EVERYDAY COLORISM IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG BLACK WOMEN:
REVISITING THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF
AN OLD PHENOMENON IN A NEW GENERATION

By

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To my mother, Gloria Wilder; my grandmother, Mary Lou Wilson; and the strong line of black women in my family who give life to this work
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By

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Chair: Milagros Peña
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My study examined focus group interviews with 58 black women between the ages of 18 and 25, exploring the influence of colorism in their everyday lives. Colorism, a form of internalized racism appearing in the form of bias and favor for light-skin, European features and “good hair,” has promoted tension and conflict within black American society for generations. Recent scholarship in this area reveals that despite the advances since the Civil Rights movement, colorism has a sustained presence in the black community, particularly for black women. My study further investigated how young black women talk about colorism, and whether this reflects a shift in color consciousness or if there has been no change compared to previous research and documented accounts of skin-tone bias within African-American culture.

Extending Philomena Essed’s theoretical framework of everyday racism, I argue that similar to the daily experiences of racism, everyday colorism is a system of language, internal scripts and external practices that govern the everyday interactions and experiences of young black women as it relates to skin tone.

Grounded theory and discourse analysis reveals that the predominant names, stereotypes and perceptions about light and dark skin signify an inheritance of similar attitudes documented in earlier generations of black Americans. However, young women in this study articulate
distinctly different experiences of being brown-skinned. Based upon the internalized ideas about light, brown, and dark-skin, women in this study engage in ritualistic, compensatory, and discriminatory practices that dictate their own behavior and interaction with other black women. The findings also reveal the role of family, school, relationships, and the media in mediating these scripts and practices.

This research speaks to the gaps in empirical research and theoretical conceptualizations of colorism by not only providing an in-depth exploration of skin tone bias and discrimination among black women, but additionally seeking to develop a foundation for a theoretical framework that captures the key features of colorism in the 21st century. Based on the findings and recommendations suggested by participants, concrete strategies for empowerment and change are offered.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Colorism. If you’ve never thought about it before as a problem, now is a good time to analyze how hurtful it can be to young women of color. It creates serious divisions among us, and can create a negative self-perception for those who aren’t born with the “right” skin tone and features. We all need to recognize colorism for what it is—a superficial, divisive, and destructive mindset. And if we can break that mentality within ourselves and refuse to reinforce it in our societies, then we can break the cycle of passing this practice on to future generations …and maybe one day soon colorism itself will be a legacy of the past.

--Kim, Sistah2Sistah Peer educator

In 1712, British slave owner Willie Lynch delivered a speech to a crowd of Virginia slave owners on the banks of the James River. His address—entitled *The Making of a Slave*—provided white Americans step-by-step guidelines for controlling African-Americans. Lynch suggested that the key to keeping black people subjugated and oppressed was through the creation of differences, namely by separating them on the basis of their skin tone. According to Lynch, pitting the light-skinned slaves against the dark-skinned slaves (and vice versa) would generate envy and resentment for generations. Although there has been much debate over the existence of Willie Lynch and the authenticity of this speech, what cannot be disputed is the long-standing history of difference and discrimination among African-Americans on the basis of color. Coined *colorism* by Alice Walker in 1983, the bias and favor for light-skin, European features and “good hair,” is perhaps the most permanent feature of slavery, dividing the black community for almost as long as racism has divided America. Often referred to as the “last taboo among African Americans,” colorism has never been formally named and acknowledged within the African-American community (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992, p.2). It has instead

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1 Among many scholars, the Willie Lynch Letter is considered to be nothing more than a modern-day myth. However, the contents of the speech are quite useful in structuring a discussion on the nature of colorism.

2 For the purpose of this research, the terms Black and African-American will be used interchangeably.
found its way into the everyday names and practices used among family, friends, and in social situations that perpetuate and reinforce the discourse of discrimination attached to skin tone. From “high yella” to “blue-black” various skin tones are placed on a continuum from light to dark. Lighter skin has typically translated into the perception of better opportunity, more resources, and overall privilege as a black person in society.

**A Magnified Moment**

Since I was a young child, I have been acutely aware of skin tone differences in the black community; my skin tone has been just as much a part of identity as my race, class, and gender. The issue of color in my personal relationships and day-to-day life is incredibly significant. I have been called many names—from “caramel” to “dirty red”—and have been judged and discriminated against because of my skin tone, hair texture, and facial features. Much like racism, colorism intrudes upon my daily life in many clever and unexpected ways. Allow me to provide an example. A short time ago, I was invited to a cookout hosted by John, a male member of my family, and his girlfriend Sharon. Like many family gatherings, this cookout was an all-black event; several close friends and family members were expected to be in attendance. The first guests to arrive were a family of four—James, Gina, and their two young children. James, a dark-skinned man, walked into the house first with his four-year-old son. His light-skinned wife, Gina, followed behind him carrying their three-month-old daughter. Sharon quickly ran over to greet Gina and to pick up the new baby.

Lifting the baby out of her car seat carrier Sharon exclaimed, “Whose baby is this? This is not the same baby I saw in the hospital! She’s so black! What happened to this baby?”

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3 The terms “caramel” and “dirty red” are names that are commonly used in the African-American community to refer to someone with light brown to medium brown skin tones. It is useful to point out that there is typically no consensus on what range of skin tones fall into certain categories.

4 In order to protect the identity of the people in this story, fictitious names will be used.
Sharon was referring to the drastic change in the child’s skin tone since she was born. It is commonplace for many black children to be born with a lighter skin tone which darkens shortly after birth. This baby, according to Sharon, was the same light color as her mother and big brother the last time she saw her, but had now changed into a “new” baby resembling her father’s dark complexion.

“Good thing you are a pretty chocolate baby,” remarked Sharon as she played with the newborn girl.

As Sharon continued to draw attention to the baby’s dark skin, Gina shook her head in disbelief and remarked, “I don’t know what happened to my baby either. The moment I took her home from the hospital she changed.”

The cookout lasted for several hours, and so did the comments about this dark-skinned baby. At one point Sharon attempted to engage James into a conversation about his daughter’s skin tone, but he was more interested in a card game. The only people who seemed to be paying attention to Sharon’s comments were the women. Particularly sensitive about the issue of skin color, I felt both sad and angered. I was angry at Sharon for being so ignorant, yet I was angrier at myself for not saying anything. And I felt sad for this three-month old baby girl who would undoubtedly be made to feel insecure about having her “daddy’s color” for the rest of her life.

What happened at this cookout will always stay with me, as it signifies the relentless nature of skin color for Black Americans, particularly women. Representative of countless similar exchanges and interactions occurring over my lifetime, this story served as a “magnified moment” of colorism. As Arlie Hochschild (1999) explains, a magnified moment is an ordinary event that provides extraordinary insight and awareness. Messner (2000) adds that these type of occurrences “offer a window into the social construction of reality” (p.766). Although this
incident was a singular moment in time, it speaks volumes about the value of being a light-skinned girl. As Margo Okazawa-Rey and colleagues (1987) remind us, “In the presence of a newborn, one can still hear passed down folklore which predicts the baby’s future skin color and hair texture. Though oblivious to these concerns, the young black infant must learn to function in a society in which the shade of one’s skin functions as a status determining characteristic” (p.92). Because this baby unfortunately “turned” from light to dark, her value and potential (in the minds of both Sharon and the child’s mother) had in many ways decreased. Although the baby was deemed pretty, she was as Sharon observed, “a pretty chocolate baby.” She was insinuating that this young baby should be thankful for being attractive in spite of her dark skin tone. Even now in 2008—the age of a “color-blind” society, and a time when Black Americans are enjoying the successes of the Civil Rights movement—this infant girl will inevitably face the pressures of not only her race and gender, but additionally her skin tone. This magnified moment demonstrates the reality of colorism in the 21st century, affecting black women in more significant ways than black men. While the problem of skin tone discrimination is no longer considered to impact black Americans on a large-scale, my experience at a family barbeque so painfully points out that colorism still remains a part of everyday life for many black people, particularly women.

In light of the sustained permanence of skin tone in the day-to-day lives of many black women, this dissertation aims to examine how young black women talk about and understand colorism in their everyday lives⁵. Despite being judged and evaluated by others because of their

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⁵ For the purpose of this dissertation research, I am focusing explicitly on the experiences of black women and their everyday experiences with colorism. Therefore, to allow black women to speak for themselves, I am purposely excluding a broader discussion of identity development, issues of mixed race, womanism, and the socio-historical context of the state of Louisiana. In future analysis, I plan to address how these bodies of literature further our knowledge of colorism, race construction and racism in the U.S., and how these build upon understanding black women’s experiences with colorism.
race and gender, black women often inflict the same pain and judgment of colorism on each other (Collins, 2000). An intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, and skin tone, this project aims to explore the lived experiences of a phenomenon that continues to impact young women coming of age in a new century and in the post-Civil Rights era. Although the present body of scholarship has yielded invaluable information on the manifestations and effects of colorism, few studies directly focus on women, and even fewer address the everyday experience of young black women. Considering this, the following research question guides this study: What are young (college-aged) black women saying about the presence of colorism in their everyday lives? How (if at all) does skin tone play a role in their day-to-day experiences? Specifically, this study aims the following:

1. to explore the influence of colorism in the lives of college-aged black women, and examine its relationship to racism in the U.S.;
2. to examine how day-to-day situations, relationships, and interaction shapes contemporary knowledge of colorism;
3. to identify relevant similarities and/or differences in current experiences of colorism compared to previous literature and documented accounts;
4. to develop a beginning foundation of a theoretical framework encapsulating the key features of colorism in the 21st century;
5. to produce culturally relevant knowledge on the varied experiences of colorism that will inform recommendations for social change.

Using focus group data of 58 black women between the ages of 18 and 25, I extend Philomena Essed’s theoretical framework of everyday racism, arguing that similar to the characteristics of racism, everyday colorism is a system of language, beliefs, and practices that govern the everyday interactions and experiences of black women as it relates to skin tone. This research contributes to the field of sociology broadly, and more specifically to race scholarship and gender scholarship. This study seeks to advance the current body of literature on colorism by not
only providing an in-depth exploration of skin tone bias and discrimination among black women, but by developing a theoretical framework that captures the key features of colorism in the 21st century. This work can also contribute to gender scholarship and further our understanding of the black female experience within a U.S. context.

**The History of Colorism in Black America**

As race scholar Joe Feagin (2004) explains, “racist thought did not come accidentally to the United States. It was, and still is, actively developed and propagated” (p.70). Since the onset of colonial expansion into the United States, the history of this nation has rested upon a clear binary divide—black and white (Bailey, 2001; Daniel, 2002; Denton and Massey, 1989; Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral, 2000; Omi and Winant, 1986). The institution of colonialism brought more than slavery into this country; a racist ideology followed which cultivated a system of language, classification, and domination privileging whiteness over blackness. Using the biological differences of skin color as a justification for the oppression and enslavement of Africans, European colonizers developed a social hierarchy that aligned whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. The inferiority associated with blackness translated into socially constructed ideas about skin tone and phenotype that continue to shape identity, status and opportunity.

In addition to defining a color line which separated blacks and whites, racist ideology subsequently caused internalized divisions among African-Americans. The frequent “mixing” of the races (commonly through the sexual exploitation of black female slaves by White male slave owners) resulted in biracial offsprings. In order to prevent any ambiguity in regards to racial classification, *and* to preclude blacks with white ancestry from gaining the same legal status as full-blooded whites, lawmakers mandated the *rule of the hypo-descent*, or the “one-drop” rule: even the smallest amount (or drop) of African ancestry legally defined a person as black (see
Omi & Winant, 1986). Although the enforcement of the “one-drop” rule equalized all blacks in the eyes of the law, in everyday practice significant differences developed between blacks of varying skin tones, hair textures, and facial features.

As Keith and Herring (1991) relate, “Whites placed greater economic value on slaves of mixed parentage and used skin tone or degree of visible white ancestry as a basis for the differential treatment of bondsmen” (p.762). It has been regularly documented that during slavery lighter-skinned slaves were afforded more resources and assigned duties that placed them indoors and in direct contact with white slave masters (see for e.g. Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Darker-skinned slaves, in comparison, were relegated to labor-intensive tasks outdoors in the open field and sun. Further, whites developed a terminology for distinguishing various level of African ancestry. The terms *mulatto*, *quadroon*, and *octroon* were adapted to designate a Black person with three-eighths, one-fourth, or one-eighth of African ancestry respectively.6 Because of their partial white heritage, light-skinned blacks were considered smarter and superior to dark-skinned blacks. As a consequence, many light-skinned blacks began to internalize the same principles of racism within the black community, actually believing that they were better than their darker counterparts, and acting accordingly (Graham, 1999). Light-skinned blacks and mulattos formed their own social class, apart from darker-skinned blacks, and saw more opportunity and advantage in the white dominated society. This included broadened opportunities in education, manumission from slavery, and the acquisition of land and property (Gatewood, 1990; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Graham, 1999). With the eventual abolition of

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6 Beginning in 1850 and up until 1920, the United States Census classified Black Americans into four categories: *Black, mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon.* An African-American with ¾ or more African ancestry was classified as Black; a mulatto was someone who had between 3/8 and 5/8 of African ancestry; a quadroon was someone with ¼ or less African ancestry; and an octoroon denoted an African-American with 1/8 or less African ancestry. According to Nobles in Kertzer & Arel (2002), these classifications were used to justify the principles of scientific racism, and to “prove” true genetic differences between Blacks and Whites, in addition to exploring the perceived genetic shortcomings of those with “mixed” blood.
slavery, the members of this newly formed group continued to set themselves apart from darker blacks by socializing, marrying and procreating with one another.

Wealthy light-skinned blacks emerged after Reconstruction to form what came to be known as the Black Elite, and were responsible for reinforcing classist and racist attitudes in the African-American community. As Zuberi (2004) indicates, “the African-American elite…viewed the African-American masses with the same contempt expressed by the European American population” (p.154). By the turn of the 20th century, many black institutions—including colleges and churches—continued to reinforce this distinction by distancing themselves from darker-skinned blacks and implementing separatist standards such as the brown paper bag, pencil, ruler, and door tests (See Kerr, 2006). These informal but well-known “tests” kept those who had shorter, coarse hair, and skin tones that were darker than a paper bag or door out of these institutions (Gatewood, 1990; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Graham, 1999). In addition, exclusionary social clubs and societies—namely Blue Vein, Brown Fellowship, The Links and Jack & Jill—were formed to perpetuate this separation based on skin tone. Admission to such organizations required light skin, “good” hair, and European features (Gatewood, 1990; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Graham, 1999). Throughout the years, these stereotypical beliefs made their way from one generation to the next, and African-Americans today continue to place a premium on lighter skin tone, seeing the different shades of brown as varying degrees of status, acceptance, and achievement.

A Review of the Literature

 Writers, poets, social scientists, filmmakers, and everyday black people alike have been obsessed with colorism for more than a century; the issue of skin color in the black community has graced the pages of countless literary, academic, and popular culture works dating back to the mid-1800s. William Wells Brown, author of the first black American novel, was the first to
document the complexity of skin tone in the 1853 classic Clotel (Kerr, 2006; Walker 1983).

Since then, color consciousness has seeped through the pages of black epics such as The Blacker the Berry (1929), The Bluest Eye (1970), and The Color Purple (1983), and more recent literary works including The Color Complex (1992) and Don’t Play in the Sun (2004); classic race studies such as Black Bourgeoisie and Black Metropolis; films such as Spike Lee’s School Daze (1988), Oprah Winfrey’s The Wedding (1998) and CC Stinson’s Light, Bright, Damn Near White (2007). This exhaustive body of work indicates the persistence of skin tone bias and discrimination over time in black American culture.

As scholar Mark Hill (2002) points out, the 1940s marked the beginning of empirical research on colorism. I argue that social science research (particularly sociology) devoted to this area of African-American culture has occurred alongside three distinct historical periods in Black America: 1) the pre-Civil Rights era; 2) the height of Black Power and the Civil Rights Era; and 3) the post-Civil Rights Era. Relevant studies are discussed below within the context of each period.

Colorism Pre-Civil Rights Era

The history of skin tone stratification among African-Americans indicates that in the era of Jim Crow segregation (the period spanning from the 1860s to the 1950s), colorism—like racism—was blatant, overt, and palpable in the lives of black Americans. Having a lighter skin color and European features provided access to better opportunity; Wade (1996) explains that at this time, “skin color became a criterion for the attainment of prestige in the African-American community” (p. 359). As such, skin tone and social class became an important focus of black social scientists examining aspects of black life. Although Anna Julia Cooper (1892) and W.E.B DuBois (1903) were among the first scholars to articulate the presence of a skin color hierarchy within black communities, the early work of Drake & Cayton (1945), E. Franklin Frazier (1957),
Gunnar Myrdal (1944) and Charles Parrish (1946) are important to highlight as they have been identified as classic sociological studies in colorism scholarship (Herring, 2002; Keith and Herring, 1991; Seltzer and Smith, 1991). Although Gunnar Myrdal was neither black, American, or a sociologist, his findings outlined in *An American Dilemma* nevertheless presents a realistic perspective of the interconnected nature of class and skin tone among African-Americans. In their in-depth study of black life in “Bronzeville,” black sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945) uncover that color distinctions present in the black community translate into differences in employment, occupation, and mate selection. Further, through the voices of the residents of Bronzeville, the authors provide open and honest commentary on the beliefs and attitudes associated with light, brown, and dark-skin. Drake and Cayton also devote in their research a discussion of how skin tone impacts black women more in terms of marriage selection and employment.

Through a questionnaire to 400 black youth, Charles Parrish (1946) investigates the various names and labels blacks use to describe varying skin tones, and the stereotypes associated with them. The results of his analysis—compiled in the piece, *Color Names and Color Notions*—find damaging notions of extremely light and extremely dark skin, while attitudes associated with people of medium shades was among the most favorable. Finally, E. Franklin Frazier’s (1957) *Black Bourgeoisie* provides a comprehensive sociological analysis of the “behavior, attitudes, and values” of middle-class blacks in the United States (p.23). He notes the parallels between status, education, power, and skin tone among the black elite, suggesting that a significant number of the black middle-class is lighter-skinned. Fighting a battle of inferiority, Frazier views the black bourgeoisie as living their lives behind the masks of oppression, insecurity, self-hatred, and guilt. Although they have an ability to use their light skin
as leverage and power within the African-American community, black elites have a false sense of security in viewing how this power translates in mainstream society. While these four works are not the only ones to address the presence of skin tone bias at this time, they do, however lay the foundation for future research in this area.

**Revisiting Colorism during Black Power and the Civil Rights-Era**

Perhaps a principal driving force behind empirical research on colorism has centered on the question of significance; many scholars aim to find out if skin tone continues to play a role in shaping life chances and life experience. This issue of permanence was of particular significance following the Black Power and Civil Rights eras. Both movements gained popularity in the 1960s, encouraging racial consciousness and black pride. They were particularly powerful because they represented a rejection of hegemonic and ideological views of race and color deeming anything light or close to European as superior. As a result, the “Black is Beautiful” ideology, which embraced darker skin and natural hair, became the mantra of many youth. Consequently for a brief time skin tone bias and stratification appeared to diminish right along with Jim Crow (Udry, Bauman, & Chase, 1971). After interviewing over 200 young urban black males about the significance of skin color, Goering (1972) notes that the “Black is Beautiful” ideology caused a shift in attitudes about light and dark skin: participants indicated a desire to wear their hair natural, would consider marrying a dark-skinned partner with a broad nose and lips, and preferred brown-skin as the best color. Interestingly, Goering predicts that this change in attitudes will continue to pervade black American society, stating that “there is a new joy in blackness which did not exist twenty years ago” (p.241). Jones (1973) and Ransford (1970) make parallel connections in their research. Both authors confirm that future generations of blacks will no longer be confused about skin tone and racial identity; the “Black is Beautiful” doctrine appeared successful in alleviating the issue of colorism in black communities.
Although great strides were made during this time, Hill (2002) and others (Bond and Cash 1992; Coard, Irby and Raskin 2001) suggest that the political and ideological shifts of the 1970s were neither all-encompassing nor long-lasting. Despite the perception that colorism is a distant memory, contemporary research on colorism indicates otherwise, with many scholars documenting the ways in which colorism continues to impact many aspects of black American society. (e.g. Brown, 2000; Hall, 1998, 2005; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter 1998, 2002, 2005; Jones, 2000; Keith & Herring, 1991, 2004; Kerr, 2006; Patton, 2006; Seltzer and Smith, 1991; Wade 1996; Zook, 1990). The existing body of literature indicates that in light of the progressions realized by blacks in more recent U.S. history, colorism still remains an issue of debate and significance.

**Contemporary Studies of Colorism**

The period leading up to the Civil Rights movement was marked by *de jure* segregation, and large-scale economic and educational opportunity seemed to be reserved exclusively for the Black Elite. As such, early empirical research on colorism explored the role of skin color in relation to class divisions and racial attitudes within the black community. Considering the overall advancements and achievements accomplished during the Civil-Rights era, contemporary scholars continue to debate the significance of skin color upon class and status attainment for Black Americans. Some recent studies still find an inescapable link between skin tone and social class. The groundbreaking research of Hughes & Hertel (1990) indicates that blacks with lighter skin achieve “higher educational attainment, occupational prestige, personal income, and family income than those with darker skin” (p.1109). Similarly, the analyses of Keith & Herring (1991) and Seltzer & Smith (1991) find that lighter skin is more advantageous for black Americans; a fairer complexion indicates higher levels of income, occupational, and educational achievement. On average, lighter-skinned blacks make 65 percent more and earn two more years
of education than darker-skinned blacks (Keith & Herring, 1991). Despite these findings, Gullickson (2005) deems the analyses of Hughes & Hertel, Keith & Herring and Seltzer & Smith limited as they all fail to consider cohort differences. In his re-analysis of data compiled from the National Survey of Black Americans, Gullickson challenges that in the post-Civil Rights era, there has in fact been a decline in light skin privilege as it relates to education and occupation. Gullickson further uncovers that skin tone is not a relevant factor for younger cohorts born after 1963. What has not changed in the African-American community, however, is spousal attainment. As Gullickson (2005) explains, light skin remains a factor in “providing access to high quality spouses” (p.173).

