, even with the tan I got from the hot Florida sun that turned me a couple shades darker. I am still unsure why that was exactly. It could've been that no one really cared about my skin complexion. Florida Today strives for diversity – they say so in their mission – and there was a lot of it in the news room alone. It seemed such a melting pot that instead of making distinctions between the several differences you could find in a single place, the people in my environment there embraced the diversity. So instead of sticking out, I finally blended in. Maybe it was just that the people in that news room were older, wiser, more mature, whatever. All I know is that it was great not worrying about how my skin made me look to other people and even myself.

"Ma, you know you wrong," I told my mother later as we cleaned up the mess from my birthday barbeque.

"Wrong about what?"

"About putting that picture of me in that pink dress on that banner. Had me lookin' all black!"

"Oh, girl," my mother said dismissing my complaint with a wave of her hand. "You were my little chocolate baby and you were precious in that dress!"
"How'd you get that picture anyway?" I asked, because I had taken what was obviously a copy and hidden it from her years ago. She just smiled. Imagine after trying to deal with my complexion and how I look, being faced with a banner that forced me to look at myself at several different stages of my life. My "awkward" stages were complicated for me by my complexion so it wasn't so easy to go back and chuckle about it the way others might. I wasn't as horrified as one might think from reading this essay, either though. My reaction to the banner was pretty much the way the whole complexion complex still is with me today: sometimes I felt I was pretty, other times not so much.

There are occasions when I still look at pretty light-skinned girls and wish, but now I am certain that I myself can turn quite a few heads, and I have, and I even joke with my light-skinned friends about how light skin is out of style and now it's all about the chocolate. Dark skin is being a bit more appreciated and accepted. I look on music videos and see dark-skinned dancers or actresses as the beautiful girlfriend which seemed to me to be so rare just a couple of years ago. Even Prince, my all-time favorite artist who didn't really showcase dark-skinned women, had a dark-skinned sista co-star in his video *The Greatest Romance That's Ever Been Sold*, a song from a recent album. But somehow, even noting this beginning evolution of attitudes toward complexion, I still can't completely shake that feeling of inadequacy. That it doesn't make any of us any better or more inferior than the other. Complexion doesn't determine beauty, attraction or sex appeal. It shouldn't speak to class and status in the Black community and society in general. That skin shouldn't matter even though after all these years, after slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, it does. After fighting for our place in this country, we start
other battles voluntarily on ourselves. Did we forget how not to fight or have we done it for so long, we never knew? Attitudes about beauty and battles over status are struggles we continue to fight when we really don’t have to anymore. But, some things I guess for writers, authors, movie producers, individuals and society at large are just hard to let go.
Conclusion

Society is obsessed with the idea of conformity. Everyone should be thin, beautiful, light or white. The dominant culture wins the lottery on deciding standards in any environment. So when there is a dominant culture of Caucasian individuals in a society that reveres beauty, the product is obvious: beauty in this country is defined as light skin and caucasoid features, and that beauty is so valued in the society that it is counted as an asset. Where does that leave everyone else? Struggling to catch up, to either find a niche where we can be accepted as is, or else assimilate into the dominant culture. And in the meantime, we go on enduring lasting effects that either transform into an art form or craft, such as writing and storytelling, or it rests inside of us, trickling out here and there, festering into low self-esteem, low self-image, color complexes, all negative traits acquired through the trauma of not belonging.

As a couple of the women in the survey research indicated, color is everywhere in movies, plays, literature such as novels, magazine covers, and of course, real life. My concern is its presence on the literary scene and how it is or can be perpetuated and/or manipulated. If these ideas can be perpetuated in literature, consciously or otherwise, then certainly literature could also be manipulated to interrupt those thinking patterns that allow the African American community to feed into such ignorance of believing one skin
tone is better than another for *whatever* reason. These African American women authors have demonstrated that possibility in their works.

The writings by the African American women authors discussed in this research are not as outdated as their copyrights might suggest. Young women of the current generation encounter colorism in various forms such as those mentioned in these women’s writings. And it affects their lives, so much so for one woman that she, like many individuals in past generations, deems it necessary to marry a light-skinned man so her children will be light. For those who may have believed this kind of thinking was dead, here is your wake-up call.

Even I have been scarred by the ugliness of colorism. It so traumatized me that it has permeated my entire matriculation as a graduate student, hence the current research. My adult life still feels more complicated because of this phenomenon and its tremendous effects on the psyche. Like all wounds, I imagine that this too, will heal over time. But, like anyone who has been hurt or traumatized, the injured party usually feels better after assessing exactly how to prevent such scarring in the future.

As long as one person carries around an ounce of ignorance, others will be affected by that ignorance. Judging people based solely on their skin color is simply ignorant, just as racism is ignorant. Unfortunately, ignorance breeds ignorance. So, where will the chain of misinformation, stereotypes and myths end? It can only end with education, an infectious re-routing of thought patterns that must simply start with awareness. We all have a responsibility to learn and teach, and if need be, unlearn and unteach certain behaviors and ideologies to become and then produce well-rounded,
knowledgeable, productive citizens in society that engage in critical thinking and are willing to challenge and deconstruct ideas such as colorism.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Appendix

Age:
Ethnicity:
Gender:
City and state in which you were raised:

1) Have you ever been teased within your own ethnicity based on skin color?
   Yes or No
   If yes, was the individual(s) complexion: lighter darker same as yours?

2) Have you ever teased someone within your own ethnicity based on skin color?
   Yes or No
   If yes, was the individual(s) complexion: lighter darker same as yours?

3) Describe yourself. Address physical, emotional, mental and/or social aspects. Briefly identify any factors that influence this description.

4) Do you prefer any one skin tone over any others in ANY capacity (friends, family members, dates, co-workers, etc.)? Why or why not?

5) Respond to / share your insights on colorism (prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color). How do you see the complexion issue, if at all?

6) Tell a story about a time you or someone you know has had to deal with or continues to deal with colorism.
Vita

Dikeita Nichole Eley was born June 18, 1979, to Linwood and Sheron C. Eley. She grew up about 60 miles southeast of Richmond in Waverly, Virginia. After graduating from Sussex Central High School with honors in 1997, she attended Virginia Union University on full academic scholarship. She finished Magna Cum Laude with a degree in English in May 2001. Currently, she is an instructor of English at her undergraduate alma mater.