In addition to exploring the sustained link between skin color and life chances, the current literature on colorism reflects an increase in research focusing on gender, with a specific concentration on black women. Harvey (1995), Hill (2002), Thompson and Keith (2001) and Wade (1996) all report that in the post-civil Rights era, gender does make a difference when considering predictors of physical attractiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Unpacking the term gendered colorism, Mark Hill (2000) explicates that “skin color has more bearing in the lives of African-American women than of African-American men” (p.5). This is not surprising given the societal value placed on female beauty. As Hunter (2004) states, the social construction of beauty is “informed by other societal status characteristics including race” (p.23). Empirical research on the nature of gendered colorism unveils that darker-skinned black women are at a particular disadvantage in the areas of beauty, mate selection, and self-esteem.

Indeed, it is black women who have advanced our understandings on the experiences of black women and colorism. In 1983 Alice Walker penned the term colorism in her book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. Discussing the divisions among black women she writes:
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 consciously, 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 (pp. 290-291).

At the time of this writing—the 1980s—black feminism and black feminist theory gained ground within academia (Breines 2006). The expansion of this oppositional framework that embraces the knowledge, consciousness and empowerment unique to black women also highlights the mutually intersecting oppressions that shape black women’s lives and experiences. A proliferation of black feminist writings from the likes of bell hooks (1981;1989), Audre Lorde (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1986;1990; 2000), and Deborah K. King (1988) underscore that black women are subject to the perils of multiple jeopardy and domination as it relates to their social location. It is no surprise, then that the bulk of writings on colorism since the 1980s has been generated by black women, and relies on black feminist theory as a conceptual lens.

Consequently, a considerable amount of contemporary empirical work examines colorism through a critical intersectional framework in a variety of academic disciplines. For instance, Neal & Wilson (1989) and Okazawa-Rey and colleagues (1987) provide a historical overview of colorism and offer suggestions for black women and therapy. The personal narratives of Marita Golden (2004) Valerie Harris (1994) and Krystal Brent Zook (1990) offer compelling accounts about light and dark-skin bias, in addition to outlining steps toward self-healing and black female solidarity. Additionally, family scholars including Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003), Beverly Greene (1994) and Harriet McAdoo (1997) point to the centrality of black women and skin tone within African-American families. Within the field of sociology, there has been less empirical focus on black women and colorism. However, the work of noted sociologist and colorism scholar Margaret Hunter (1998; 2002; 2005) has contributed a considerable amount of knowledge on the
contemporary nature of colorism through her work with African-American and Mexican-American women.

While there has a wide range of colorism research focusing on gender, there are some scholars who concentrate on age, exploring how attitudes surrounding skin color impact younger cohorts of African-Americans. As previously mentioned the earlier research of Goering (1972), Holtzman (1973) and Jones (1973) addressed how young blacks’ perspectives of skin color were shaped by their age and changing patterns of racism and segregation. Likewise, a portion of contemporary research on colorism also focuses on whether the generational ideas of younger African-Americans represent a change from previous generations. The results report a diversity of conclusions. In their study of black college women, Bond and Cash (1992) conclude that a majority of the women they surveyed felt satisfied with their skin color, regardless of skin tone. Yet they also report that “even though no rampant pursuit of lightness was apparent, darker skin was seldom an aspiration” (Bond and Cash, 1992, p. 883).

Ronald Hall (1998) also explores skin color bias among African-American college students, but yields different outcomes. Interviews conducted with 200 black college freshmen indicate that both light and dark-skinned respondents “associate skin color with physical beauty,” suggesting that the ideals of today’s young black Americans have not been dramatically impacted by the dominant 1960s “Black is Beautiful” ideology (Hall, 1998, p.239). Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) discover a divergent perspective in their questionnaire to 113 college students:

Primarily, the results indicate that the African-Americans in the sample preferred skin color of a medium tone and did not show a preference for light skin. This finding was true, regardless of the individual participant’s skin color (p.2267).

Although their study was aimed at African-American adolescents ages 11-19, Robinson and Ward (1995) uncover that those participants who noted their skin tone as neither light nor
dark expressed higher levels of satisfaction compared to individuals who fell on extreme opposites of the color spectrum. The researchers also find that young men rate skin color as an important factor in dating compared to the young women in the study. This of course, underscores the seemingly lop-sided nature of colorism, as it is more salient in the lives of black women. Considering the mixed messages these studies imply about the relevance of skin tone among young blacks, further research focusing on younger cohorts of black Americans—especially young black women—is needed.

**Re-examining Colorism in the 21st Century**

Why continue to study colorism in the twenty-first century? Some could argue that colorism has been a mainstay in black American communities for generations, and there is nothing new to be gained or understood by further study and exploration. Others may contend that colorism is not as nearly as significant as racism, and the focus in the new millennium should center on the eradication of an issue that affects *all* Americans. Although racism remains an important matter of social, political and scholarly focus, I argue that studying colorism simply yields a deeper understanding of this complex issue. It only takes a cursory glance at current events to validate the need for further empirical research on colorism. In October of 2007 twenty-seven year-old Ulysses Barnes, a Detroit party promoter, was reproached by the black community and anti-racism advocates for throwing a “Light-skin Bash,” an event guaranteeing all light-skinned women free entry (see Figure 1-1). Word of the party spread rapidly (thanks to the advent of the internet) and black women across the country demanded the party be cancelled. When asked about his reasoning for throwing a gathering with such an offensive theme, Barnes quickly retorted that “it was a brilliant promotion at the time,” and there were also future plans for similar events for “chocolate” and “caramel” black women respectively (Retrieved November 28, 2007 from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21367799). More recently an article in
the February 2008 edition of *Ebony* Magazine featured the ubiquitous contrasting viewpoints of colorism, highlighting the personal stories of a light-skinned woman and a dark-skinned woman in an article entitled, *Do Light-Skinned Black People Have an Advantage?* These two items (among others), signify that a re-examination of the everyday experiences of colorism within the scholarly arena is not only warranted, but long overdue.

There remain several gaps in the literature. Although there has been a considerable amount of empirical research dedicated to colorism, the topic remains theoretically undeveloped (Hill, 2002). While many scholars understand colorism as byproduct of racism, colonialist ideology, or as a function of intersectionality, it is imperative to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework that captures the nature of colorism in the post-Civil rights era. It is my hope that this research can serve as a starting point on how to conceptualize colorism in the 21st century.

Outside of the theoretical implications, this dissertation attempts to fill a gap in the empirical body of scholarship in several ways. First, missing from the literature are more in-depth analyses of colorism that focus strictly on black women. This is of particular importance in the field of sociology considering the scant amount of research in this area. While the present body of literature does focus on gender, it only considers gender as a variable to test significance or interaction as it relates to other variables. For example, Hughes & Hertel (1990) and Ross (1997) control for gender to examine the interactions between skin color and gender and skin color and age within gender categories. Other studies examine skin tone and gender within a comparative context, evaluating the differences and/or similarities of black women and black men as it relates to such issues as mate selection, self-esteem, or physical attractiveness (see for example Hill, 2002 or Thomspson & Keith, 2001). Despite the strengths of what we learn in this
research, still excluded from the center of analysis are the voices of women; approaching colorism from a more subjective lens can yield a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of colorism. Feminist research calls for the re-direction of women’s experience as a separate entity; the nature of colorism for black women therefore must be evaluated uniquely and separately. Although Hunter (2005) does present the voices of black women in her pioneering work *Race, Gender, & the Politics of Skin Tone*, this is the first body of work to provide an analysis of the contemporary experiences of colorism for black women. Clearly more research is needed to fully understand this complex and poignant matter.

Second, empirical research should assess if there has been a progression, decline, or no change in the color attitudes and beliefs of young black Americans compared to previous generations. There is an extensive amount of scholarship devoted to racial attitudes in the post-Civil Rights era (see for example, Bonilla-Silva, 2006 or Feagin, 2003), and although scholars explore the existence of institutionalized forms of colorism in contemporary society, there is still much to be learned from the everyday perceptions of colorism. Further, research on color attitudes could perhaps illuminate scholarly conversations about the “new” racism. Directing this issue toward today’s college students would undoubtedly add to the current body of knowledge.

Finally, this research project aims to provide strategies for social transformation and change. bell hooks’ (1990) notion of *critical intervention* suggests that academia and the classroom can be a vessel for transformation; our roles as teachers can be utilized not only as a means for learning, but also as a location for activism. Similarly, Risman (2004) suggests that feminist scholars move theory beyond the walls of academia and the ivory tower and into the realm of the public in order to effect transformation and social change. She writes:
Feminist scholarship always wrestles with the questions of how one can use the knowledge we create in the interest of social transformation. As feminist scholars, we must talk beyond or own border. This kind of theoretical work becomes meaningful if we can eventually take it public. Feminist sociology must become public sociology (p.446).

I believe that perhaps this is one of the most profound limitations to the current knowledge on colorism. Although some work aims to produce social transformation and change, most of the empirical research falls short on providing concrete solutions that will indeed effect change. In many research projects, many scholars fail to answer the crucial “so what” question. It is my hope that the knowledge produced from this research will inform recommendations for action and social change, and broaden our understandings of colorism on a scholarly and public level.

**Overview of Dissertation**

Chapter Two is devoted to the methodological layout of this project, which is grounded in feminist theory and black feminist epistemology. Also discussed in this chapter are focus groups, grounded theory and discourse analysis, and a description of the study sample and recruitment. Chapter 3 focuses on the theoretical considerations influencing the model of everyday colorism. An overview is given on black feminist theory, in addition to the theories of Patricia Hill Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, and Philomena Essed, thinkers who form micro and macro-linkages in their work. The chapter ends with a discussion of everyday colorism. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 represent the results of analysis. Chapter 4 is an investigation of the contemporary names and attitudes surrounding skin color. In addition, this chapter examines how the language and internalized ideas of skin color translate into everyday behavior and practice. Chapter 5 deals with family, school, relationships, and the media, and their role in mediating colorism. Chapter 6 addresses the three counter-narratives emerging throughout the focus groups. Participants interviewed noted the perceived absence of colorism in the Northern
half of the United States, a higher prevalence of colorism in the Caribbean, and the declining
importance of skin tone in the current generation. Chapter 7, the concluding chapter, evaluates
the current status of colorism, and whether the present looks like the past. Considering this, a
discussion about the future of colorism appears in this section, in addition to proposed solutions
and recommendations for change. Lastly, I provide suggestions for future research.
Figure 1-1 Flyer for “Light-Skin” bash
CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

I decided whose side I was on and resolved within myself that as a black social scientist I must take a stand and there could be no value-free sanctuary for me.---Joyce Ladner

The goals of this dissertation research are three-fold: to investigate colorism as a phenomenon occurring within everyday settings and interaction; to place black women’s voices and experiences at the center of analysis; and to produce culturally relevant knowledge that will inform recommendations for personal empowerment and social change. Considering these aims of empowerment, consciousness-raising, and the co-construction of knowledge, employing focus groups—guided by the core principles of feminist methodology and black feminist epistemology—is most appropriate for this project. This chapter details the theoretical perspectives influencing my methodological approach to the study of colorism in the everyday lives of young black women. I begin by detailing feminist methodology and black feminist epistemology. Next, I outline the value of utilizing focus groups as the ideal method for researching black women and studying colorism. This is followed by a discussion of the sample and the recruitment process. Then, I turn to grounded theory and discourse analysis as methods of analysis. Finally, I conclude with ethical considerations and a discussion of reflexivity.

Feminist Methodology

Simply stated, feminist methodology guides research within the context of feminist theory, and is grounded firmly in the experiences of women (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Distinct from feminist research, feminist methodology is dedicated to the theory about research practice, epistemology, and knowledge production (Devault, 1999). Much more than women interviewing women or a employing a specific research technique, Devault (1999) argues that feminist methodology has three essential components. They include: (1) the importance of methodology as a tool of “excavation,” bringing women’s voices and experiences to the focal
point of practice and method; (2) the empowerment of research participants through minimal harm and control; and (3) the infusion of activism, change, and transformation into research methods. As these key elements are consistent with my research goals, designing a project that embraces feminist methodology is apt to accomplish these study objectives.

Unlike traditional scientific research methods that are grounded in ideals of positivism, feminist research methods are concerned with advancing the knowledge of women’s experience and gender relations while highlighting the significance of feminism. As Wolf (1996) suggests, positivism represents value-free science that is objective and exploitative. Furthermore, Collins (2000) notes that traditional research requires a disregard of emotion, ethics, and values. Feminist critiques of positivism have challenged these male-biased methodological and epistemological stances, arguing that women have been excluded from traditional means of theorizing and knowledge production. Thus, feminist research developed to uncover facts and truths that were marginalized and excluded. Wolf (1996) describes the advancement of feminist research methods further:

[Feminist scholars] sought to break down the hierarchical and potentially exploitative relationship between researcher and research by cultivating friendship, sharing, and closeness that, it was felt, would lead to a richer picture of women’s lives. Many feminists heeded the call of ‘passionate scholarship’(DuBois, 1983), joining their methods with their political sympathies (p.4-5).

To that end, feminist researchers find traditional methods, methodologies, and epistemologies inadequate and inappropriate for investigating the experiences and perspectives of women.

Considering the three elements of feminist research, there are several key features that distinguish feminist research from traditional research methods. First, feminist research is grounded within feminist theory (Reinharz, 1992). Despite the multiple perspectives and standpoints that constitute a multitude of theories, a guiding principle of this theoretical framework recognizes the nature of unjust gendered relations and practices. As Naples (2003)
points out, “feminist theories emphasize the need to challenge sexism, racism, colonialism, class, and other forms of inequalities in the research process” (p.13). Unlike traditional forms of research methods and methodologies that do not consider the elements of feminism, feminist research places women’s voice and experiences at the center of analysis. Marjorie Devault (1999) refers to this idea as excavation. A critical element of feminist methodology, excavation brings women to the focal point of practice and method. Ultimately, feminist theory provides a guiding framework that enables feminist researchers to study women’s lives for the purposes of understanding and ending oppression (Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1994).

Second, feminist research acknowledges difference and diversity. Just as there is no universal feminism, there is no universal feminist method, methodology, or epistemology. Many feminist scholars maintain that there is a multitude of approaches to feminist research (Devault, 1999; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987). As Reinharz (1992) insists, “diversity has become a new criterion for feminist research excellence” (p.253). An attention to diversity within the research process reveals the various ways in which difference shapes a seemingly universal experience. As such, feminist research methods can draw on differing methods, epistemologies, and experiences to further knowledge on various issues and phenomena. Similarly, a recognition of difference and diversity also underscores that there is no distinct feminist method, methodology, or epistemology (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). As Reinharz (1992) points out, “feminist research practices must be recognized as a plurality. Rather than there being a woman’s way of knowing, or a feminist way of doing research, there are women’s ways of knowing” (p.4). Alternative frameworks, such as black feminist epistemology have developed in response to this criticism.
A third feature of feminist research lies in empowerment. Unlike traditional methods that privilege the knowledge of the researcher over participants, feminist research aims to empower the research subjects. Devault (1999) writes that an important aim of feminist methodology is the infusion of activism, change, and transformation within research methods. Using feminist methods as a means of consciousness-raising is an integral component in fostering such change. In considering my research on colorism, one of my main objectives is to incorporate a feminist methodology in order to produce culturally relevant knowledge that will inform recommendations for both personal empowerment and social change. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by allowing the women who deal with colorism everyday to have their say in the research. Previous research has not explored colorism from this vantage point, and has yet been able to affect concrete strategies for empowerment and change.

The final component of feminist research concerns the idea of reflexivity. Although a subjective stance is not common to all feminist researchers, many argue that personal experience and reflection is at the core of feminist methods, methodology and epistemology. As Reinharz (1992) explains,

To the extent that this is not the case in mainstream research, utilizing the researcher’s personal experience is a distinguishing feature of feminist research. Personal experience typically is irrelevant in mainstream research, or is thought to contaminate a project’s objectivity. In feminist research by contrast, it is relevant and repairs the project’s pseudo-objectivity (p.258).

Writing on the importance of positionality, Deutsch (2004) adds:

The researcher’s awareness of her or his own subjective experience in relation to that of her or his participants’ is key to acknowledging the limits of objectivity. It recognizes the bidirectional nature of research. I am subject, object, and researcher. To assert otherwise is to be disingenuous about the process of research, especially qualitative research” (p. 889)

Recognizing that reflexivity is a core element of feminist research, it is critical for researchers to position themselves within their research, by reflecting, examining, and exploring the ways in
which they are impacted by the research process (Cook & Fonow, 1991). Feminist researchers, must in fact, start with themselves at the onset of research (Reinharz, 1992). This start is particularly crucial for feminist researchers who are studying populations that they are a part of. For example, Annecka Marshall (1994) employed a self-reflective approach when writing about her experiences as a black woman conducting research on a population that has so often been trivialized by mainstream paradigms of social science research. As a black woman researcher, Marshall points out that she couldn’t help but play a “dual role” as a researcher and as a participant (p.109). Similarly, other scholars, including bell hooks (1989), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), and Joyce Ladner (1971) write about the ways in which their passion and personal connection (a direct consequence of their social location) has influenced their theorizing and research methodology. As women of color embedded within research projects on women of color, it is neither possible nor recommended to place large amounts of distance between researcher and subjects. I will turn to my own issues with reflexivity as a black woman and researcher later in this chapter.

**Black Feminist Epistemology**

Many feminist scholars maintain that there is no one generic feminist methodology, but rather a multitude of approaches (Devault, 1999; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987). This study is heavily influenced by *black feminist thought*, a critical social theory emerging from the historical invisibility and marginalization of black women. Although black feminist thought is not typically recognized and acknowledged as feminist methodology (Devault, 1999), this theoretical framework has nonetheless provided valuable methodological insight to other black women researchers and can provide a sound approach for this research project. As Collins (2000) highlights, “increasing numbers of African-American women scholars have chosen to study Black women’s experiences, and to do so by relying on elements
of Black feminist epistemology in framing their work” (p.267). Central to this feminist methodology are the features of subjectivity, lived experience, dialogue, and ethics. I would like to briefly turn to the methodological contributions of sociologists Joyce Ladner and Patricia Hill Collins to further illustrate the key points of black feminist epistemology.

Joyce Ladner’s seminal work, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow*, impacted sociology and feminist scholarship in innumerable ways. Conducting the first sociological study on black women (conducted by a black woman) that refused to pathologize black adolescence and womanhood, Ladner’s 1971 ethnographic account of low-income black girls in urban St. Louis was unique in that the author incorporated an alternative methodological approach to her research. Impenitently aware of her social location as a black woman, Ladner openly writes about the methodological conflict between what life experience taught her and what academic training required. She writes:

> As I became more involved with the subjects of this research, I knew that I would not be able to play the role of the dispassionate scientist…I began to perceive my role as a Black person, with empathy and attachment, and to a great extent, their day-to-day lives and future destinies became intricately interwoven with my own…On the one hand, I wanted to conduct a study that would allow me to fulfill certain academic requirements…On the other hand, I was highly influenced by my Blackness—by the fact that I, on many levels, was one of them and had to deal with their problems on a personal level (Ladner, 1971, p.3-4).

Ultimately, Ladner resolved to conduct research outside the realm of sociological and positivist training, deciding to use her own study as a way to “decolonize social research on the conceptual and methodological levels” (Ladner, 1971, p.7). She sets the groundwork for valuable and credible research that is sociological, yet liberated from the traditional, value-free constraints of social science.

Similar to Ladner, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) “found [her] training as a social scientist inadequate to the task of studying…a Black women’s standpoint” (p.252). In the ground-
breaking text *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins carefully outlines an alternative methodological framework that she refers to as black feminist epistemology. This methodological approach “enrich[es] our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters their empowerment and social justice” (Collins, 2000, p.269). Collins (2000) declares that every black woman, whether she is in academia or the community, is an agent of knowledge; meaning and intellect can be derived by any black woman. Lived experience, she asserts, is a worthy criterion for knowledge claims (p.257). Additionally, Collins highlights the importance of dialogue, the ethic of caring (emotions and empathy), and the ethic of personal accountability as crucial methodological ingredients in feminist research involving black women.

The landmark empirical example offered by Joyce Lander, and the theoretical framework set forth by Patricia Hill Collins provide concrete methodological steps in conducting feminist research grounded within the tenets of black feminist thought.

**Focus Groups**

The focus group method employs group interviews to generate knowledge on a specific topic of interest. They are used to learn how people talk about a phenomenon through group interaction. As Morgan (1997) writes, “the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data” (p.2). There are many advantages of focus groups. Through this method of data collection, the researcher interacts directly with respondents, allowing participants to “feed” off of each other, building upon and reacting to the responses of others. In addition, focus groups are a quick and easy way to get at data. They can be assembled on a relatively short notice, making them flexible and efficient. Because of the open-response format, focus groups can produce vast and varied amounts of information. Stewart and Shamadasani (1990) offer the following:
The open-response format of a focus group provides an opportunity to obtain large and rich amounts of data in the respondent’s own words. The researcher can obtain deeper levels of meaning, make important connections, and identify subtle nuances in expression and meaning” (p.16). As opposed to individual interviews, focus groups allow for a sense of consensus (or diversity) and a better understanding of group meanings.

Focus groups are a particularly effective approach when conducting research involving black women. The first advantage lies in the utility of the method to elicit individual and collective survival and resistance strategies from women of color. Madriz (2003) writes:

Group interviews are particularly suited for uncovering women’s daily experience through collective stories and resistance narratives that are filled with cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that reflect the different dimensions of power and domination that frame women’s quotidian experiences” (p.369).

Black women have historically gathered together in family groups, churches, and other places to share stories and to help each other cope with the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender. These everyday areas sites for conversation and socializing; yet they also serve as a domain to give space and voice to the collective memory of black womanhood. As St. Jean & Feagin (1998) relate, collective memory shapes identity, interaction, and experience. Focus groups then are an ideal method in getting at both the individual and collective experiences of black women.

Consider the research of Shoshana Pollack (2003). Interested in examining the experiences of black women who have been incarcerated, Pollack implemented focus groups as a way to understand the collective and individual stories of women in prison. Writing on the value of this method, Pollack states:

Bringing black women together in a group format seemed to alter the power dynamics somewhat and to enable the participants to speak about the social causes of individual struggles that have roots in racist ideologies and practices… The focus group-data greatly enhanced the analytic merit of this study and produced important information about Black women’s experiences of systemic oppression, resistance, and lawbreaking (p.471).

Pollack’s experience with focus groups reinforce Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) assertion that “for black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals
and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (p. 260).

Even within the context of a research project, the mutual dialogue generated in a focus group setting has the potential of producing premium quality data compared to an individual interview.

Focus groups are also an ideal method for accomplishing the goals of feminist methodology and black feminist epistemology. As a feminist methodologist, my goal is to create an informal, yet empowering research environment that will promote participant-control and accurate portrayals of everyday colorism. According to Bloor and his colleagues (2001), another trademark of focus groups is that they can be a source of empowerment for participants: “having found a voice, groups may develop an awareness of their common predicament and attempt a collective remedy” (94). Montell (1999) further adds that the group dynamic of focus groups achieve “connections and solidarity among women that contribute to feminist consciousness and social action” (p. 54). Compared to other methods in which power is typically held by the researcher, focus groups enable the balance of power to be shared between participants and the researcher (Wilkinson 1998). Because focus groups can provide an outlet for expression that is neither intimidating nor uncomfortable, participants have everything to gain from realizing their shared experiences of pain surrounding issues like colorism.

There are, of course, limitations to the focus group method. Compared to the individual interview, focus groups do not get into much detail and depth as one-on-one interaction. The amount of time spent conducting a focus group with several participants is roughly the same amount of time spent in an individual interview. Due to the small number of participants in the focus groups, there is the concern that the group is not representative enough and will produce generalizations of the larger population that is being studied. Additionally, the personality of the participants could bias your results. As Morgan (1997) writes, the group could follow a
tendency towards conformity, in which “some participants withhold things that they might say in private,” or the group could follow a tendency towards polarization, in which “some participants express more extreme views in a group than in private”(p.15). The topic of interest could be controversial, causing disdain and conflict among the people in the group.

It is important to note here that despite these disadvantages, focus groups proved to be a more reliable method expressly for this study compared to the individual interview. This research project consisted of two phases of data collection. Phase I, occurring from October 2005 to August 2006, consisted of four focus groups and was intended to inform the next phase of data collection, originally designed to include individual interviews. At the onset of Phase II (September 2007), I conducted four individual interviews that did not provide the same rich amounts of data as the focus group interviews. I have reflected deeply on the reasoning behind this. First, the issue of colorism is a very delicate topic for black women, and in many respects the participants in the individual interviews were somewhat reluctant to share with me their inner-most sensitivities about skin color. As a black women conducting research on other black women, sociologist Juanita Johnson-Bailey (1999) noted how the issue of color impacted her ability to create a comfortable interview environment. Although her research project was related to the educational experiences of black women, Bailey nonetheless found colorism to be a significant methodological barrier. She explains,

The participants and I spoke awkwardly about color. Even though I shared a lighter skin color with several of the participants, it was these participants who did not broach the subject of color and because the nature of the research was to solicit their schooling narratives, the topic was not introduced…The participants who did raise the issue of colorism do so in an effort to determine its importance in my life. Although I tried to set forth that I saw colorism as a destructive factor in the history and present-day conditions of the black race, colorism brought a tenuousness and a level of uneasiness to the interview setting…Color remained a sometimes conspicuous and at other times inconspicuous barrier to conversational dialogues…its presence as a potential obstacle in the person-to-
In many ways, my experience conducting individual interviews mirrored those of Johnson-Bailey. As ironic as it may seem, it was much more difficult for me to establish rapport with one participant compared to establishing rapport with a group of women. This of course, could easily be attributed to my role as a researcher coupled with my lighter skin tone and facial features. The amount of participant power and control diminished greatly in a one-on-one interview setting compared to a group interview setting. Although the women I interviewed individually shared their experiences of colorism with me, it was to some degree polite and at times superficial. Whereas the focus group interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours, individual interviews ranged between 30 and 45 minutes.

Compared to the individual interviews, each focus group produced what I would consider an “after-show\(^1\) effect,” where participants expressed an interest in continuing the group conversation on colorism and other issues impacting black women upon the conclusion of the focus group. These “after-show” conversations lasted anywhere between 20 and 30 minutes beyond the focus group, and topics such as inter-racial dating and hair were discussed. This outcome speaks to the strength of the group dynamic on the topic of colorism and the value of bringing black women together for group dialogue. In essence, my experience with focus groups had the opposite effect of the literature documenting the limitations of the method. Throughout the course of this project I found that many women were willing to share their experiences regarding colorism in a group setting and eager to hear the stories of others. The ability of focus groups to capture the viewpoint of a larger amount of respondents, in addition to respondents

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\(^1\) Famed talk show host Oprah Winfrey produces a show called *Oprah After the Show*, an unscripted version of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The program allows Winfrey more time with guests after the cameras stop rolling ([www.oprah.com](http://www.oprah.com)). In many ways, the experience during the focus groups produced the same effect: a desire for participants to keep the conversation going after the tape recorder stopped.
being able to feed off of each other, resulted in my decision to conduct more focus groups during the second phase of data collection.

The Research Project

The literature indicates that focus groups are most successful with anywhere between 5-10 participants, with the average research project including approximately 3-5 groups per project (Morgan 1997). For this project, I conducted two phases of data collection, each consisting of four focus groups. In order to include a representative sample and to address the issue of validity, I made every effort to ensure that each focus group included participants with similar skin tones. After conducting the pilot focus group in April 2005, it became apparent that women who possessed similar skin tones felt more comfortable sharing their experiences as opposed to women who had varying skin tones. For instance, if a dark-skinned black woman made a derogatory comment about a light-skinned woman, the woman with the lighter skin tone was less apt to feel comfortable and vocal during the focus group session. The same reasoning applies in the reverse case; therefore, careful effort was made to ensure as much homogeneity of participants as possible. However, accomplishing this goal became more difficult as I relied more on participants who expressed interest in participating in the research compared to the solicitation of certain women in order to fulfill a “color quota” for each focus group.

As earlier indicated, each focus group lasted between 90 minutes and two hours in length. Prior to each focus group session, each participant was fully aware of the nature of the study. Informed of their right to privacy and confidentiality, all participants signed an informed consent form and completed an anonymous demographic face-sheet supplying personal information such as skin tone and ethnicity (see Appendix C).

A pilot focus group was conducted in April 2005. The purpose of the pilot study was to test out the interview guide to experiment with the size of the group. The pilot included eight
participants who ranged in skin tones from very light to very dark, and ranged in age from 19 to 43. From the pilot study, I discovered that the interview questions were not necessarily producing answers relevant to the guiding research questions. Additionally, the focus group of eight was a little too large. The topic of colorism is a poignant and charged issue, and every respondent did not have an opportunity to share their voice and experience within the time limitation. After tweaking the interview guide and limiting the number of maximum participants to seven (with five being the minimum), the first phase of focus groups began in October of 2005. Four focus groups of women between the ages of 18 and 25 were concluded by August 2006. It is important to point out that during the first phase of data collection, I collaborated with a white female research partner. Although we shared equal tasks in the research process, I served as the primary moderator and facilitator for each focus group. Concerned about her identity as a white woman, my co-researcher served as a note-taker and participated in the discussion by following up with impromptu probes during each focus group. Ultimately, we found her presence during each focus group session to be negligible and did not lessen participants’ willingness to be open and forthcoming about their experiences of colorism.

The second half of the data was collected in September 2007. There were significant methodological changes made in between the first and second phase of data collection that are worth noting. First, my co-researcher elected to pursue other research interests and did not continue on the project after April 2006. Second, I was awarded dissertation funds which enabled me to provide subsequent participants a $30 incentive. In addition, I enlisted the assistance of an undergraduate student to aid in the recruitment process for the second phase of data collection. An Indian-American woman very interested in the issue of colorism, this student organized each focus group and served as a note-taker during each focus group session. Her
identity as a brown-skinned Asian-American did not hinder her ability to recruit African-American participants, nor did her presence during the focus groups impact participants’ enthusiasm about sharing their experiences. Lastly, after conducting data analysis on the first round of data, I amended the interview guide to focus in on certain themes and issues that emerged after the initial analysis (See Appendix B). This includes an extended section on the demographic sheet that asks participants to free-list names associated with various skin tones.

Four focus groups were conducted in September of 2007. By the end of the fourth group, the data generated began to mirror the stories and experiences offered in previous focus groups. As Glaser & Strauss (1967; 1999) suggest, this signified the point of theoretical saturation. This situation occurs when no new categories or data emerge in the research process; the researcher “sees similar instances over and over again” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p.61). Upon reaching this point I recognized that data collection was complete.

**Sample**

The sample for this research project includes 58 women, the total number of participants from nine focus groups (See Table 2-1). As my target population was young black women between the ages of 18 and 25, the study population was selected from a convenience sample of black female students who attend the University of Florida. At the time of data collection, all of the women were between the ages of 18 and 25, and all of the women were enrolled at the university; all but two of the women were undergraduate students. Because the University of Florida is a large state institution attracting the majority of students from in-state residents, the sample for this study also included a majority of women (81%) who are natives of the state. The remaining participants cited South Carolina, Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and New York as their states of origin.
Although the study sample was rather homogenous in regards to age and hometown, the group was more diverse in relation to ethnicity. Contemporary literature documents the growing diversity of the Black American population. As Logan and Deane (2003) contribute, the number of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans living in the United States has grown considerably over the past twenty years: “Afro-Caribbeans in the United States [currently] number over 1.5 million…Africans number over half a million” (p.1). The majority of these “other” African-Americans (Shaw-Taylor and Tuch, 2007) reside along the East Coast. Given that, it is no surprise that the study included a diverse number of Black American women. When asked to denote their ethnicity\(^2\), twenty-five (43\%) women stated that they were African-American. Forty-five percent of the women in the study indicated other ethnicities: 11 Haitian, 12 Jamaican, 1 Bahamian, 1 Antiguan, 1 Nigerian, and 1 Panamanian. The other five women (8.6\%) identified themselves as biracial: one woman indicated herself as being half Black and half Cuban; two women identified as being half Black and half Puerto Rican; one indicated having one White parent and one black parent; the fifth woman indicated that she was half Black and half Hawaiian. Despite their biracial heritage, all of the women who were of mixed ancestry identified primarily as black, and this qualifies their eligibility for participation in this study.

Considering the context of this research, the skin color of the study sample is a more complicated characteristic to report. Adopting the same five-point scale (very light, light brown, medium, dark, and very dark) used in the 1980 National Survey of Black Americans, participants were also asked what category they would place their skin tone (See Table 2-2). Three women (5\%) in the sample identified themselves as \textit{very light}. Fourteen women—24 \%—categorized themselves as \textit{light brown}. Forty-three percent (25 women) of the sample characterized

\(^2\) There were two women in the study who did not indicate their ethnicity on the demographic face-sheet.
themselves as medium. Another fourteen women—24%—indicated their skin tone as dark. Only two participants (4%) classified their skin tone as very dark. Based upon these self-reported classifications, the majority of the participants’ skin tones fell in the medium category. Very few women fell at the extreme ends of the spectrum, while the remaining half of participants fell equally in the light brown or dark categories. While this unequal distribution of skin tones can definitely be viewed as a limitation to this sample, it can perhaps also point to the difficulty in describing one’s skin tone. At the onset of each focus group when respondents were filling out the demographic sheet, some women stopped and asked me how I would categorize each skin tone. A few members even asked me what skin tone they should report. As a researcher I also took note of each participant’s skin tone, and at times there were in fact “disconnects” between how I rated someone compared to their own rating. Although there is much variability in skin tone perception, at times an inconsistency between a participant’s self reported skin tone and viewpoints expressed during the focus group often revealed the stigma attached to being either too light or too dark. For instance, Leah and Vivica—two women who identified as medium—disclosed in their narratives negative experiences associated with their skin tone, in addition to a desire to be called “brown” and not “dark.” Their sensitivities could perhaps have translated into how they viewed their skin tone. Likewise, Missy—another respondent who classified herself as medium—could easily be categorized by another black person as very light or light brown. Her bright yellow hue was considered much darker by her extremely fair grandmother, and Missy spent most of her childhood and adolescence thinking that she fell in the middle of the color spectrum. Having a higher self-perception of color (in the case of Leah and Vivica), and having a lower self-perception of color (in the case of Missy) can lead to a tendency toward “medium.” These young women’s experiences are detailed further in the following chapters.
Recruitment

A flyer was developed detailing my research study (See Appendix A). Recruitment strategies for this study involve the circulation of this flyer in organizations and institutions that have a high population of my designated selection criteria. This included a host of University of Florida black student organizations such as BGSO (Black Graduate Student Organization), Caribsa (the Caribbean student organization) and NCNW (National Council of Negro Women). I also relied on a number of friends and/or associates who teach classes with a large number of black females who were willing to circulate the flyer in their respective classes. In order to gain a representative sample, this study included a combination of purposive and snowball sampling measures for the recruitment of participants. Purposive sampling involves the development of “certain criteria established by the researcher” to serve the purpose of the research and the questions of the investigation (Huck, 2004, p.109). Snowball sampling starts with a group of key individuals who could offer referrals on future participants.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I understand that it takes more than just the posting or e-mailing of a flyer to garner participants. For this reason, I attended a number of these student organizational meetings to personally introduce myself and my research. Talking about my research and circulating my flyer added to the number of interested participants. The personal approach is particularly successful in recruiting women of color. As Madriz (2002) relates in her own research experience, “impersonal recruiting strategies…do not work with lower-socio-economic status women of color…my sources of recruitment were personal networks such as friends, students, community leaders, and friends of friends” (p.377-378). I too, have decided to rely on personal networks, and to employ a more informal, personalized approach to generate research participants. Gaining a representative sample according to skin tone became much more difficult, as I had to select focus group members from a general pool of
interested applicants. As colorism is a delicate issue, I could not easily go up to participants and ask them if they would be willing to discuss their experiences with colorism based upon their skin tone. It would also be unethical for me as a researcher to assume that black women with very light or very dark skin tones would have the most interesting viewpoints to share. To that end, snowball sampling—where participants recruited other potential participants—proved to be the most reliable method in soliciting respondents.

**Data Analysis: Grounded Theory and Discourse Analysis**

Each focus group session was audio-taped in its entirety. Audio-tapes of each focus group were later transcribed verbatim. Interview notes taken during the focus group (by myself and a note-taker) were also compiled. The process of analysis draws on two specific methods, Charmaz’s (2006) approach to grounded theory and Gee’s (2005) discourse analysis. As Kathy Charmaz (2006) explains, “grounded theory serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them” (p.10). Unlike other methods of data analysis, the method of grounded theory enables theory to be driven from the research data, rather than relying on previous theory to inform the research data. Grounded theory features the simultaneous and constant comparison of data and analysis, enabling the researcher’s empirical data to inform further data collection and analysis (Charmaz 1995). Originally outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967), and later advanced by Charmaz (2006), grounded theory analysis includes a multi-stage process which I adhered to for this project. The initial stage of analysis includes the open-coding of all data for relevant themes and patterns, followed by a second stage of more focused coding. At this time, larger pieces of data are used to develop sub-categories describing the data. Finally, I engaged in axial coding, which enabled me to create larger frames of categories connecting sub-categories together and providing relationships from one sub-category to the next. Kathy Charmaz (2006) also advocates for the use of clustering and free-writing, two
techniques of memo-writing that helps the researcher to begin the analysis of data and codes early on. As she recommends, “memos give you a space and place for making constant comparisons between data…use memos to help you think about the data and to discover your ideas about them” (p.72-73). As part of the grounded theory process, I implemented these two forms of memoing in order to enhance the quality of my analysis.

For further secondary analysis, I employed Paul Gee’s (2005) approach to discourse analysis. Because I am interested in how the discourse of colorism is reflected in everyday practices and talk, this method serves as a complementary technique to grounded theory. As Gee (2005) explains, language is a tool for analysis and interpretation and thus discourse analysis involves searching for “patterns and links within and across utterances in order to form hypotheses about how meaning is being constructed and organized” (118, emphasis added). Furthermore Gee’s analysis enables researchers to recognize socially constructed identities and activities. Central to Gee’s approach are the seven building tasks of language (significance, activities, identities, relationship, connection, politics, and sign systems and knowledge) which are reflective aspects of reality.

In order to begin a discourse analysis, large pieces of data are identified and examined according to some (or all) of the building tasks. Relevant questions are then asked dependent upon the building task, and themes and patterns should then emerge from the data. For the purpose of this research, I employed the identity building task, and asked questions from the data that according to Gee (2005) “construes the aspects of the situation network as realized at that time and place and how the aspects of the situation network simultaneously give meaning to that language (p. 110). More specifically these questions were: How do black women construct their identity within the context of their skin tone? How do they present and perceive themselves?
How are these various identities stabilized or transformed in a particular situation? What discourses are relevant and how they have been made relevant in particular situation? In the grounded theory method of analysis, each focus group is analyzed individually and then together. Discourse analysis, however involved the analysis of individual narratives. Taken together, both methods provided in-depth and detailed analysis.

**Ethics and Reflexivity**

Unlike the vast majority of Black Americans, I have both a personal and professional relationship with the issue of colorism. Since 1996, when I began conducting interviews for my undergraduate senior thesis entitled, *Black Women and Western Standards of Beauty: Is Black Beautiful in America?*, I have been deeply entrenched in research that has been very personal and even more political. There have been significant benefits to my identity as a black woman in this research. My personal experiences have added to the value of this research project. Due to the sensitive and protected nature of this topic, it would be very difficult (though not impossible) for a non-black woman to gain access, build rapport, and to recruit participants. I do not consider myself an expert, but rather a curious insider, and this has allowed me to reach many women who want to share their experiences with colorism.

Despite the advantages of my social location, I have encountered significant moral and ethical challenges. For all social researchers, ethics are of chief concern from the conception of a research idea to the publication of the final product. For example, Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) cite five such concerns—“informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and the consequences for future research”—that are characteristic of ethnographic research (p.264). Similarly, Diane Wolf (1996) cautions that feminist researchers should pay close attention to issues of power within their work. Although I do not plan on conducting fieldwork in my research on colorism, ethics are an important matter to me. As a black woman, sociologist, and
feminist researcher, there are unique issues that I am facing in this research. This section begins a discussion of these dilemmas.

Before I delve into the ethical dilemmas concerning the research process, allow me to first address my personal dilemmas surrounding the research topic. Colorism, although it has persevered within the black community for centuries, has yet to be formally named and acknowledged by the majority of black people. A sensitive topic that stirs such emotions as anger, fear and pain, many within the broader African-American community would rather not comment, focus, or draw attention to an issue that shames and embarrasses blacks in the face of larger (white) American society. On the writing of his controversial book inside the life of the black elite, *Our Kind of People*, Lawrence Otis Graham (2000) states:

> For many people, this book is a political or social hot potato in the sense that even though most blacks talk about issues of elitism, racial passing, class structure, and skin color, they don’t want to see it broadcast in a book. For a few black members of the media, the topic struck too close to their own past experiences of being excluded by snobbish members of the black elite. Some of them quietly told me that they were glad that I wrote the book…but that they could not publicly support the book…because their black audiences would find the subject too painful (ix-x).

Likewise, Kathy Russell, a light-skinned black woman and co-author of the ground-breaking text *The Color Complex*, writes that she was scorned and berated by her black peers for even considering publishing a book with such sensitive subject matter. She often heard comments like, “Just one more thing for White people to use against us”(Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992, p.4).

Whenever I talk openly about my research on colorism, I hear the same criticisms that were aimed at Graham and Russell. Although there are people who are excited that I am exploring an issue that is so private and personal, there are some members of the black community who are less than excited about my research. I often hear concerns that I will be
placing unnecessary focus on colorism when the real focus in the 21st century should be on eradicating racism. Rather than divide the black community on issues of colorism, some suggest that I use my position as a black sociologist to bolster and unify the black community in our struggles against racism. I am sometimes made to feel guilty about airing the dirty laundry of African-Americans so publicly and in the face of whites. On two separate occasions, I have had two black female students confront me about my decision to discuss colorism in my classes. One woman told me that as a fellow black woman, I was complicating and furthering negatives images of black womanhood, and she was of the opinion that my research did not embrace the ideals of black feminist thought. This student raises a very interesting ethical concern. How can I as a black woman conduct research on black women that portrays Black womanhood in a negative light? Traditional social science has oftentimes pathologized black women by constructing negative, yet power controlling images (Collins, 2000). Black feminists have always worked to deconstruct distorted images of blackness, particularly black femininity. Yet, my work on colorism specifically identifies the ways in which black women discriminate each other based upon skin tone. I have resolved this issue of allegiance by formulating a research project that aims to bring a much needed (and loud) voice to colorism by empowering black women, and finding strategies that will, in fact, effect personal and social change. This objective is in line with the goals of black feminist thought, which aims to critically engage how colorism is a by-product of racism, and “how institutionalized racism produces color hierarchies among U.S. women” (Collins, 2000, p.90). Demanding a speech and discussion of colorism permits black women to speak up and talk back about an often subtle, yet powerful form of oppression.

This question of allegiance expands beyond my membership in the black community. As a black woman and a sociologist, there is a conflict of interest between my academic identity and
my personal identity. Patai (1991) refers to this dilemma as a confrontation of dual allegiances. She points out that feminist researchers are concerned with fulfilling their academic obligations, yet are equally committed to the “transformative politics” of feminism (p.3). Other women of color have also documented their experiences with the same dilemma. In thinking about my own research I am faced with some of the same questions: Whose research is this, and for whom do I intend the knowledge that I produce? Do I have a responsibility to the black community? Do I allow my intuitions as a Black woman situate my work, or my knowledge as a sociologist guide my research? In order to answer these questions, Miriam Glucksmann (1994) recommends that feminist researchers go into their research projects openly aware that there will always exist inequities and divisions of knowledge, and that despite the goals of producing “feminist” research, it is unlikely that researchers will ever achieve a balance of knowledge and power. As Glucksmann (1994) explains, “no amount of sensitivity or reciprocity …can alter the fact that while the task of the researcher is to produce knowledge, those being researched have a quite different interest in and relation to their situation” (p.150). Without a doubt, my objective in this research is to get black women talking about the impact of colorism in the black community. Moreover, I am hopeful about developing concrete strategies for social change; I am constantly reminded that my research must address the “so what, who cares” question. However, I must recognize that outside of the controversial topic of colorism, I do have much more at stake than the subject matter. One such consideration, of course, is fulfilling the requirements in order to complete my doctoral degree.

To address this dilemma of personal and academic conflict, it is important for me to maintain a reflective practice throughout the research process. Being keenly aware of my thoughts, assumptions, interpretations, and interactions can be a start. In negotiating the moral,
ethical, and political dilemmas of feminist research, Nancy Naples (2003) advocates for a multidimensional and embodied approach to research. As she suggests,

An embodied perspective (one that is tied to particular social locations and particular positions in the community) emphasizes how researchers’ social positions…influence what questions we ask, whom we approach in the field, how we make sense of our fieldwork experience, and how we analyze and report our findings (p.197).

This framework provides one possible solution to perhaps one of the most difficult challenges that I am facing in my research.

Outside of the sensitive nature of colorism, my personal and academic conflicts of interest, and divisions of knowledge, another ethical dilemma I face is in the realm of power. One of the biggest contradictions of feminist research is that it proclaims to empower research subjects through minimal harm and control, yet in thinking about true ownership and decision making throughout this process, I do of course, have more power than the women whom I research. In her text, *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, Naomi Wolf (1994) argues that the biggest issue facing feminist researchers is power. She characterizes dimensions of power along three levels: power stemming from social location and position; power translated during the research process; and power exerted in the writing and representation stages of the research process (p.2). On the first domain of power, I do acknowledge that my position as a light-skinned black woman possibly carries more power than even my academic credentials. I am aware that my skin color has afforded me the opportunity to build rapport across skin tones: I am neither extremely light nor dark so I can be viewed as a “safe” brown person to talk to. However, I do recognize that there are some women who are reluctant to even talk with me. In reflecting on her experiences interviewing women of color on the issue of colorism, Margaret Hunter (2005) discusses how her skin tone influenced her work. She writes:
I am a light-skinned, biracial, African-American woman who could easily pass for white. This presented both challenges and benefits in the process. I spoke candidly before each interview about my own color and my interest in the color politics in the Mexican American and African American communities. I assured the women I spoke with that they could speak candidly about their feelings without fear of ‘hurting my feelings’ or ‘making me uncomfortable.’ ‘I’ve heard it all before,’ I told them. Nonetheless, I am sure that if I had a darker complexion, I would have had a different type of access to some women’s feelings (p.12-13).

Although she did not explicitly address the notion of power in this excerpt, is clear that Hunter’s ability to pass for white played a role in how she negotiated herself within the research process.

The second dimension of power refers to power exerted during the research process. I am employing a research method that enables participants to hold a significant source of power. Focus groups are a way for women to develop a collective voice, in addition to strategies for resistance and survival. According to Bloor and his colleagues (2001), focus groups can also be a source of empowerment for participants: “having found a voice, groups may develop an awareness of their common predicament and attempt a collective remedy” (94). I have structured the focus groups as informal conversations, with a loosely structured interview guide. At the beginning of each focus group, I am candid about my own experiences with colorism, and inform each participant that their knowledge is valuable to the research process; I tell every woman that she is just as much an expert on colorism as I and my goal is to learn from her. Because focus groups can provide an outlet for expression that is neither intimidating nor uncomfortable, participants have everything to gain from realizing their shared experiences of pain surrounding this issue.

Finally, the last dimension in which researchers can exert power is in the final stages of the research process. Ultimately, the researcher has final ownership over what data and whose knowledge is presented and how the data is interpreted. As Gullicksman (1994) points out, “each researcher is left on trust to draw the difficult line between interpreting the data in terms of
its relevance to her research questions as opposed to twisting it in a way that amounts to a
misrepresentation of what was said” (p.163). It remains important to protect the subjects as
much as possible, and in the area of language, participants are quite vulnerable. Likewise,
Devault (1999) maintains that naming and language within the research process is critical, and
feminist researchers should aim to “choose words carefully and creatively” in order to prevent
the mislabeling of experience (p.80). In an effort not to betray the trust of my research
participants and to ensure that their voices are heard in their form, providing member-checking
feedback forums, in which I present to participants a summary of my analysis, is a way to
guarantee that what I present is accurate and expressive of each woman’s voice.

To be sure, there are many personal and professional issues to consider in my research.
However, as my work is situated within a black feminist methodological and epistemological
framework, an attention to ethics is built within this paradigm. Patricia Hill Collins (2000)
developed an extensive strategy to black feminist epistemology, and she highlights the ethic of
caring and the ethic of personal accountability as crucial methodological ingredients in feminist
research involving black women. An ethic of caring involves an emphasis on individuality,
emotions, and empathy. As such, these elements foster the emergence of truth through caring.
Similarly, through the ethic of personal accountability, “people are expected to be held
accountable for their knowledge claims” (Collins, 2000, p.265). When taken together, these key
elements are able to empower all black women who are viewed as agents of knowledge.

I understand that colorism is not an easy topic to address. Further, I acknowledge that in
researching this subject as a black woman and a sociologist that I walk a fine line between
community responsibility and professional duty; I am aware that my research must begin with
my own self-reflection. Like many other feminist researchers, I know that there is no easy
solution to these dilemmas, and it remains difficult to produce emancipatory research that is neither disempowering nor oppressive in some way. Yet, equipped with the appropriate methodological tools, I am confident that colorism can evolve from the dirty laundry of the black community to a public issue for broader society.
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Figure 2-1 Participant characteristics by skin tone
CHAPTER 3  
UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY COLORISM: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Black women have long recognized the special circumstances of our lives in the United States: the commonalties that we share with all women, as well as the bonds that connect us to the men of our race. We have also realized that the interactive oppressions that circumscribe our lives produce a distinctive content for black womanhood.

--Deborah K. King

The aim of this dissertation research is to explore how young black women talk about and understand colorism in their everyday lives. Further, the purpose of this study is to: show that colorism continues to impact black women; examine the ways in which day-to-day situations and interaction are shaped by contemporary notions of colorism; develop a beginning foundation of a theoretical framework of colorism in the 21st century; and produce culturally relevant knowledge that will inform recommendations for social change. Examining black women and their everyday experiences of colorism requires attention to two equally important bodies of scholarship: black feminist theory and sociological theories that integrate both micro and macro-level paradigms. Each of these frameworks is essential in articulating the concept of everyday colorism. This chapter therefore presents a discussion of these theoretical conceptualizations. First, I will outline the core features of black feminist ideology, a theoretical framework centered on the distinctive experiences of black women. Next, I turn to the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, and Philomena Essed—thinkers who articulate ideas on the inter-connected processes of everyday life and practice. Finally I will discuss how everyday colorism, a model encompassing various elements of both theoretical perspectives, is useful in situating the day-to-day experiences of black women and skin tone.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminism did not produce a groundswell in academia until the 1980’s (Breines 2006). Yet, black women’s consciousness and intellectual production—both inside and outside
the ivory tower—has persisted for centuries. As Deborah King (1988) points out, “black women have been feminists since the early 1800’s” (p. 70). Despite being unrightfully acknowledged and recorded for generations, black women have historically taken a critical stance against inequality and oppression. A theoretical approach that embraces the ideas of resistance, voice, and activism, black feminist theory (or more commonly black feminist ideology or black feminist thought) was borne out of the desire to be heard, warranted, and legitimized. This ideology is centered around a distinctive black female experience grounded in intersecting oppressions, standpoint and visibility, and the self-production of black women’s knowledge and experience for the purpose of empowerment.

**Intersectionality**

Central to understanding the experiences of black women, intersectionality is a core feature of black feminist theory. As many black women scholars have observed, the position of a black woman in American society is one that is rife with distinction. One of the first women to articulate this experience, Anna Julia Cooper (1892; 1988) writes:

> The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is yet an unknown or and unacknowledged factor in both (134).

Excerpted from *A Voice From the South*, one of the earliest writings of black feminist theory, Cooper underscores that a black woman’s life—unique compared to a black man or a white woman—is shaped by both her race and her gender. She also asserts that because of their distinct place in society, black women are relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Cooper’s original expression of a “woman question and a race problem” in 1892 has remained a core feature of black feminist thought, however there has been a progression in the ways in which black female thinkers have articulated black women’s place in society.
Much later in 1970, Frances Beale furthers our thinking of intersectionality by noting that the black female experience is subject to the double jeopardy of racism and sexism. Beale also points to the system of capitalism as the culprit for “reducing black women to a state of enslavement” (as quoted in Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p.149). For a significant portion of time (from Reconstruction to the 1960’s), the majority of black women were concentrated in domestic labor and servitude (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2006). Pointing not only to racism (from whites) and sexism (from black men) as vehicles of oppression, many black feminists in the 1960’s and 1970’s extended Marxist notions of economic exploitation to show classism as an additional subjugation shaping the lives of black women and the ideals of black feminist thought. This is exhibited for instance in the writings of the Combahee River Collective (1977). Employing an intersectional framework of race, class, and gender as a system of interlocking oppressions more accurately captures the unique and shared history and status of black women (Collins, 1986). It is important to underscore, however that there is no one generic, monolithic version of black womanhood, but rather various models that are reflective of race, class, and gender inequality.

Deborah King’s (1989) pivotal work, *Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousnesses*, advanced black feminist thinking on the intersectional paradigm. As Guy-Sheftall (1995) suggests, “her groundbreaking essay…is an important contribution to black feminist theory, which goes beyond the triple jeopardy thesis to describe the nature of black womanhood” (p.293). King critiques the race-sex, double-jeopardy model of research and theoretical investigation for black women, and advocates instead for utilizing an interactive, multiplicative paradigm of triple jeopardy, rather than an additive one:
...racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems. An interactive model, which I have termed multiple jeopardy, better captures the processes. The modifier ‘multiple’ refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism (p.47).

King’s work further illuminates the distinctive position of black women in American society. Her theory, in conjunction with the broader aspects of black feminist thought, provided a platform for other women of color, including Chicana feminists and Native American women, to articulate their multidimensional struggle (Garcia, 1989; Mihesuah, 2003).

**Standpoint and Visibility**

Since the first wave of feminism, the experiences and concerns of black women have been disregarded. The main objective of the first wave—the right to vote—was never meant to benefit the lives of all women, just middle-class white women (hooks, 1981). As bell hooks (1999) argues,

The first white women’s rights advocates were never seeking social equality for all women...historiographers and especially feminist writing have created a version of American history in which white women’s rights advocates are presented as champions of oppressed black people (p.376).

Despite the notion that white women and black women were united in solidarity against slavery and for suffrage, hooks reveals that the needs and concerns of black women did not match those of white women. Black feminist writing at the time tells the same story.

Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech on Woman’s Rights, asked the famous question, “a’n’t I a woman,” which spoke volumes to the exclusive nature of the suffragist movement and the invisible presence of black women within the movement (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p.36).

History repeated itself in the second-wave of feminism, as the voices and concerns of black women and other women of color were overlooked and counted as one within the struggle of mainstream feminism. Many black feminists accused white feminists for failing to represent the
interests and positions of black women. Betty Friedan’s “one dimensional perspective on women’s reality” in her seminal book, *The Feminine Mystique* offers one such example of this exclusion (Hooks, 2000, p.3). As hooks and other black feminist scholars argue, marginality and invisibility were part and parcel of the black woman experience.

To that end, visibility and standpoint characterize a key element of black feminist thought. As Deborah King (1989) notes, “conceptually invisible,…black women have found that much in the movement has denied important aspects of our history and experience” (p.60). Negative images and stereotypes of black womanhood prevented the intellect, value, and position of black women from being recognized as legitimate and valid. Sexually and economically exploited, black women were often seen as “mules uh de world,” with no human value (Collins, 2000, p.45). Thus, the black woman’s standpoint begins with the basic belief that “…black women are inherently valuable” (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p.274). Furthermore, black feminist thought is concerned with developing a standpoint and theoretical framework that accurately captures the true and real experiences of black womanhood with black women at the center of analysis. A self-defined standpoint, black feminist ideology is grounded in the reality of black women (King, 1989), and as Collins (1986) points out, “the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women’s power as human subjects” (p.S17). This is one of the reasons why Patricia Hill Collins (1986) argues that black feminist thought can be produced *only* by black women. This theoretical perspective provides agency, while simultaneously creating a vehicle and outlet for expression.

**Voice and Empowerment**

Bell hooks (1989) argues that for the oppressed, power originates in “moving from silence into speech” (p.9). Patricia Hill Collins (1998) adds that when black women come out of silence, they simultaneously come into voice *and* power. Bringing the silenced voices from the
margins to the center, black feminist thought is concerned with connecting personal lives to
greater social forces and insists on the power of self-definition to change consciousness and
increase awareness. This theoretical approach embraces lived experience as a worthy criterion of
producing knowledge and wisdom. The orientation of black feminist thought recognizes the
importance of dialogue in supporting relationships and connectedness, particularly in challenging
and resisting domination (Collins, 2000). More importantly, recognizing that there is no one
voice that captures black all women, black feminist thought embraces a multiplicity of voices
that is shaped by individual biography and experience. Talking back and coming into voice
signifies for black women the authority, resistance, and empowerment needed in order to
develop and maintain a critical consciousness.

**Bridging Micro and Macro-Level Process in Social Reality**

As C. Wright Mills (1959) suggests, no sociological examination is complete without
investigating the connection between an individual’s private troubles and the “public issues of
social structure” (p.8). Although Mills is considered a theorist who focuses on macro-levels of
understanding, he was in fact a thinker who saw the benefit in examining the relationship
between large-scale institutions and individual aspects of social life. One of the recurring
debates in past and present sociology lies in this distinction between micro and macro-level
processes (Cuff, 2003; Ritzer, 1991). Despite the divisive history and nature of sociological
theory, more contemporary sociological theory features a movement “away from micro-macro
extremism and toward … the integration (or synthesis, linkage) of micro and macro theories
and/or levels of social analysis” (Ritzer, 2008, p.375). In reflecting on my own placement as a
sociologist, I chose to situate myself within the field of theorists who employ more unified and
integrated social theories to guide their work. Given the context of this research on black women
and colorism, I rely heavily on the unified theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Patricia Hill Collins and

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Philomena Essed—three scholars who successfully navigate the theoretical terrains of micro and macro-level sociology.

Pierre Bourdieu

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers many contributions to contemporary sociological theory, mainly his theories to the sociology of culture through his pivotal work *Distinction*. Yet, Bourdieu is also a social scientist whose work is useful in bridging the divide between macro and micro-sociology. Viewed by Cuff (2003) as a “synthesist,” Bourdieu is concerned with “the ways actors create the social world around them…[by] looking more closely at the relationship between structure and agency in the social world” (Gattone, 2006, p.102).

Bourdieu takes on this task in his piece, *Vive La Crise!* Written in 1988, Bourdieu is openly critical of the false unanimity and oppositional nature of sociology. Accusing the discipline of being divided into “theoretical denominations”, Bourdieu suggests that sociology make a number of connections, namely between theory and practice, micro and macro sociology, and qualitative and quantitative methods (p.780). More importantly, he is focused on the unification of objectivity and subjectivity. As Cuff (2003) points out, “Bourdieu is centrally concerned with the reconciling of dualisms…the dualism which occupies centre stage…is the classical epistemological one between objectivism and subjectivism” (p.322). In Bourdieu’s view, the concentration of intellectuals on objectivity prevents them from knowing and understanding the social world from the perspective of the social actors within it. Conversely, an emphasis on subjectivity leads to a reductionist view of the social world. Despite this limitation, Bourdieu argues that the subjective, or “soft sociology” is perhaps a more accurate representation of the social world (p.781). He offers the following resolution:

I believe that true scientific theory and practice must overcome this opposition by integrating into a single model the analysis of the experience of social agents and the analysis of the objective structures that make this experience possible (p.782).
In consideration of Bourdieu’s numerous contributions to the area of sociological theory, I believe his conceptualization of *habitus*, *practices*, and *fields* are most applicable to this research. Framing these concepts within the conversation of structure and agency, Bourdieu situates these three ideas as critical elements in how people construct life and social reality. First, the *habitus* represents the internalized thoughts and ideas that guide the ways in which people understand and view the social world. Habitus is acquired through socialization, and as people internalize the rules and structures of the world, these dispositions become part of one’s consciousness. In fact, Bourdieu (1984) suggests that “the habitus functions below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny and control by the will” (p.466). Further, Bourdieu notes that while each individual has their own habitus (shaped by their social location and position in society), there is, however, an element of collectivity inherent within habitus. Ultimately, the habitus provides a basis for choice and action, producing the practices within society.

While habitus represents the internalization of thought, *practices* then constitute the externalization of internalized thoughts and ideas. According to Bourdieu, practices represent the behavior mediated by structure and agency; practices are simply what one does. *Fields*, then, symbolize the setting of shared relations which contextualizes group interaction and identity. Both individual agents and institutions co-exist within fields, and matters of power and position impact habitus. As Ritzer (2008) explains, “the field conditions the habitus; on the other hand, the habitus constitutes the field as something that is meaningful” (p. 408). Bourdieu’s unified perspective of habitus, practices, and fields attempts to resolve the partiality of a micro or macro-level model explaining the social world.
Patricia Hill Collins

Patricia Hill Collins is another thinker who is useful in bridging the micro-macro divide. Unlike Bourdieu, Collins is much less formal in her analysis and does not engage a theoretical debate or critique in her work. Yet, she does provide an interesting paradigm for exploring the relationship between structure and agency. Like many feminist theorists, Collins employs an integrative macro-micro framework, and thus is quite capable of bridging this divide in her work. Throughout her work, Collins offers a clear and yet seamless way of understanding the interdependent nature of institutional organization and individual thought and behavior. Using the empowerment of black women as her theoretical lens, Collins employs four highly interconnected systems of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal) operating through the matrix of domination in various micro and macro-levels ways. As Collins (2000) reveals, although each domain functions at different societal or individual levels, and each domain influences individual and collective human agency.

The **structural** domain of power reflects the ways in which macro-level processes affect the lives of black women. As Collins (2000) explains, this particular domain “encompasses how social institutions are organized to reproduce Black women’s subordination over time” (277). She points to such structural inequities in housing, education, and employment that have hindered the resources and opportunity for black women, and reinforced institutional forms of racism. An interplay of the structural and **disciplinary** domains of power enable the enforcement of such large-scale bias and discrimination. This second feature of macro-level power points to the “inside” enforcement and surveillance of organizations that “foster new and unanticipated forms of disciplinary control” (282). Despite legal advances (i.e. Civil Rights Act or Voting Rights Act) that impact the structural domain of power by furthering the position of women of color, large-scale discrimination is still possible at this disciplinary level.
In comparing the four models of power, Collins (2000) provides this summary:

The structural and disciplinary domains of power operate through system-wide social policies managed primarily through bureaucracies. In contrast, the hegemonic domain of power aims to justify practices in these domains of power. By manipulating ideology and culture, the hegemonic domain acts as a link between social institutions (structural domain), their organizational practices (disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (interpersonal domain) (p.284).

As Collins maintains, the *hegemonic* domain of power refers to symbols, ideas, and ideologies, while the *interpersonal* realm is more concerned with day-to-day relationships and communication. Although this model is complex, it does provide an alternative way to understand how the status and position of black women individually and collectively is mediated through this interrelated process of micro and macro-level domains. These linkages are critical to the social transformation and empowerment of women of color.

**Philomena Essed**

In her research examining the daily experiences of racism faced by black women in the United States and the Netherlands, Dutch sociologist Philomena Essed’s 1991 pioneering work, *Understanding Everyday Racism*, provides both a theoretical and empirical framework for studying and understanding the unique perspectives of black women. By using the narratives of 55 black women as her guide, Essed builds a theoretical frame of everyday racism that explains both micro and macro-level implications of racism.

Similar to other theorists who engage the sociology of knowledge, Essed considers knowledge to be an integral part of everyday life and practice. Within any given society or culture, there exists a collective stock of knowledge that guides behavior and action (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). All members of a society acquire the knowledge needed for navigation within that particular society or culture. The acquisition of such knowledge is developed by learning the language, customs, traditions, and rules of that particular culture or society. According to
Essed, knowledge used in everyday life is in many ways mediated by the institutions of family, media, and education. For many members in a society, going about daily life and interacting with these various institutions on a frequent basis results in the institutionalization and embodiment of this frame of knowledge that is oftentimes taken for granted as an objective part of reality.

Philomena Essed applies an intersectional perspective to the sociology of knowledge, and uses the framework to explain: 1) how members of a society acquire a collective knowledge on racism; and 2) how black women are particularly impacted by everyday practice and interaction as it relates to racism. As she points out, “everyday practices are present and reproduced by everyday situations. The situations of the everyday world are substructured by relations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. This introduces, finally, the notion of everyday racism” (p.49). Essed’s specific use of the concept “everyday” is key in fusing a micro and macro-level paradigm. As she explains, employing the term “cross[es] the boundaries between structural and interactional approaches to racism and link[s] details of micro experiences to the structural and ideological context in which they are shaped.” (p.288) For Essed, it remains important to underscore the cumulative effects of racism. She describes that “specific instances acquire meaning only in relation to the sum total of other experiences of everyday racism” (p.288). To that end, everyday racism encapsulates the routine practices, attitudes, and behavior of racism that taken alone would go ignored and unnamed as racist.

Essed’s framework of everyday racism is so essential to scholarly research on black women for several reasons. First, Essed points to a scholarly disinterest in micro-level practices and in the evaluation of everyday experience. “Due to this prevailing macro-sociological bias,” she writes, “micro-interactional perspectives on racism…have been neglected.” (Essed, 1991,
As such, in considering the scholarly work of experiences of racism, the value of everyday experience has been taken for granted and omitted from empirical inquiry. It is important to highlight that at the time of Essed’s publication, this was a legitimate concern; more contemporary research, however, does address everyday experiences of racism. The work of St. Jean and Feagin (1998) provides one such example of an empirical focus on micro-level processes. Secondly, Essed highlights that a “marriage” of micro-level practices and macro-level structure within research and method is necessary in order to completely understand the experiences of black women and racism. To accomplish this task, Essed (1991) suggests that “more studies of racism are needed that start from real-life experiences.” (p.294). This empirical and theoretical example provides a useful tool for subsequent research.

**Understanding “Everyday Colorism”**

The theoretical questions and perspectives concerning skin tone have been commonly evaluated throughout the history of the sociological study of colorism. From W.E.B. DuBois’ (1903) classic essay, *The Talented Tenth*, to Margaret Hunter’s (2005) recent work *Race, Gender, & the Politics of Skin Tone*, key theoretical conceptualizations of colorism have all been grounded within race scholarship. Scholars who study colorism rely heavily on racial paradigms to explain the dual phenomenons of race and skin tone. As Kimberly McClain Dacosta (2005) explains, it was commonplace for early studies of colorism to be coupled with broader studies of racism (see for e.g. Drake & Cayton, 1945; Frazier, 1957; Kronus, 1971). As such, colorism (like racism) typically has been viewed as either a consequence of slavery or colonial domination. Conversely, many women of color who examine the effects of skin tone in their work do so from a critical intersectional standpoint, investigating how skin tone intersects with other factors such as race, class, and gender. Unlike race scholarship however, conceptual frameworks of colorism have remained under-theorized over time, and many scholars who
conduct empirical research fail to advance colorism theory beyond the scope of race and racism (Hill, 2000; Hunter, 1998). The exception to this rule is the theory offered by scholar Margaret Hunter (1998; 2002). She frames colorism as a “skin color selection system,” pointing out that black women form a beauty queue with light-skinned women at the front and darker-skinned women in within the larger power relations present within the structure of colorism. While I agree that it is essential to engage race theory when conceptualizing colorism, there remains a critical gap in the literature relating to the theoretical foundations of colorism. The present body of scholarship on race theory is quite broad and expansive; many scholars have advanced our theoretical understandings of the various forms of race, including color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), everyday racism (Essed, 1991), and silent racism (Trepagnier, 2007). Yet colorism—arguably another form and derivative of racism—has yet to realize an independent theoretical development.

Given the theoretical limitations of the literature, a portion of this research aims to develop a starting framework for understanding the contemporary nature of colorism. In addressing how the framework of everyday racism can be useful in understanding other forms of oppression experienced by black women, Philomena Essed (1991) suggests that “apart from racism, the same method can be applied to assess other accounts of systematic injustice […] in everyday life” (294). Her model is useful then in engaging a conversation about colorism. Building upon the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu’s habitus, Collins’ framework of empowerment, and Philomena Essed’s notion of everyday racism, I am positing the term everyday colorism, a theoretical frame emerging from the data that contextualizes the voices and experiences of the women involved in this research project. I argue that everyday colorism is comprised of three elements: language, internal scripts, and external practices (See Figure 3-1). I define language
in this context as the everyday vocabulary and system of meaning attached to skin tone. *Internal scripts* refer to the socially constructed ideas, expectations, emotions, and beliefs women carry with them about skin tone. Internal scripts then guide *external practices*, everyday behaviors and actions enacted by women towards themselves and others based upon their internalized views about skin color. It is important to highlight that the language, scripts, and practices of everyday colorism can yield two models: a normative framework and an oppositional framework. The most common form of everyday colorism, a *normative* model explains the dominant nature of colorism that places light-skinned women at the top of the skin color hierarchy and dark-skinned women at the bottom. An *oppositional* model of everyday colorism yields everyday language, internal scripts and external practices that resist and challenge the dominant ideology.

I argue that the model of everyday colorism is significant for several reasons. First, my usage of the term colorism is a first step in formally naming the issue. It is important to note that despite the long history and widespread prevalence of colorism in black communities, the term itself remains largely unnamed. In fact, at the onset of this project, I found it more challenging to recruit participants using the term colorism on my recruitment flyer. After quickly recognizing this oversight, my recruitment efforts were more fruitful after I started looking for young women who wanted to “discuss issues of light skin, dark skin, good hair and bad hair” (See Appendix A). Like other scholars who readily study and understand the issue of colorism, this term is part of my everyday vocabulary; yet my researcher bias failed to consider how uncommon the term is among young black women. In fact, at the beginning of one focus group session, I asked every participant to talk about why she wanted to be a part of this research. One young woman honestly stated, “before today, I have never really heard of this word, so I can’t really give you any answer and look stupid. What exactly is colorism?” When asking
participants about the relative obscurity of the term, many observed that usage of the term
colorism was rare and directly related to the problematic nature of this sensitive subject. As
Karina, a Haitian woman notes:

I think […] if we don’t give it a name, then it’s not really an issue, we’re not considering it an
issue, so we’re like keeping it, you know, undercover. If we were to say you know, like
racism, if we called it colorism, then that means it’s an issue in our community and I guess
we don’t want to say that all the time.

Throughout this project, there were no respondents who used the term colorism freely.
Some women talked about the “color complex” (which could be a direct allusion to the popular
1992 book of the same name), yet the majority of participants did not connect their daily
experiences with skin color to the term colorism. The irony however is that although colorism is
not readily recognizable or easily defined, not one woman in this study had any difficulty
articulating the meaning and value inherent in skin tone, or that colorism was a problem
disproportionately affecting black women. As Becky so aptly remarks, “This is something that
plagues women rather than men, and I was drawn [to this research project] because it’s
something you could never really get tired of talking about because it always seems to be an
issue.” Despite the fact that colorism goes unnamed in the black community, there is a
unanimous recognition that colorism is alive and well in everyday life and interaction, and as
Becky suggests, operates in a covert fashion, looming in the mindset and mentality of young
women.

The inability to name colorism also translates into the scholarly arena. In the classic
works, in addition to the more recent body of literature, colorism is more commonly referred to
as skin tone bias, discrimination, or stratification. Although this is sufficient in describing the
issue of light skin and dark skin, it still does not accurately encapsulate the overarching ideology
and discourse of skin tone looming in the backdrop of black American life. As colorism is a
form of internalized racism, I assert that colorism should be invoked as the universal term used to describe the complex system of social inequality that exists in conjunction with other forms of oppression to perpetuate difference, subordination, and hierarchy in black society. Naming colorism—within black communities and in academia—will undoubtedly give way to formally challenging this long-standing history of bias and discrimination. As Patricia Hill Collins (1998) reminds us, “private naming is not enough—truth must be publicly proclaimed” (p.237). Naming, then, is ultimately about empowerment.

The second value of this framework is that this model highlights everyday experiences of colorism, yet it also points to the connection between individual behavior and the actions of institutions. This research fills a gap in the literature by examining day-to-day interaction, however it is equally important to address the role individuals play in reinforcing behavior that becomes reproduced and institutionalized on a regular basis. As earlier stated, more contemporary scholars are devising frameworks that transcend micro and macro-level paradigms (Cuff, 2003). The manifestations of colorism remain salient yet insidious in a variety of contexts including family and personal relationships, and larger societal institutions such as the media and education. Consistent with Pierre Bourdieu’s interplay of habitus, practice, and fields, or even Patricia Hill Collins’ four domains of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, interpersonal), perceptions and experiences of colorism rest on a fine line of individual agency/constraint that is influenced by both micro and macro-level forces. Evaluating one or the other does not provide an accurate description of how black women view their skin tone as a multi-dimensional element (in conjunction of course, with additional interlocking oppressions) that shapes their life agency and/or constrains them within this dynamic system. Their micro-level interactions also speak to macro-level, structural implications.
Finally, building upon Risman’s (2004) interpretation of gender as a social structure, I argue that colorism can also be viewed as multi-dimensional structure. Although colorism does exist within the larger structure of racism, it can undoubtedly be conceptualized as a structure functioning at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. As Risman (2004) defines these areas in relation to gender, the individual level constitutes internalization and socialization; the interactional level defines status expectations, bias and othering; the institutional level of course refers to organizational practices, legal regulations, and ideology. Although I am not equating colorism with gender, I consider colorism a multi-level construct existing at these three levels. Everyday colorism examines the broader connections between these micro and macro-level structures.

These ideas represent a start point in advancing the scholarship on colorism theory. In the following chapters, I present the findings of analysis that are centered on the framework of everyday colorism.
Figure 3-1. The structure of everyday colorism
CHAPTER 4
REVISITING COLOR NAMES AND COLOR NOTIONS

From the time I can remember everyone was described by color, down to a half or quarter shade darker than someone else. If the person was dark, the description was negative, especially if the person was female…I got the message: no good, dark, ugly, not worth black men’s attention, unattractive, and not wife material. I believed it.

--Virginia R. Harris

In the statement above, artist Virginia Harris (1994) describes her own experience growing up as a “prison of color.” Being called “black” on a regular basis led Harris to believe all of the negative attributes commonly associated with having a dark skin tone. There are a variety of descriptors used within African-American society to refer to various skin tones, as well as a wide range of connotations (positive and negative) attached to every name. These names and ideas constitute the first two elements of everyday colorism, language and internal scripts. Referring back to the story of Virginia Harris, she notes that as a child she was called black so many times by family members and schoolmates that by the time she reached adulthood she unknowingly internalized the socially constructed images of the term, convincing herself and others that she was in fact “no good, dark, ugly.” In many respects, this research aims to deconstruct the collective language and internal scripts of colorism. Furthermore, by examining how young black women talk about and understand colorism in their everyday life, this research aims to identify any shifts in color consciousness compared to previous generations of young black Americans. I use the pioneering work of sociologist Charles Parrish (1946)—Color Names and Color Notions—to serve as a basis of comparison. This chapter presents the results of this exploration; I engage a detailed discussion of the language and internal scripts related to light, medium, and dark skin tones. Next, I describe how the language and internal scripts of colorism influence and produce external practices. Data is presented to demonstrate each area separately.
Language: “Color Names”

Within our society, language is perhaps the most vital component of interaction and communication. As Berger and Luckman (1966) point out, “an understanding of language is essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” (p.37). The language of a particular culture or society inherently implies meaning, power, identity, and location. Sociologist Larry Crawford (2000) shares his perspective on language and its relationship to race and color:

Language is a very powerful tool. When oral or written symbols are reinforced through entertainment, education and religion, it becomes even more potent. Words communicate meanings that are commonly understood by all participants or they cannot stand as a method for conveying meaning or order. The subconscious, symbolic reality which people speak into existence facilitates the exercise of power or reveals impotence. Words, also, are made into allies or enemies. Our unspoken awareness of the European meanings behind the symbols we use demonstrates a willing consumption of a racist reference group’s seductive culture. The language we ape reveals our not so blind endorsement of another’s self-benefitting cultural definitions about color, ours relative to their lack of it.

The first element of everyday colorism, language is defined as the everyday vocabulary attached to skin tone. This language of course is filled with value and meaning. Although the term colorism is vaguely mentioned in the black community, there exists an extensive and sophisticated vocabulary for identifying and distinguishing skin color categories. Historically, blacks have designated each other as either light-skinned or dark-skinned. In addition to these two basic terms, there is an additional set of terms associated with being light or dark. As Marita Golden (2004) suggests, it is the “more specific descriptive terms that separate Blacks and create castes and cliques” (p. 7). Many of these terms, including “high yellow,” “brownskin,” and “redbone” are connected directly to the perceived hue of one’s skin tone, and have been commonplace in black American culture for generations. Yet the extensive vocabulary of color has origins in slavery and colonialism. As Obiagele Lake (2003) observes, European colonialists are credited with the invention of racial terms (i.e. black and white) and are additionally
responsible for developing a nomenclature differentiating light and dark-skinned blacks. It is African-Americans, for sure, who have amplified the attention given to the nuances of skin gradations and hair texture.

Perhaps the most comprehensive attention to the vocabulary of skin tone has been the work of sociologist Charles Parrish. In his seminal study, *Color Names and Color Notions* (1946), Parrish explores the various names blacks use to describe people of varying skin shades. The results of his questionnaire given to high school and college students finds twenty-five\(^1\) commonly used terms to describe light, medium, and dark skin tones. Names such as *fair*, *bright*, and *yellow* are regularly cited for characterizing light-skinned individuals. Variations of the word brown (e.g. *high brown* or *brownskin*) are universal terms for a medium skin tone. *Dark* and *black* are commonly used names for those with the darkest skin tones. Parrish also investigates the various meanings and associations attached to these terms. He learns that the names associated with skin tone are invariably connected to stereotypes and personality traits. Those blacks having a medium complexion are favored the most and receive either neutral or positive attributes. Yet those who are both very light and very dark are subject to the most objectionable stereotypes.

[Blacks who are very light] …are physically attractive—look well in their clothes. They are thought to have a superiority complex which makes them conceited; they act like White people and have little to do with darker Negroes; they are ‘not in the race’

[Blacks who are very dark]: Most of them are thought to be ugly; they are thought to be evil and hard to get along with; they have a strong feeling of inferiority; they are quick tempered and like to fight (Parrish, 1946, p.18).

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\(^1\) Parrish originally found over 125 various names referring to various skin tones, but draws from 25 names that are the most commonly used among all participants.
Although the aim of this research is not to replicate Parrish’s study, it is important to gain an understanding of the names that young women today use and hear on a regular basis. In the first phase of data collection, I noted the preponderance of different names participants talked about to describe various skin tones. In light of this, in the second phase of data collection I explicitly asked respondents to free-list and discuss the many color names they use or hear on a regular basis. The results of the focus groups indicate that there are 40 terms that these women commonly employed to describe themselves and others in their day-to-day lives (See Table 4.1). Several points of significance are worth highlighting here. Each of the included terms was mentioned by at least three participants; the majority of these terms were easily identified, recognized, and understood by all of the women interviewed. There are nine terms (denoted with an asterisk) that are an exact match to Parrish’s list of terms. Close to half of the names are related to being light-skinned; many of these are consistent with not only the terms Parrish found over sixty years ago, but resonate with many other bodies of fiction and scholarly literature (see for example Kerr, 2006 or Lake, 2003). Reflecting the history of color language in African-American culture, the terms associated with a light-skin tone, such as pretty skin is generally positive. However, it is necessary to mention the term house nigga. As Denise, a brown-skinned participant aptly stated, “I think that the problem with the color complex is that everybody wants to be a house nigga.” This comment is a direct reference to the distinctions made between light-skinned slaves whose duties were relegated inside the slave master’s house, and their darker counterparts (field niggas) who had to perform manual labor in the outdoors. Denise’s remark, in addition to the other women who noted either using or hearing the term house nigga, reflects not only the survival of the contentious word nigger, but the continued reification of the slave mentality within black culture.
As light skin and dark skin reflect the polar opposites of colorism, the majority of terms offered for dark-skin are derogatory; names such as burnt, charcoal, and watermelon child point to a historical bias toward being dark and reinforced controlling images of dark-skinned black women. These labels continue to signify negativity and inferiority standing in stark contrast to the favorable labels of light skin.

Some terms listed provide direct references to more concrete instances of skin tone bias. For instance, there is a significant portion of Jamaican participants in this study, and many of them offered the terms browning and coolie to denote a light-skinned individual. Both of these terms are rooted within Jamaican culture, as they typically refer to racially mixed (light-skinned) girls. In addition, the term jigaboo was mentioned by several participants, as the name for a dark-skinned black girl, but also alluding to the divisions between black women that are played out in the popular film School Daze. In the movie, the jigaboos are dark-skinned women with kinky hair. Their counterparts, the wannabes, are the more popular and attractive light-skinned women with long hair and Eurocentric features. Although the film is more than twenty years old, the term jigaboo is still present within the contemporary language of skin color.

Interestingly, there are several terms falling within all three categories that are connected in some way, shape, or form to food. From vanilla for light skin, caramel for medium tones, to chocolate for dark skin, these food terms may in some way point to the (hyper) sexualized and eroticized images of all black women regardless of their skin tone. Without question, historical white images and attitudes surrounding the black female body have primarily been connected to sex. As sociologist K. Sue Jewell (1993) relates, “from the early 1630s to the present, Black American women of all shades have been portrayed as hypersexual "bad-black-girls" (p.46). Consequently, the names given to black women by larger society incorporate food metaphors. In
1984 sociologist Irving Allen published in *Sex Roles* the results of a study that examined the battery of terms found within American culture that derogate women of color. Finding the largest number of epithets for black women, many of these terms—including brown sugar, chocolate drop, hot chocolate, mocha, charcoal blossom, and honey—symbolize food. As Allen (1984) observes, although the connection of food to sexuality may seem peculiar, there exists nonetheless this universal correlation within American vernacular for all women of color. It is no surprise, then that many of the color names offered by respondents in this study typify various foods. The larger importance of this finding is the survival (and oftentimes embracing, e.g. “sexy red” or “sexy black”) of these derogatory terms within black American culture. Many of the same terms Allen found for black women, which are both racist and sexist, get reintroduced and reaffirmed through colorism.

Although there exists a wide range of descriptors for light and dark complexions, the women in the study do not use or hear very often terms associated with having a medium skin tone. As one respondent stated, “I have never heard of any names for anyone with a medium tone.” This comment is consistent with the literature on colorism, which has traditionally operated from a “light/dark” binary structure. Despite the few names offered, there is some indication that the experiences of women in the “middle” are quite different compared to their light and dark counterparts, suggesting that colorism is a three-tiered experience as opposed to a binary. I will return to this issue later in this chapter.

It is also important to highlight the most commonly used terms. When referring to light-skinned women, the overwhelming majority of respondents use the word “red” compared to any other term, including light-skinned. Red is synonymous with light-skin and is viewed as the ideal
color holding the most value in the black community. Historically, the term redbone has signified a person with mixed white, Native American, and African-American ancestry (Marler, 1997).

Conversely, the term “black” is used by women in this study as the predominant name for dark skin, above and beyond the term dark-skinned itself. As Drake and Cayton (1945) point out, this word has always been “loaded with negative implications in Anglo-Saxon linguistics. Things are ‘black as sin.’ When you don’t like a person you give him a ‘black look’ ”(p.496). Although many people of African descent in the U.S. today identify themselves as Black, this connotation for a dark-skinned woman is negative and is in no way infused with Black pride. Neal and Wilson (1989) observe that the usage of the word black in this context is a “derogatory adjective…[and] does little to enforce the idea that black is beautiful” (p.327). The characterization of dark-skinned women as black further reinforces the socially constructed divisions among black women.

**Internal Scripts: “Color Notions”**

As noted in the previous section, the names and labels attached to varying skin tones are loaded with meaning. Red, brown, and black are much more than phenotypic descriptors; these color names, of course, shape color notions. More importantly, the language of skin tone creates a collective stock of knowledge that is shared and maintained by many members of the black community. The everyday experiences of colorism are connected to the ways in which women internalize the mental messages, or *internal scripts* of skin tone. In this context, I define this second element of everyday colorism as the socially constructed ideas, expectations, emotions, and beliefs pertaining to skin tone. Similar to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of habitus, internalized scripts represent a *color* habitus, reinforcing for the women this study their commonsense knowledge about skin color.
“Red Girls Get More Attention”

Consistent with the many positive terms used to denote a light skin tone, many of the internalized scripts related to light skin were also positive. When asking respondents to describe the attributes associated with light-skinned women, many used words such as “trustworthy,” “amiable,” “non-threatening,” and “comfortable.” The most commonly held view however, was that light skin was synonymous with beauty. As Beyonce, a medium toned participant observed, “I think there’s an expectation [that] when somebody’s light skinned, you just automatically [assume that]… they’re just supposed to be pretty.” The vast majority of the women in this project—regardless of her skin tone—echoed this sentiment. Equating light skin with beauty translates into the placement of light-skinned women at the top of what Margaret Hunter (2002) refers to as the “beauty queue”. As skin tones are placed on a continuum of light to dark, so too is beauty; a black woman’s level of attractiveness corresponds to where she falls within the beauty queue. The internalization of light-skinned women as the most beautiful black women has pervaded virtually every literary, theoretical, and empirical body of work on colorism. It is no surprise, then that this was the most universal attribute offered by the women in this study.

Because light-skinned women are viewed as the most attractive, connected to this idea is the expectation of superiority. Parrish (1946) and others find that within the black community conceit and arrogance are often internalized scripts associated with light skin. Due to their skin tone, many light-skinned blacks historically looked down upon darker blacks, distancing themselves through many social clubs and organizations. Consequently, light-skinned women are viewed to be snobbish because of their proximity to whiteness. The same ideas emerge from the women in the study. Consider for example the experience of Sharelle, an eighteen-year old who identifies her skin tone as light brown. When discussing the perceived attributes associated with
having light skin, Sharelle openly discusses her frustration with constantly being stereotyped as a snob.

People always assume that because I’m light skinned that I’m stuck up and they say, oh you’d make the perfect AKA[…] I don’t think I’m stuck up but people say that I am, and I just think it’s because of my complexion. I don’t think I’m stuck up.

Sharelle’s account is a compelling example mirroring the stories of other light-skinned women participating in this study. Before they have the opportunity to prove otherwise, many light-skinned women are often judged and evaluated in their everyday lives on the basis of their skin tone. The other assumption that Sharelle alluded to—that she would make the “perfect” member of Alpha Kappa Alpha (a black sorority historically believed to select mainly light-skinned members)—automatically places her in the mind of others at the top of the beauty queue. Although Sharelle insists that she is not a conceited individual, this internalized script of superiority leads to an inevitable disconnect in communication between light and dark-skinned women.

As Hunter (2005) states, “the more beauty one possesses, the better off she will be when competing for resources such as jobs, education, or even spouses in the marriage market” (p. 70). Hunter goes on to explain that for African-American women light skin provides more social commodity and capital. In addition to the internalized scripts shared about light-skinned women and beauty, there was an overwhelming perception by the women I interviewed that light skin carried more privilege compared to dark skin. Many of these advantages include better employment, the ability to have more inter-racial friendships and relationships, and overall appeal. The following response shared by Denise, a medium-toned participant, illustrates this belief:
Red girls get more attention [from men] than dark skinned girls [be]cause of the […] simple fact that they’re just red […] it could be a prettier dark skinned girl, the red girl may not even be that pretty, but she’s getting attention just because she’s red. And it’s where the feud begins because some dark skinned girls feel as though this red girl isn’t as pretty as they are and she’s getting all the attention just because she’s red, the dark skinned girls are being over looked just because this person is red.

Inherent in what Denise has internalized about what it means to be red is the notion that being average-looking and light-skinned is always better than being pretty and dark-skinned. What is more desirable (i.e. what holds more value) in dating and mate selection is being red.

Similar scripts about friendships and the business arena reinforce the idea of light-skin privilege. Consider the examples offered by Desiree and Vivica, two brown-skinned women who each discuss the additional advantages of lighter-toned black women:

when we see black people who hang out with different ethnicities other than black people, a lot of times they’re light skinned girls with really nice hair. (Desiree)

wouldn’t you say that you have more privileges […] would you agree or disagree that the privileges offered to light skinned people in corporate America… wouldn’t you say there is more privilege? (Vivica)

Because these ideas about the advantages of light skin have been so carefully ingrained within the psyche of many black women, there is no question that these internalized scripts are indeed verities in the everyday lives of these women. As Denise points out in the above statement about red girls, their value to black men and their position ahead of darker women is a “simple fact.”

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that,

The reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality. It does not require additional verification over and beyond its simple presence. It is simply there, as self-evident and compelling facticity. I know that it is real (p. 23).

The subjective belief that light-skinned women are the most beautiful, superior, and resourceful of all black women become the shared objective reality of many of the women I interviewed: light skin is about more than just beauty—it signals an overall better quality of life.
Perhaps an unintended consequence of having light skin is the question of authenticity. To be sure, the “Black is Beautiful” mantra of the 1960’s invoked racial pride into the hearts and minds of many African-Americans through a rejection of whiteness and an appreciation of blackness. The acceptance of dark-skin as “true” blackness reverberated throughout the focus groups. As one participant Colleen noted, “If you’re a lighter Black person, you have to prove how Black you are.” This idea mirrors one of Hunter’s (2005) major findings in her research. In spite of its associated privilege, those who are light-skinned also expressed feelings of constraint, subject to others’ stereotyping and questioning their identity. Some of these feelings include the perception that due to their skin tone that they do not face discrimination. In addition, there is the expectation that because someone has light skin, it is automatically assumed that they must be biracial. This can be particularly offensive for some women. As Melissa, a light-skinned woman explains, the interrogations by other black women about her blackness are rather bothersome.

It was hard being the light-skinned girl because most people always asked me, “Are you Dominican?” “Are you mixed with something?” And I’d [say] “No, I’m just black.” What does that have to do with anything? But I always got that, even to this day I still get, “Oh what are you mixed with?” or “Where are your parents from?” “Are you Jamaican? “Are you something?” Then I just say, “Oh no I’m just black. My parents are just African American.”

Melissa’s discomfort of course stems from her lack of recognition and immediate acceptance by other blacks as “fully” African-American. Acknowledgement as an authentic member of the black community is extremely important for this participant, as it is for many people of color.

The same level of frustration is echoed by Trina, a young woman who considers her skin tone to be very light. Trina notes that she is very active in school and community activities, and considers herself especially committed to issues impacting black Americans. Yet, as she describes, her level of activism is not taken as seriously because of her skin tone:
I’m light skinned and […] honestly feel discriminated against. You know, I feel like I’m more about the cause than blacker people are. You know what I mean? […] And I feel it’s a barrier because […] I am light skinned and […] my natural hair may not be as coarse […] I still feel like it’s a barrier for our people […] I don’t feel like I’m doing good, just because somebody calls me red.

In Trina’s mind, because she does not fit the stereotypical image of a “pro-black” activist, her motives and ideas are often discredited. Because of her experiences Trina considers her light skin to carry an additional layer of “baggage” compared to her darker counterparts due to the fact that she is constantly working to prove that she is black enough and worthy of validation from the black community.

“Black Girls Are Ghetto”

As the literature on gendered colorism indicates, the experience of dark-skinned black women at times creates a position of quadruple jeopardy: race, class, gender, and dark skin can serve as mutually intersecting oppressions shaping the experience of dark-skinned women (Thompson & Keith, 2001). To no surprise, the internalized scripts revealed by the women in this study support the vast majority of literature indicating that dark skin is inherently negative. Further, the attitudes expressed about dark-skinned women reflect the polar opposite of the attitudes expressed about light skin. In every focus group, women with darker skin tones were typically described as “loud,” “suspicious,” “unattractive,” and “less intelligent.” The following internal scripts about dark-skinned women accurately depict this mindset:

I don’t think I can really discern any true advantages [to being dark-skinned] other than the idea that you are truly Black, but […] there are not true advantages of being darker skin, unless you define that yourself. But I think as far as society goes, I can’t imagine anything that truly makes you at an advantage for being that complexion. (Allea)

I guess it’s a good thing and a bad thing, but people are intimidated by you sort of, nobody is going to mess with you or anything. Nobody want[s] to talk back to you, so. That’s the advantages of being more dark skinned. (Keysha)
I’ve actually heard that the darker your skin, the more militant African American women are supposed to be [...] because you are so dark, you’re not pretty, you’re not attractive [...] Boys don’t look at dark girls. (Yolanda)

Well, I think that people seem to think that Blacker girls are more ghetto. And they are loud [and] have more attitude. (Keleechi)

The scripts offered here portray dark-skinned women as intimidating, militant, ghetto, and loud. Although it could be argued that equating darkness with strength and attitude are positive attributes, the beliefs about dark skin more likely exemplify the controlling images of African-American women. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) defines controlling images as socially constructed ideas about black womanhood that reinforce their subordination. Defined and manipulated by members of the dominant group, negative depictions of black women have been institutionalized since slavery. Two such images are particularly relevant here: The Matriarch and the Welfare Mother. The Matriarch is the epitome of the strong black woman, but to a fault. She is represented as overly strong, aggressive, and at times a militant black woman who works to emasculate black men (Collins 2000). The Welfare Mother, by contrast is not strong but lazy, poor and uneducated. Both of these figures, coupled with more recent images of the “angry black woman” point to the internalization of these controlling images within the African-American community. This highlights the nature of colorism as a vehicle for the reproduction of hegemonic racism and sexism against black women. Via these negative internalized scripts of dark skin, the young black women in this study are supporting the same images that have been historically used in their own subjugation.

Another powerful of image of black women that appear in the focus group data is dark-skinned women as objects of sexual desire. Many scholars suggest that the sexuality of black women has traditionally been presented as sexually promiscuous and deviant (see, for example Collins, 2000 or St. Jean and Feagin, 1998). Yet, some allude to the idea that there are divergent
perspectives of sexuality based upon skin tone. For instance, considering the historical representations of dark-skinned women in music and literature, Kerr (2006) indicates that “the recurring questions become: Is sexuality generally defined differently for dark- and light-hued women? (p.14). Based upon the data gathered in the focus groups, young black women answer that question with a resounding yes. While many respondents talked about light-skinned women as the object of beauty, many also communicated internal scripts about dark-skinned women as the objects of sexual desire. It was commonplace for women like Ashley, a 21-year old who identifies as light-brown, to associate a higher level of sexuality with darker women. When I asked about the qualities related to dark skin, Ashley responds,

I would say also sexuality… they’re more than lighter skinned women, […] darker-skinned women (pause) they’re more promiscuous and doing things.

Kelechi, a participant identifying herself as very light, makes the same connections when sharing her experience in high school. She notes that her school population had a disproportionate amount of dark-skinned girls, and she noticed a huge difference in the way in which she was perceived by the young men in her school. She recalls that,

Me and my sister were the only […] light skinned girls, it was mostly dark skinned [girls] and […]guys would approach us differently, if a guy came and I was with a friend, he might talk to her because she was darker. […]But when he came to me, he talked to me. Guys would approach the dark skinned girls in a more sexual manner or they just wouldn’t approach me at all.

Kelechi quickly recognizes this difference in treatment, and attributes this difference to the perceived sexual desirability of darker-skinned girls.

It is important to note that women with darker tones recognize their classification as sexual objects in opposition to the light-skinned beauty. Some women even suggested that black men date light-skinned women for their facial appearance, and dark-skinned women for the body.
Take for example the ideas of Shanae, a dark-skinned participant who describes her own experiences with men:

Well to be honest it seems that men are attracted to Black women [for] their body traits, most guys are approaching me because of the way I’m shaped rather than the way I actually look. […] I don’t know if I ever noticed this but most red skinned girls, if they’re talking to a guy […] and if you try to figure out why that particular guy is with that girl, it’s because she’s pretty rather than she has a nice body […] her face stands out more than her body.

Women in this study also make this connection through the media. There was agreement across focus groups that light-skinned women are typically featured as the “prize” or point of beauty in music videos, while darker-skinned women are used to in music videos to entice viewers with their overly-sexualized bodies. Sherelle’s comments illustrate this position:

..in [music] videos, usually if it’s […] a love song or something, and they’re talking about how they feel about a girl […] she tends to be lighter skinned. And if they’re talking about, oh she’s got a nice body or she shake her whatever, […] it tends to be a dark skinned girl. And I think in the media the light skinned people are portrayed as […] the prize […] And I don’t think it’s right, but that’s just the way the world is because it’s been going on for so long, and it’s been a while and no one’s actually doing anything to stop it.

Many focus group members like Sharelle are critical of media images and are readily able to identify the various ways in which colorism becomes highlighted within the context of music videos.

Consistent with the body of literature on colorism that documents the struggles of light-skinned women invalidating the perception that they are not authentic members of the race, there also emerged from this data similar experiences from dark-skinned women. Just as light-skinned women fight to prove that they are black enough, many dark-skinned women in this study battle to invalidate controlling images—to prove for instance that they are not violent and not ghetto.

The effort to disprove stereotypes appears in a variety of contexts. Recall the experience of Sharelle, the young woman who was labeled as the “perfect AKA” simply because of her skin tone. Although Sharelle was not a part of this organization, many people assumed that she was,
or that she should be. Contrast Sharelle’s experience with Yolanda and Bernice, two young
women who are in fact members of this sorority. Yet because of their dark skin, their
membership in this organization does not make sense to many people and is often questioned.
Yolanda explains,

      Everyone around here is confused because we are [members of] AKA. We joke about it
      […] because we just crossed into Alpha Kappa Alpha a few weeks ago and […] because
      Bernice and I are a little bit darker than a paper bag people assume that we wouldn’t be
      AKAs […]. But the stereotypes that are connected out there, they are hurtful and people
      just perpetuate them continually.

The experience of Yolanda and Bernice is a good example of how some women struggle to
invalidate negative stereotypes about being dark-skinned. As evidenced from their story,
dispelling myths about their skin tone is a minor annoyance because it is something that they can
joke about.

      This ongoing battle is one that dark-skinned women frequently engage in, and this is
related to the ongoing effort in contesting controlling images. Tessa, a young woman who
identifies herself as very dark, discusses openly how her family’s internalized scripts about her
dark skin lowered their expectations about her own intelligence. She states,

      My experience, I think, I’ve always seen this idea if you are lighter skinned then you are
      capable of education. I remember my young cousins growing up who were lighter skinned
      and had the good hair, […] they were just expected to be smart, to say smart things, to kind
      of carry on the family name, versus I was never expected to be smart, but maybe they
      didn’t expect it more from me, and when they did see it, it was a surprise and kind of
different than what they thought it would be, versus the lighter skinned kids [who] came
      out perfect and they were, they were manifested to be perfect. Where I had to prove [my
      intelligence] over and over again.

As an honor student, Tessa mentioned not only people in her family lowering their expectations
of her, but she explains that many of her peers presumed that her “African dark” skin
automatically made her less capable than others. Indeed, a majority of the respondents who
identified themselves as dark or very dark spoke about the limitations of their skin tone. As Tatiana and Toni express, there are always constant “self-reminders” about who they are:

I think it’s always been in the back of my head, […] people see you differently, I’ve had to learn to realize that I love being sexy chocolate, you know what I mean? I had to tell myself that, but like it was instilled in me at a young age, that “there’s something wrong with you,” I got called all the names, doo doo brown, all that… it was hard, when you’re a child and you don’t know that you’re different from everybody else, so I think it’s always been in the back of my head (Tatiana)

I’m an adult now and it’s something that still sticks with me even though I feel as though I’ve grown and matured but I do still catch myself falling back into that mind-frame of insecurity because of my skin complexion (Toni)

These two young women point to the “internal work” required to deconstruct the negativity placed upon them. Like Toni and Tatiana, many of the women interviewed share a turning point in their lives that re-directs the normative internal scripts of colorism. As Tatiana shares, she had to learn to love being “sexy chocolate” rather than internalizing “doo doo brown.” This process of resistance and reclamation is discussed at length in Chapter Six.

“I am Not Black, I Am Brown”: Medium Skin-Tone As a Safe and Protected Class?

Much of the literature of skin tone and colorism within the black community speaks to the preferences and disadvantages associated with light or dark-skin, yet few studies concentrate on what it means to fall in the “middle” of the color spectrum. In many respects, colorism is situated within the context of a binary structure (light skin/dark skin; good hair/bad hair), yet there is some indication that being medium or brown skinned is seen as favorable and is therefore somewhat of a protected position. Although a much less reported idea, the works of Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001), Drake and Cayton (1945), Goering (1972) and Parrish (1946) find that blacks rated those who are medium or brown-skinned more favorably than their counterparts with extreme light or extreme dark skin. Similarly, Zook (1990) suggests an element of safety inherent in the middle when she writes, “all of us but the most even-toned,
chestnut-smooth browns are inevitably screwed in one way or another” (p.94). Results from this research support the idea that those who are medium or brown-skinned are not as affected by the consequences of colorism. Yet, there is some evidence that also refutes this same idea. The focus groups do not point to a universal “voice from the middle,” but rather various internalized scripts on what it means to be brown.

One of the first themes emerging about medium skin tone is that colorism is not an issue for those who are considered brown. As twenty year-old Lela points out,

I would consider myself medium and there’s always been this whole thing with the red girls and the dark skinned girls and being in the middle, I’ve never you know had any problems or anything like that. Nobody’s ever said anything to me.

Lela considers her experiences very different from other black women because she is recognized as being in the middle and treated as such. For this young woman, colorism has never been her issue; it is rather “this whole thing” between those who are either very light or very dark. This sentiment is echoed by Fuze, a young woman who responds,

I’ve just kind of view[ed] myself right in the middle and I think that, I feel like I kind of walk the line and can observe a lot more than a lot of other women because […] when I interact with women I don’t really have a problem […]

Similarly, Fiona adds,

I don’t think people call [me] dark, and I don’t think people call me light, either. So I feel kind of lucky to be in the middle, ‘cause I’d say that I’ve escaped a lot of negative things, the extreme negative things that come with being light […]or dark […] I feel kind of nice in the middle.

From the viewpoints shared by these women, it is apparent that being brown often creates a unique “buffer” position that affords them better navigation among women than their light and dark counterparts.

Desiree articulates her middle position very differently from other women participating in the focus groups. She understands her skin tone to be quantifiably different than women of
different skin tones. Believing that black women are indeed placed in a queue, Desiree is fully aware that her position as a brown-skinned woman affords her more advantage than a dark skin woman, yet less advantage than a light-skinned black woman. She notes:

And if I go into an interview and there is a dark skinned girl sitting next to me, I feel as though I have a better chance than her just because I have a lighter skin complexion. I’m not light skinned, but I’m brown skinned and I don’t care what kind of degree she has, I have something that appeals to other people and that’s my complexion and if I go into the interview and there’s a lighter skinned girl than me there, I feel threatened because she has something that she can use against me and that’s her complexion.

Desiree goes on to explain that for black women, skin color is about the survival of the fittest. Having brown skin deems her better fit than dark women and less fit than light women. Nevertheless, for Desiree this translates into varied levels of resource and opportunity, including employment. And it is for reason that Desiree uses her skin tone to the best of her advantage and ability in order to get ahead in her life experiences.

Despite the relative inconsequence of colorism in the everyday lives of the medium-toned women listed above, there are some in this groups who, like dark-skinned women, feel a considerable amount of constraint within their day-to-day lives. For instance, Vivica, a young woman who identifies herself as medium, recounts her experience in elementary school when she first learns that there is less value placed upon her brown skin. Recalling how many of the young boys in her class were more enamored with the “light” and “Spanish-looking” girls, Vivica quickly internalized the negativity placed upon her brownness, and thus developed an “internal script” that regulated how she viewed her outlook on life. She says:

And so when you are in that mindset or whatever, you don’t try to go out for the light skinned people or whatever. You just try to stay amongst yourself because you feel like “ok, this is my level. This is what I can reach” […] I mean we’re just at the bottom anyways.

In light of the varying contexts and meanings attached to being a brown-skinned woman, it is useful to point out that many of the women who identified themselves as medium were very
sensitive and particular about characterizing themselves as brown. These young women
distanced themselves from the label of dark, preferring instead to be considered brown. Even
though these women are not light-skinned, for them it was better to be brown than dark. The
following statement offered by Nia is illustrative of this point:

I’ve never [been called dark] until my freshman year and people were like, “oh [yeah],
you’re dark” and to this day I still don’t think I’m dark, I think I’m brown…I really think
my perception of color is distorted because […] I will think that I’m the same shade as
someone else, and they’re like “oh no no no you’re darker than that” and I’m like how?
[laughter] And I’m you know, pulling my arm out and [comparing to others]. That looks
the same to me!”

This story is particularly interesting because Nia speaks in the focus group about her “discovery”
of being dark upon her arrival to college. Growing up, Nia’s family always referred to her as
brown, and that is the identity that she internalized. There was however, a disconnect between
how her family viewed her skin tone and how she was classified in the larger African-American
community. This mismatch of color is fairly common among blacks as there are varying frames
of reference for classifying someone as light, dark, or brown. As Nia mentions, her perception is
that she was brown, yet she finds herself in a position of fighting against being labeled as dark.

Similar to Nia, Leah—another young woman who identifies as medium—learned from
her family that it was better to be brown than dark. During the focus group, she talks about her
experience as a young girl, and getting darker during the summer. After many hours of playing
out in the sun, she would come home and shower in an effort to restore her brown color. Leah
describes,

[As a little girl] I would get really dark in the summer time [and I would] come home
and[...] scrub my skin when I was in the shower, so I could get my [brown] color back
[...] cause I didn’t want to be too dark, that’s that was in my mind. Don’t know why, I
just didn’t like it, cause I felt like I looked um dry and dirty. And my mom would come
home and [ask] “What are you doing?” And I’m like “mom, I’m black, I’m black.” And
she’s like “no.” From that point she would tell me “no, you are not black, you are brown.
Don’t let anyone call you black, cause you’re brown.”
Even as a young girl, Leah fears the condemnation inherent in dark skin (i.e. looking dry and dirty), by attempting to scrub her color back. Additionally, her mother’s insistence of calling herself brown and not black speaks to the elevation of brownness over blackness in the African-American community.

This elevation of brown over black interestingly played itself out during one focus group session. This particular gathering included a pair of best friends: Melissa, who considers herself light-brown, and Denise, who identifies as medium. At one point during the focus group, Melissa talks about her friendship with Denise. She says, “one of my closest friend[s], she’s dark skinned and we have the best relationship. We don’t um, well she’s brown skinned, sorry, brown skinned.” When Melissa first describes Denise’s complexion as dark, Denise “cuts her eye” at Melissa, indicating her disapproval of being labeled dark. In the midst of her comment Melissa changes her characterization from dark to brown-skinned. This “change” was important to Denise, and is indicative of the notion that brown-skin is “safe” and much more desirable than dark skin. Although it is uncertain whether or not being medium translates into life experiences that are truly protected and safe from the challenges of very light or very dark skin, it is clear from these narratives that “feeling” brown is much more significant than “being” dark.

In comparing the findings from this study with the results of Parrish’s 1946 work, it appears that in many ways, the color names and color notions present within black culture have not changed. We see overwhelmingly positive names for light skin and negative names for dark skin. There is some difficulty in naming the terms for those who fall in the middle of the color spectrum.

The contemporary language of skin tone very much shapes what ideas are communicated and internalized about light, brown, and dark skin. The internal scripts of skin tone emerging
from the focus groups underscore findings from previous research on colorism, yet also point to new patterns among contemporary women of color. First, messages about light skin as the beauty ideal is repeated by the women interviewed, as well as implications of light skin offering more privilege and value in the black community. Negative images of black women as unintelligent and ghetto are also reiterations of the previous research. As these findings suggest, there is “red-brown-black” divide at work in the lives of these young women. Obiagele Lake (2003) notes a similar pattern operating within Jamaican society. The majority of the women in this study are conscious that their skin tone is an integral part of their identity, and fully aware that as young black women, skin tone indeed denotes a certain social position. On defining colorism, many women mentioned issues of beauty. Light skin carries the most value in terms of physical attractiveness and desirability. Yet in the everyday lives of these women, colorism goes beyond standards of beauty as participants consider colorism to be about “separation,” “preference,” “attention,” and “treatment.” Red women seem to occupy in the black community the same space that white women hold in greater society. Dark-skinned women, who are more typically referred to in this study as “black,” occupy the same space held by black women in broader society—the bottom space. Perhaps what is new is the presence of a middle voice, and a keen recognition of the safe space being brown provides. In addition to this recognition is a resistance to being labeled black, as that equates into “true” blackness, especially in treatment. The internalization of the scripts indicating that light is best, brown is safe, and dark is worst creates in the lives of black women a subjective reality that influences the ways in which these three distinct groups of women go about their day-to-day behavior. The next section explores this everyday behavior.
Practices of Everyday Colorism

I had little if any interaction with the light-skinned elite, but their codes of conduct, their etiquette, their colorist beliefs and practices, were well known in the Black community and for the most part when I was a child went unchallenged. Colorism existed like a bitter, unalterable pollutant in the atmosphere of the Black community, something of which we were all aware and yet tried to ignore. --Marita Golden

In the statement above, Marita Golden, author of Don’t Play in the Sun: One Woman’s Journey Through the Color Complex, writes about the unspoken and uncontested “codes” of colorism that invariably create difference and distinction based upon skin tone. As Golden suggests, these codes manifest themselves in the form of norms, beliefs, and practices of people in a wide range of social settings. The final component of everyday colorism, external practices are everyday behaviors and actions enacted by women towards themselves and others based upon their internalized views about skin color. Just as the internalized scripts of skin tone represent a young woman’s identity, external practices reflect a young woman’s experience of colorism. The following example perhaps best crystallizes the nature of everyday colorism.

Melissa, a young woman who identifies as light-brown, indicates how her views about darker women influenced her behavior:

I know sometimes I can be kind of racist toward dark skinned girls because I have been before when in my high school days, I really didn’t like dark skinned girls, because they used to be evil, so I didn’t really like them […] I used to say really hurtful comments and really bring down people’s self esteem.

She goes on to say:

I saw that their color was their insecurity, so I used that against them. So, it was basically them showing me their weakness as […] their dark skinned color being their insecurity so I used that against them.

Melissa’s “racism” towards dark-skinned women is based upon her perception that they are evil. This of course justified her deplorable actions. Melissa’s experience provides an excellent example of how white racism becomes internalized and reified through the daily interactions of
black women. Similar stories emerged throughout the focus group discussions. These comments suggest that women engage in three specific areas of practice: ritualistic, compensatory and discriminatory. Each practice is detailed below.

**Ritualistic Practices**

Historically, black women have engaged in countless ritualistic practices in an effort to uphold standards of beauty in the African-American community. It is not inconceivable then to assume that at some point in her life, almost every black woman (including myself) has been cautioned to “stay out of the sun,” for fear of spoiling (or further darkening) her skin color. In fact, one participant shares the story of her dark-skinned cousin who in preparation for her wedding refused to go out in the sun a full month before her wedding in order to “preserve” her color. As Russell, Wilson, & Hall (1992) and Kerr (2006) carefully document, the traditions and folklore surrounding skin color are central to understanding the nature of colorism. Kerr (2006) points out,

> Historically, black women, in the company of other black women, are exposed to folk beliefs and practices concerned with skin lightening, hair lengthening or straightening, and repressing facial features, including milk baths to lighten skin, exercises to tighten full lips and retract full nostrils, and home-backed concoctions to straighten hair and inspire hair growth (p.9).

Although many of the above-mentioned customs are associated with practices occurring in the 19th and early 20th centuries before the dawn of the “Black is Beautiful movement”, there is evidence that some of these rituals have been transferred to the younger generation, and are alive and well within the lives of young black women. Many of the women in this study mentioned hearing and/or participating in such ritualistic practices as: holding the nose with a clothespin in order to make it narrower; scrubbing one’s knees, elbows and neck with a white wash cloth in order to prevent the areas from becoming darker; “double” wrapping the elbows in gauze treated
with special oils; and expectant mothers drinking “special” herbal teas in order to improve the chances of giving birth to a baby with light or brown skin.

The birth of a new baby in many African-American families signifies even more ritualistic practices that reinforce the strength of colorism. Close examination of an infant’s ears, fingers, and even nail beds supposedly aid relatives in determining how light (or dark) a child’s skin tone will become. The following remarks of two participants further demonstrate this tradition:

All [of] my nieces and nephews are very light, and when they [were] babies, we could tell if they were [getting] darker by checking […] their ears apparently. So a part of your ear is the shade that you’re gonna be, I remember they would always check my ears, you know if it’s dark [then] you’re gonna be, because I mean all black babies are lighter when they’re born, they check their ears after. (Michelle)

My nephew, he’s the cutest baby in the world. [laughter] And he’s light, you know. And when he was born they were like, “do you all think he’s gonna get darker?” [laughter and agreement]. And then, [my family] was like “well look at his ears, and look at his nail beds. Whatever color they are, that’s the color he’s gonna be. (Trina)

Although many women could relate to the customs connected to newborns, the vast majority of women in the study more commonly shared their experiences with bleaching. A multi-million dollar industry in the United States, many black women participate in colorism through the purchase of skin bleaching products. This ritualistic practice was revealed by numerous women who admit to a long history of bleaching starting in childhood. Consider for instance the parallel accounts shared by Chanel, Vivica, and Stacey--three Haitian participants who link the practice of bleaching to being a central aspect of their ethnic culture. Chanel, a dark-skinned woman attributes bleaching her skin every night before going to bed during early adolescence as a recommended remedy for curing her acne. Vivica, a medium-toned participant, further illuminates that for Haitian women, bleaching is a common beauty practice:
And speaking from the Haitian part of it, women, Haitian women [...] put [bleach] on every time [they] take a shower they put it on, take it off, they get a pimple and I was even at one point... I mean you know, don’t forget to put that on, cause you [don’t] want to go back, you want to be as light as possible whatever [...] it’s still prevalent in our society.

Likewise, Stacey grew up in a family where bleaching was common among her female relatives. She reveals that as a child her mother taught her to use a bleaching soap every night before bed in order to keep her pretty complexion:

My mom said, oh we’re going to buy you some soap for you to [use] at night, you take a shower with [it], not like Irish Spring, but bleaching soap, and I put a bleaching lotion on. I mean there’s so much discoloration in my face, I [asked my] mom, why is my face so white, and my neck so dark? ‘Cause you didn’t put your cream there, you gotta work on that. And being Haitian [that] means a lot.

A large part of the care that Stacey’s mother put into her complexion was due to Stacey’s position in the family as the lightest child. On her demographic sheet Stacey indicated her skin tone as dark, yet explains that within her family she was faintly lighter than her brothers and sisters. Because of this, Stacey explains that she was coveted by her mother more than her other siblings, and being encouraged to use bleach every night was a way for Stacey’s commodity and social capital within the family to be improved.

Outside of skin bleaching, perhaps the one ritualistic practice that almost every woman in this research could readily identify with was the sun. Staying out of the sun’s damaging rays was mentioned by nearly every focus group participant. For many respondents, they learn early on to heed the advice of their mothers, grandmothers, or other female family members and subconsciously avoid the sun. This is fact was my own experience. Although I would describe my upbringing to be full of positive ideals and practices especially relating to skin tone, I can vividly recall questioning my mother’s request for me to wear long sleeves during the hot months of the summer. I currently live in a climate that averages 300 sunny days a year and admittedly, I am sometimes cautious about how long I am direct contact with sunlight. Many of
the women interviewed share a similar concern, while others express more of a ritualistic avoidance of the sun.

**Compensatory Practices**

The second type of external practices, compensatory practices is a behavior enacted in order to balance or counteract a perceived negative attribute. In this project women who spoke about engaging in compensatory practices were of darker hues. These women felt that they had to alter their appearance in order to be validated by themselves and others. An example of this is the story shared by Vivica. The young woman who was featured in the previous section cites bleaching as part of her regular beauty regimen. Yet lightening her skin also serves as a compensatory practice because she does so in order to please her boyfriend, who admits that he is typically attracted to lighter women. At one point during the focus group session, there is a discussion about where to buy certain bleaching products. Vivica says,

> It’s a huge section […] you know there’s [a store] across the street from Winn Dixie […] go right in there and just go to the aisle […] I know exactly what aisle it is because I used to… I mean there’s no reason to lie because you use [bleaching crèmes]… sometimes you feel like you know, if you were just a little bit lighter and you know what’s so bad about it because my boyfriend did like me like me when I was that color […] that cream makes you lighter and he likes it.

As Vivica explains, she gets a better response from her partner when she is lighter, so in her mind taking the extra step in bleaching is worth it.

Like Vivica, there are other women who feel compelled to pay close attention to their appearance in order to be on the same level as women with lighter complexions. Monica, a medium-toned woman, suggests that one of her best friends (a dark-skinned woman) employs various compensatory practices when she is around a mixed group of black women. Monica describes that her friend “feels like she has to do extra things to make herself look more appealing… her hair has to be extravagant, make up, nails, everything has to be perfect because
she feels like she has to balance that out with her dark skin.” This idea of settling the “color score” is reiterated by the experience of Stacey, a dark-skinned participant who readily acknowledged that because of the negative ideas that she and others carry about dark-skinned women, she has to do things in order to redress her position:

I feel because [I am dark], I always have to step up my game and […] always have my dress code, doing things, always trying, mak[ing] sure that I have the knowledge or trying to play up yourself more and do more and exhaust yourself to the point of depression because you just want to be the best because you’re a dark skinned Black woman.

There are other women in this study who, like Stacey, believe that carrying out these kind of practices are necessary in order to successfully navigate within larger society. It is only until an oppositional knowledge of colorism is gained that Stacey and others no longer feel the pressure or need to engage in such behaviors.

**Discriminatory Practices**

Perhaps the most common (and hurtful) types of practices mentioned throughout this research project, discriminatory practices are those behaviors that function to include or exclude someone based upon their skin tone. They range from small incidents such as joking or teasing, to larger-scale practices that preclude certain people from forming friendships or relationships.

Within the domain of discriminatory behavior, bias occurs from all points of the color spectrum.

As previously noted, on a smaller scale discriminatory practices include taunting and excluding someone on the basis of their skin color. Many women in this study recollect these types of experiences happening in grade school. Shanta, a medium-hued participant, recounts her experience in the fifth-grade of being snubbed by another classmate for not being the right shade:

[…] the other girl was mainly like two shades lighter than I was, [but] I was told, “you can’t hang out with us because you’re dark, […] you should probably drink from the other water fountain.”
Shanta’s memory of her grade school experience demonstrates two important features of colorism. First, this story highlights the meaning and significance of “shades.” Throughout the focus groups, many participants speak about being included or excluded for being one or two shades too light or dark. Minute delineations in skin tone (i.e. one shade), as indicated by Shanta’s account, translate into large-scale differences in treatment.

Second, being told that she should drink from another water fountain is a direct reference to Jim Crow segregation practices that relegated people of color to separate and substandard facilities prior to the Civil Rights movement. Although twenty-year old Shanta is recalling an experience that occurred in the late 1990’s, it is a stunning example of what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the “past in present” occurrences of the “new” racism (2004). Collins is speaking specifically to the ways in which old patterns of Jim Crow racism continue to manifest and reappear throughout our contemporary society. As colorism is a form of internalized racism, the same reasoning can be applied to the modern-day experiences of colorism. Separatist practices such as the brown paper bag test are no longer a reality for many black Americans, yet everyday discriminatory practices resembling “old-school” colorism are still very much commonplace in African-American culture.

On into adulthood, the women in this study note that discriminatory practices become more substantive as their experiences and ideals of colorism grow more solid. For instance, Shanae suspects that her dark complexion causes her to be profiled on a regular basis,

Well being dark skinned, I have been called burnt and midnight, […] people seem to think that I’m ghetto and have and have an attitude because I am black. I have always been discriminated against because of my skin color, for instance say I go into a store, you know people tend to follow me because of my skin color […] I don’t know why, but you know.

Although Shanae cannot explicitly pinpoint her skin complexion as the reason for being followed in stores, it is evident that she has clear grasp of the effects of not only her race but her skin
color. Everyday racism is characteristic of the more subtle, daily occurrences of mistreatment that are typically not intended to be harmful, but are viewed as such (Collins 1998). Everyday colorism then embodies the same characteristics; in Shanae’s case, “looking” suspicious and being discriminated against is part and parcel of being dark-skinned.

In this project, the area of relationships—specifically, friendships with other black women—are the root of the majority of discriminatory practices. The language of skin color, combined with the internal scripts associated with light skin and dark skin, work to create barriers in forming friendships with women of opposite skin tones. Tessa discusses openly how her views about her darkness serve as an impediment to developing meaningful relationships with light-skinned women:

It’s not like I go out and say I’m not going to be friends with white skinned women, but definitely, even though you don’t want to be doing it in your head, you definitely say OK this girl is light skinned and maybe I shouldn’t be friends with her because she might not understand where I’m coming from or want to be my friend because I am [dark], I’ll bring her down basically.

Tessa’s perception that she will “bring down” a light-skinned woman down is rooted in her family’s negative attitudes toward her dark skin. Recall that in an earlier chapter that Tessa talks about the low expectations conveyed to her as she was growing up. As this excerpt suggests, although she tries hard not to let the same pessimism continue to control her internal scripts and external practices, Tessa nonetheless perceives herself as unworthy of the friendship of a lighter-toned woman.

Similar to Tessa, there are other cases in which discriminatory practices take the form of complete evasion of women of differing skin tones. In some instances, women avoid making friendships with women who share are the same complexion. This is in fact the case for Rachel, a young woman who describes her skin tone as light brown, but confesses that her peer group of friends is intentionally darker-skinned.
I have to say, I don’t have a lot of lighter skinned friends. […] But I think that some of them, I won’t name names, I’ve seen the lighter skinned girls and they’re all in the cliques, they’re the fashionable ones, and I don’t really care for that kind of lifestyle at all.

Rachel implies from this statement that most light-skinned women are aloof and exclusionary and notes that she would rather spare herself by intermingling with darker-skinned women. This is the same sentiment of Ashley, also a young woman who identifies as light brown; she admits to having negative internal scripts about light-skinned women and therefore chooses to make friendships with women who are darker, because she considers them more “real.”

All my best friends are of darker skin tones. I think when I’ve had you know situations with women who are […] lighter than me, it’s become catty […] I wouldn’t say that all light skinned girls are catty, but it’s just from my experiences it’s been a lot of, “oh yeah, I got you, I got you,” and then something happens and they were the ones who disappear. […] In comparison with my relationships with darker skinned women, they’ve never really pressured me about stuff, […] they’re real with me, honest with me about stuff […] that’s the type of people I like to surround myself with. My experience with lighter skinned girls has not been that real to me.

We learn from these statements that light-skinned women are also viewed as less authentic in the area of friendships as well. Although Rachel and Ashley are light-skinned, they too believe the socially constructed ideals about light-skin.

To be sure, negative internalized scripts are shared by women of all skin tones, and can in many ways function to create hostility and tension among women of contrasting complexions. This notion is perhaps best displayed during a focus group session in which participants candidly discuss their reasons for avoiding their lighter and darker counterparts:

Monica: I think personally, with myself, just being honest, sometimes when I see someone who is really dark I’m kind of hesitant. In other words, I’m wondering where they’re coming from, do they come from the same place that I’m coming from. Are our personalities going to be compatible? Um, light skinned women, I don’t really approach either […] So I tend to seek out women that look like me, that are medium skinned, same kind of tone, you know.

Shanae: Ok, for me most of my friends are red boned, before we became friends, we had a feud because of the whole red and black thing.
JeffriAnne: Give me an example of a feud that you had.

Shanae: Ok, I remember a fight in my 9th grade year with my best friend who was very light skinned and if you see her you would think that she was, well I wouldn’t say white but she is light skinned […] yeah, and we both had this attitude to where we thought, you know, walk with our heads up high, bad ass or whatever[…] we sat next to each other and we would not talk to each other […] I don’t know how to explain it was just always like that with me and my friends that are red skinned. But now, it’s all good.

Kira: I’m also going to agree with what Monica said, […] I am more hesitant, I guess, to go up to someone who is lighter skin, just because of that stereotype. […] I’m not going to go up [to them] in the back of my head, I’m like, I hope they’re not rude. […] vice versa for a darker skinned person, I hope you’re not extremely ghetto, trying to hit me in my face or something crazy is going to happen. But, it’s just always in the back of my mind, […] it affects how I speak to them or how I view them right off the bat, it’s just there.

Asia: I’ll finish what I was saying, I really, I don’t have problems with anybody, but I don’t really approach black women because sometimes I don’t find that they’re easily approachable.

JeffriAnne: What about just in your day to day interaction. Not necessarily with your friends. But just walking on campus or being somewhere, do you think that the way that you interact with other black women who aren’t your friends, do you think that skin tone plays some sort of role?

Kelechi: Yes because when I approach, like I try to be nice to everybody, just so, I don’t get any stereotype put on me,[…] if I approach someone of darker skin tone, I try not to talk too much because when I talk, I sound like a white girl, so they say, so I try not to talk that much.

This dialogue speaks to the complexity of relationships between young black women. Monica, a brown-skinned participant believes that initiating friendships with women of similar skin tones is best, and further speaks to the distrust and perceived lack of connection she has for dark-skinned women. Shanae, on the other hand, has a close friendship with a “red” girl, but admits that their differences in skin color initially necessitated a fight in order to get over each other’s hang-ups about women of opposite skin tones. Kira confesses that she is cautious of her light and dark-skinned counterparts, citing the expectation of cruelty from light women, and the fear of violence from dark women. Asia, who also identifies as medium, points out that she has no problems with any black women, but nonetheless avoids approaching “black” women. These young
women are readily aware that their internalized viewpoints are influencing their behavior and potential for building true bonds of black sisterhood across skin tones.

There are some cases in which women actually make attempts to forge relationships with their lighter counterparts but are rejected. As a result, a type of retaliatory discriminatory practice is enacted against members of the “opposite” skin tone in an effort to challenge the system of hierarchy and stratification. For example, Toni recalled numerous occasions of being slighted because of her darker skin tone. Despite being openly discriminated against by her lighter-skinned counterparts, she often seeks to counteract the treatment she received in the past by establishing exclusionary friendships with fellow dark-skinned girls in college:

My roommate was […] also dark skinned and […] we kind of did a reverse kind of thing, where we only hung out with dark skinned girls, our whole clique was dark skinned girls. And […] it wasn’t necessarily like “oh, if you’re light skinned you can’t hang out with us” but it was kind of on purpose, you know and I think it was just kind of our way of […] turning up our noses at the way that things typically are, which is you know, light skinned girls, oh they stick together and they’re boughee and […] we were like, oh ok cool, so we’re all going to stick together and we’re fly and we’re dark skinned and you know we roll together.

Toni’s experience provides a useful example of how those who are initially victims of colorism later become themselves culprits of colorism; the only way for Toni to combat skin tone discrimination was to take part in the same discriminatory behavior.

**Summary**

The findings from this section reinforce just how strongly racism is internalized and inculcated within the minds of young black women. The ways in which these young people formulate negative opinions about women of differing skin tones, and then discriminate against light, brown, and dark women is surprisingly similar to the documented experiences of racism. Consider for example the 1991 study conducted by scholar Joe Feagin. In his research examining the contemporary significance of race for middle-class blacks, Feagin finds that
through day-to-day contact with whites, African-Americans are discriminated against in five specific ways: through avoidance actions, rejection actions, verbal attacks, physical attacks by police; and attacks by other whites (see Feagin, 1991, p.102). Although I am careful not to equate the experience of the black Americans featured in Feagin’s research with the young black women in this study, the parallels of racism and colorism are quite similar. The resemblances lie between the kinds of discriminatory practices highlighted in the everyday experiences of racism with those of everyday colorism. Similar acts of avoidance, rejection, and verbal attacks are noted in the stories shared by the young black women in this research. The next chapter addresses how the language, scripts, and practices are learned, perpetuated, and transformed.
Table 4-1. Terms associated with light, dark, and medium skin tones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIGHT</th>
<th>MEDIUM</th>
<th>DARK</th>
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<tr>
<td>Coolie</td>
<td>Brown (Skin)*</td>
<td>Jigaboo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bright*</td>
<td>Milk Chocolate</td>
<td>Black (ie)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light Bright</td>
<td>Caramel</td>
<td>Darky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Yellow*</td>
<td>Pecan Tan*</td>
<td>Burnt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red (Bone)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Midnight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red-Skinned</td>
<td></td>
<td>Chocolate*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexy Red</td>
<td></td>
<td>Blue-Black*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Red</td>
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<td>Purple</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Super Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pretty Skin</td>
<td></td>
<td>African</td>
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<tr>
<td>House Nigga</td>
<td></td>
<td>Darkness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yellow*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Charcoal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mulatto</td>
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<td>Sexy Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caramel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tar Babies*</td>
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<td>Mixed</td>
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<td>Watermelon Child</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Oreo</td>
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<td>Browning</td>
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<td>Vanilla</td>
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<tr>
<td>French Vanilla</td>
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CHAPTER 5
POINTS OF ORIGIN, STABILIZING AGENTS, & TRANSFORMATIVE AGENTS

Often it is within the family, where a variety of skin colors may be represented among individual members, that black children first learn the values attributed to differences in skin color. When the child enters the larger social world, she carries these color conscious attitudes beyond the confines of the home, and in turn, those attitudes are reinforced by that world. --Margo Okazawa-Rey, Tracy Robinson, & Janie Victoria Ward

The previous chapter details the ways in which young black women perceive skin tone differences in their daily lives. Emerging from the data was the idea that everyday colorism, or the day-to-day experiences of skin color bias, appears in these young women’s lives via language, internal scripts, and external practices. Throughout the process of analysis, however, there were several recurring questions surrounding the nature of everyday colorism: How does the discourse of colorism begin? How is it maintained? Does it ever change; can there be an oppositional discourse of colorism? This chapter is focused on addressing these important inquiries. Results of the analysis suggest that there are three factors impacting everyday colorism: points of origin, stabilizing agents, and transformative agents. By taking a deeper look inside the stories of the young women in this study, I will examine how everyday colorism starts, is maintained, and in some cases transformed.

Defining Points of Origin, Stabilizing Agents, and Transformative Agents

An overwhelming majority of the women in this study share a strong sense of colorism in their day-to-day lives. The language, beliefs, and practices attached to the discourse of skin tone are learned through points of origin; reinforced by stabilizing agents; and challenged by way of transformative agents. Simply stated, a point of origin is the way in which colorist ideology is first introduced to an individual. Serving as the primary means of socialization, points of origin provide the knowledge base (i.e. language, scripts, practices) for understanding the socially constructed meaning of skin tone. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) note, primary socialization
is the most important for an individual, and signifies one’s membership in society. Because primary socialization occurs in childhood, the majority of women in this study reveal that colorism was introduced to them by their families; others cite grade school and the media. For nearly all the women, colorism is introduced within a normative framework; young women learn the dominant views of skin tone widely held within the black community. Yet, for a small number of participants, an oppositional framework of colorism is laid as the foundation of knowledge. In these instances, individuals are socialized to embrace positive aspects and attributes of all skin tones. Although very few women learn oppositional perspectives early in life, many strive later in life to establish this alternative ideology in resistance to mainstream principles of colorism.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) further note that secondary socialization is “any subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society” (p.130). Once the ideology of colorism (normative or oppositional) is introduced, the analysis suggests that there are points of secondary socialization that work to either strengthen or shift a young woman’s identity and experiences with colorism. I am defining these elements as stabilizing and transformative agents. Stabilizing agents are defined as people and/or events that legitimize one’s primary understanding of colorism, confirming internalized scripts and justifying the external practices of everyday colorism. Transformative agents then represent people and/or events that change one’s primary understanding of colorism. These agents either work to a) introduce the dominant discourse of colorism, representing a shift from an oppositional to a normative framework; or b) work to challenge the normative framework, resulting in a re-direction of language, internalized scripts, and external practices (See Figure 5-1). In essence, points of origin signify the foundation of knowledge; stabilizing agents confirm
old knowledge, and transformative agents create new knowledge. In this project I examine family, school, and friendships/intimate relationships as playing significant roles in the socialization of normative and/or oppositional ideologies of colorism. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to an in-depth exploration of each area.

**The Black Family: The Ultimate Point of Origin**

The family is regarded as a powerful force in the lives of black Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; McAdoo, 1997; Staples, 1986; Tatum, 2003). For many, the black family represents the bedrock of survival, resilience, kinship, and community. Black families have historically served as an institutional buffer against the external forces of racism. It is oftentimes within the family unit that black consciousness and black pride is learned and celebrated. At the same time, however, the black family can simultaneously work to indoctrinate colorist ideology. This notion is well-documented in contemporary literary works such as *Our Kind of People*, *Don’t Play in the Sun*, and *The Color Complex*, yet there is still a gap in scholarly research. Although there is an extensive body of revisionist literature on black families and a growing body of scholarship on the contemporary nature of colorism, there is a dearth of empirical research—particularly within the field of sociology—addressing the role of the black family as it relates to colorism. This section of analysis begins to fill this gap.

Women in this study cited their family more than any other individual or institution as the most influential factor in shaping their views and ideas about themselves and others as it relates to skin tone. As one participant observes, “I’ve always been affected by colorism. The majority of the members of my family are light skinned, there is a couple [who] are dark skinned, it’s just always been a big issue.” When sharing their stories many participants began their narratives—even if they were not about the family—by describing the skin tone of their family members, at times even mentioning great-grandparents. Further, women were very honest about the color
dichotomies existing within their families, often referring to the “light side” or “dark side” of the family, or placing emphasis on family members with distinctive features, such as “the cousins with the curly hair”, or the “gray-eyed” nephew. Almost every person shared this type of information at some point in the focus groups. It is clear, then that the language, scripts, and practices of everyday colorism start in the family, the ultimate point of origin for skin color hierarchy and division. The findings point to two specific patterns in the black family: 1) the instillation of the normative discourse of colorism via female family members; and 2) the creation of an oppositional ideology.

**Bloodmothers and Othermothers**

With very few exceptions, women in this study note that female family members play a significant role in the production and socialization of a skin color hierarchy within their respective families. This is not surprising given the matriarchal-centered family structure that has dominated African-American culture since slavery. Part of this centrality involves what Collins (2000) refers to as the power of motherhood. Although she raises this idea in the context of the politicization of motherhood as a source of activism and empowerment, in this research the power of mothers—bloodmothers and othermothers—also lies in their ability to shape a young woman’s perceptions about skin tone. Bloodmothers, or biological kin, and othermothers, extended family or non-kin, play integral parts in childrearing and childcare, and thus play a significant role in handing down colorist ideology to the next generation. As bell hooks (2005) observes,

…it is crucial that we look at the black female experience. For if the majority of black children are being raised by black females then certainly how we perceive ourselves, our blackness, informs the social construction of our individual and collective identity (p. 63).

Each woman in this study understands herself as a direct reflection of her mother, grandmother, or other female family member who in many ways serve as the source of her identity.
construction. For many of the participants making this connection was not an easy one, as talking about their families in the focus groups made them realize that women were responsible for enabling normative ideas of colorism. Consider the story of Luann, a twenty-one year old that initially had difficulty pointing to female figures as points of origin within her own life. At the beginning of her focus group the medium-toned respondent did not consider skin tone bias to be a problem, citing “I don’t think my life has been shaped by colorism, I think I’m medium, right in the middle.” Despite her initial misgivings about the impact of colorism in her life, Luann later recognizes that she was wrong. Like many other participants, she shares stories of the women in her family doing a range of things from cautioning her to stay out of the sun to influencing her attraction to light-skinned men. By the end of the discussion Luann confesses, “I don’t think colorism will ever go away.” She goes on to say,

‘Cause we all know about it, and the moment we started talking, I didn’t even realize […] what I said at the beginning, when I started talking I said I don’t think [colorism] should [matter], well not that much. And then I kept talking [and thought] well you know what, my grandma said this to me, my auntie said this, my mom has said, it’s all, it’s the women. It’s how you internalize [colorism] is in Black women. I didn’t even think about it. Wow.

Luann’s participation in a focus group conversation with other black women caused her to understand the oftentimes covert nature of colorism, particularly within black families.

Another woman who shared in the same mental voyage connecting family to her first awareness of colorism was Karina, a twenty-one year old Haitian woman who identifies herself as medium. When thinking about her first memories of colorism, Karina initially attributes college life to exposing her to skin tone differences. She begins,

for most of my life […] with me it was more, you’re either White or you’re Black […] there were two Black kids in my school […]. But when I got here to [college], that’s when I […] first noticed it.

As Karina explains, attending predominately white schools served as a reminder of racial differences rather than distinctions based upon color. She also points to her diverse circle of
friends for making her less aware of colorism. However, similar to the experience of Luann, it is only until the stories of other women are shared in the focus group that Karina recognizes the differences her family made about skin color. As she continues,

But my family, well now that I know about it and I look back […] you know my family had roots into colorism […] a lot of them are mixed and [a lot of them are] the darkest of dark. And there were little competitions, like you know my child came out lighter than your child or, my child had better hair, you know little things like that. And I didn’t notice it when I was younger […] I didn’t care about that, cause my mind was focused on other things. Now that I look back on where all this coming from, it’s like now I notice [that] it’s probably coming from family.

Karina goes on to share that as a young adolescent she stayed in “constant competitions” with her cousins whom she considers to be more colorstruck because they migrated to the United States from Haiti in their late teens. Noting that class and color is a “pretty major” issue in Haiti, Karina admits that her cousins (who have darker skin tones) were socialized to concentrate more on skin color differences than she, and that resulted in small battles over who was prettier or who had the better hair. Like the African-American community, Haiti has a similar history of colonization, yet the socially constructed differences based upon phenotype translated into a more rigid caste system of hair, skin, and features (Trouillot, 1994). As such, class and color differences are more pronounced, which explains why Karina’s cousins were more concerned about skin color and hair. Several other participants of Haitian and Jamaican heritage comment on more exaggerated notions of colorism in those Caribbean societies compared to the U.S. A more detailed discussion of this matter follows in Chapter 5.

Despite the fact that some women were completely unaware of the impact of female family members upon their views on skin color, there were quite a few participants who readily acknowledged the authority of women in their family, particularly their mothers. The majority of women in this study identified experiences with their mothers as having the most influence over their identity, ability, and relationship choices. For Rachel, an eighteen-year old participant
woman who speaks openly about the preferential treatment she receives as a light-skinned woman remembers that as a child her mother would make differences between her and her older sister. Clarifying that having different fathers contributed to their differing skin tones, Rachel suggests that even in the smallest things like housework her mother would elevate and praise Rachel more than her darker sister:

I don’t know if it’s just my imagination but my mom would yell at her more than me. […] growing up doing chores, I would do my chores better than my sister and it just didn’t make sense, but that’s how it is in my family.

For eighteen year-old Amy, she vaguely recalls overt experiences of colorism in her family, yet does share that her mother would regularly encourage the medium-toned participant to bleach her skin. As Amy describes, “my mom is always trying to get me to use products to lighten my skin color because my mother is also pretty light and she wants me to be more like that.[…] She sees that other people look at darker as a bad thing, [and] she doesn’t really want me to go through that stereotype.” Although Amy’s mother is trying to protect her daughter she is at the same time reinforcing the value placed on lighter skin. Amy and Rachel’s stories offer small yet noteworthy examples of how mothers can subtly reinforce the normative ideology of colorism.

There are, however more significant instances of mothers making blatant references to skin tone. Take for instance the experience of Leah, a young woman who considers herself medium. As a young child Leah was preoccupied with her skin tone, partially due to her mother’s insistence that Leah identify herself as “brown and not black”. Her mother, a light-skinned woman, was also influential in shaping Leah’s relationship choices. As a teenager she admits being more attracted to dark-skinned men. Leah states, “I had this infatuation with men that were darker than me, I don’t care how dark, just as long as you were darker than me cause it was something that made me feel good that they were darker than I was.” From this statement it
appears that for Leah dating darker men was a way to affirm her skin color. Yet as Leah further explains, her mother was not happy with this decision and strongly encouraged Leah to “date up” within the color hierarchy as opposed to “dating down:”

So one day my mom, being red, being light-skinned, she comes [and] I’m telling her about my current choice. We were driving down [the street] and he was walking past, […] and I was like “mom, that’s him right there.” My mom turns to me and stops the car and says, “Who?! That Black boy there?” I was in complete shock [laughter]. I was like “Black boy?” I was like “Mom!” […] You know? She [said] “I’m tired of you dating these black-skinned boys.” And I was like “black-skinned?” […] And then she told me […] “I want my grandchildren to have nice hair and a nice skin tone.” And I’m looking like are you serious? […] how is it that you’re with daddy, and daddy’s darker than me.” She was like, “well that’s how it’s supposed to be, that the light-skinned and dark-skinned are supposed to be together and not dark on dark and light on light”

This exchange between Leah and her mother speaks volumes to the ways in which mothers promote the negative ideals of colorism. Although Leah’s mother attempted to guide her on the “right path” in relationships, she did so in such a way that reinforces the rules of the color hierarchy. Suggesting to Leah that it was only natural for people to date and marry people of opposite skin tones was a common theme mentioned throughout the focus groups. Inherent in this popular adage is the idea that a mixed-tone couple (one light-skinned and one dark-skinned) will ideally produce offsprings that are brown and exempt from the negative experiences of being extremely light or dark. This example shows how powerful maternal influences can be in shaping self-perception and intimate choices.

In addition to mothers, some respondents acknowledge the impact their grandmothers have in forming their perspectives on skin color. This is not surprising, considering the special place grandmothers hold in many black families. As Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) points out,

The role of the grandmother is one of the most central ones in African-American families…Grandmothers are central to the economic support of Black families and play a crucial role in childcare…They represent a major source of strength and security for many Black children (p.79).
As a main figure in families, grandmothers are oftentimes responsible for the transmission of values from one generation to the next. When the women in this study mentioned their grandmother playing a significant role in shaping their views on colorism, more often than not these grandmothers were distinguished as the fairest member of their families. It can be argued that they have more at stake in the maintenance of colorism compared to mothers. Coming of age in an earlier generation and time when skin tone stratification was more structured and overt, these grandmothers may feel a greater obligation to uphold color divisions and to draw sharper lines between their families and darker black families. Indeed, this was the case for Trina, Missy, and Monica—three young women who share that their grandmothers of mixed ancestry were responsible for transmitting the dominant language, scripts and practices of colorism to the women and girls in their respective families. Trina, a very light woman, reveals that growing up she recognized that her grandmother was very color conscious:

And what I noticed was that my grandma would [say], don’t bring no black niggers here. She would [say], “I don’t want no blackeyes around here.” […] My mom used to date dark guys, and for whatever reason [she] was attracted to really dark, husky Black guys and my grandma would [warn] “no Black gorilla ghosts around here.”

The harsh warnings Trina received from her grandmother refute the popular belief that light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks should couple together. Instead, it is clear from these admonishments that dark-skinned people are demonized as inferior and in the mind of Trina’s grandmother, a threat to the purity of her light-skinned family. This is strikingly similar to the opening pages of Lawrence Otis Graham’s (1999) *Our Kind of People*, an autobiographical account of life within the black elite. As a child, Graham recalls his well to-do, fair-complexioned grandmother referring to darker blacks as “niggers” (See Graham, 1999, p.2). This type of blatant colorism may be more common among older generations of black Americans.
Although Missy’s grandmother did not impact her decisions on who to date, she did however have considerable control in how Missy viewed herself. At the beginning of her focus group session Missy explains,

My grandmother […] is almost as pale as you are [pointing to Colleen, a white co-facilitator], and she’s Black. And she calls all her grandkids from my family colored […] we’re [the] *colored* children, the darker ones in the whole family.

As a result of being called colored and categorized by her grandmother as the darkest one in the family, Missy identified and understood her life experience as a medium-toned individual.

However, Missy is one example of the discrepancies I sometimes found between my perceptions as a researcher and the participants’ own perceptions of their skin tone category. On her demographic sheet Missy identified herself as medium. Yet, I noticed that she was one of the fairest women in her focus group; she had a “yellow” tone, and could be easily classified as light brown. Although there is at times variation and disagreement as it relates to who belongs to what skin tone category (light, brown, or dark), there is no mistake that Missy rated her skin tone darker based upon her grandmother’s influence and construction of her as dark. Each time that an inconsistency of this kind occurred it was readily traceable back to the family.

Finally, Monica, a brown-skinned woman, describes that her grandmother is notorious for creating divisions and hierarchy among her sisters. She explains that even though her mother has never raised the issue of skin tone to her or her siblings, it is instead her father’s mother (whom she describes as very light and passable for white) who holds the most colorist values in the family. As Monica informs the focus group, her grandmother’s fair skin and her views about skin tone dictated how she and her sisters were treated:

…my mother is very dark and […] my sisters happened to come out dark and I came out more of a different skin color. And my grandmother prefers me to the two of them because [of] my features, you know, my straight nose or whatever […] my skin color is more acceptable to her, she likes me better than them.
She continues,

    Well, like I said, [...] my grandmother had issues [...] But she was always OK with my other sisters because of the features they had. One of them is dark but she has really curly hair. That made it OK.

A number of lessons can be learned from Monica’s narrative about her grandmother. First, Monica was the preferred sister due to her lighter skin tone in comparison to her darker sisters. As Monica suggests, she was favored more and got treated better. Yet, in her grandmother’s eyes, her sisters’ European features and “good” hair served as redeeming qualities in spite of their dark skin. Unfortunately, Monica’s experience with her grandmother is all too common, as her story resonates not only with other focus group participants, but also with previous literature.

    Tessa also shares a family story of how her grandmother influences her early romanticized ideals of colorism. Although the narratives of Trina, Missy, and Monica point to their grandmothers as having a palpable role in producing colorism within their families, Tessa’s grandmother has a common reaction to the birth of a light-skinned baby that resonates throughout her entire family. According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992), within black families there exists a great deal of excitement and obsession about a child’s impending skin color, hair texture, and facial features that begins well before birth. Tessa explains how the birth of her biracial cousin’s youngest child creates a “color commotion” in her family:

    [My cousin has] two sons and a girl, and his daughter in the middle is darker skinned, she takes after her mother, and his younger son [...] was born with gray eyes and you know, turned out to be this beautiful light skinned child, and I just remember [...] in my family a mass flocking to the hospital to see this child and my grandmother, she still to this day, will go to the house and pick up this little boy and leave the daughter there, just leave her there. And I mean, there’s no other reason to explain it other than it’s just, everyone wanted to babysit him, everyone to take care of him. I even fell into the trap as well, and you know, I want to have a little gray eyed baby myself. And [my grandmother would say] “how can we be so lucky to have a beautiful gray eyed child?”

Tessa openly discusses how members of her family discriminate against each other based upon skin tone, and the birth of this infant boy reinforces the negativity inherent in dark skin, and the
praise and elevation accompanying light skin. People in her family—Tessa included—would provide extra attention to this “beautiful” baby, while disregarding the other child with darker skin. Internalizing the favor given to this baby, Tessa admits that she “fell into the trap” of colorism and wished for a light-skinned baby of her own. She later realizes her error, noting, “This the wrong line of thinking to have.” Like other participants in this study, Tessa recognizes that replacing the normative language, scripts, and practices of colorism with an oppositional line of thinking and behavior is at times very difficult. “It seems so powerful,” she confesses, yet Tessa remains insistent on moving from a place of compliance to point of resistance.

Although mothers and grandmothers are most commonly mentioned as the main purveyors of colorism in families, it is important to note here the role of other female family members in creating a color consciousness for some of the women in the study. I will illustrate this through the compelling narratives of Chanel and Jasmine, two focus group participants who in their childhood are impacted by female cousins in two very different ways. Chanel, a twenty-one year old respondent, shares that she was first made aware of the negativity placed upon her dark skin at a family reunion. Up until this point Chanel admits that she was not cognizant of skin tone differences because her immediate family was fairly homogenous in relation to skin tone. Yet the sharp words of a lighter-skinned cousin permanently change her perspective:

I remember I was about 8 years old and I went to one of my family reunions […] one of our cousins married a really light skinned woman and […] the matriarchs, the heads of the family […] made her this supposedly most beautiful person because she was light skinned and it just used to bother me cause I could never understand […] And I remember her sitting next to me. She just looked at me [and] said, “why do you look like that?” I’m just confused. I’m like “what do you mean? You know, she left the question alone, but I really felt that she was talking partly because of my weight, but also too because of my skin tone. Because you know, most of my family is darker skinned and she really thought she was important because she was light skinned because many people made her believe that. So that was one of the first really experiences I got from my family.
Chanel honestly notes that her cousin never explicitly degraded her dark skin. Yet this small exchange set the tone for how Chanel she would evaluate, perceive, and judge herself in the future. She admits this internalization impacted her intimate relationships with men. Because of her dark skin Chanel reveals that she didn’t believe she was worthy of a good relationship and discusses how she had to unlearn this crippling mentality:

I didn’t really see myself as being desirable because that’s the way you know men treated me. […] so when I got older and the time came [when] men were showing interest in me, I really had a significant problem accepting that. I thought they were crazy and I thought that I could never accept it and still to this day, I’m working on it. It’s ok, I can actually talk about that. But I know personally, it’s just been, emotionally it’s been more difficult for me to accept that men would find me attractive because that’s not what I experienced growing up.

As we learn from Chanel’s story, moving to a point of acceptance and self-love can at times be complicated.

The narrative of focus group member Jasmine provides a good example of the black family serving as both a point of origin and stabilizing agent for the normative model of everyday colorism. A nineteen year-old young woman who identifies as light brown, Jasmine has a keen sense of colorism within her life, and attributes her early family experiences for the development of her normative ideals of skin tone. Similar to other women in this project, Jasmine cites her mother as an influence upon her identity, but also credits the elevated position of two light-skinned cousins in her family to the development of her own self-image:

I have 2 older cousins […] who I’m closer with and they’re very light […] they are a lot lighter than me and they have […] brown-grayish eyes you know and I really admire them […] and that really legitimized [my] skin tone because how I view myself, I guess I kind of want to be just like them because they are really beautiful and I really admire them, so you know that really influences me […] my family used to say how I always looked like one of my cousins […] so I guess I just don’t want to get darker because I just want to seem more like my cousins.
Jasmine does not mention any particular action or behavior on the part of her cousins that serve as the trigger of her color awareness. Yet being compared to her light cousins with the “brown-grayish eyes” creates internal scripts that connect light-skin to beauty and privilege.

Jasmine’s early ideals of skin tone constructed by her mother and cousins become even more solidified when she encounters a stabilizing agent in high school,

> When I was 15 or 16, I did color guard in 10th grade and I got so dark […] I even got sun burned. I did not know that I could get sun burned until I woke up one day and my skin was peeling […] I remember taking pictures with one of my friends and getting them developed […] my mom [saw the pictures] and said, “wow, you’re really, really dark,” and I don’t know I guess it just hit me because I didn’t like the fact that my mom called me dark because I was so used to being called light, and you know I also associated that, back then I was also like really fat so, you know I kind of associate being dark with not being as attractive because I noticed that in 11th grade, after I lost weight and I was lighter, I got a lot more attention from males.

Joining the marching band represents a critical point in Jasmine’s life for a number of reasons. Participating in an outdoor activity like the color guard may be regarded as a fun experience for many teenagers, yet for Jasmine the constant exposure to the sun signifies a demotion in the color hierarchy. The language her mother uses to describe her changes from “light” to “really, really dark.” In an earlier point in her focus group Jasmine recalls that her mother never called her dark, that she typically used the word dark to refer to Jasmine’s younger sister. At one point Jasmine mentions that to her, being called red symbolized “total affection and beautification.” Her internal scripts significantly shift from attractive to unattractive, from being likened to her beautiful light cousins to feeling dark and fat. The response Jasmine receives from her mother deeply impacts her experience, and thus precipitates the need for a change. Her behavior (external practice) then is guided by these two factors. This event serves as a stabilizing agent because it re-affirms her ideals about being light-skinned and fuels her aspirations to get her color back. As Jasmine explains, the following year she quit color guard, lost weight, and
restored her redness—and beauty. Consequently, the attention she gets from young men is attributed to her lighter tone.

Family as the Point of Origin for Oppositional Colorism

A considerable share of women in this study admit that their families are responsible for instilling within them a belief system of bias and judgment as it relates to skin tone. Many respondents learn early in life to associate negativity with darkness, and to equate goodness with lightness. Yet, there are some women involved in this project who talk about a different pattern of family socialization. Several participants speak of being reared in black families that espouse the ideals of Afrocentricity. Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) observes that “the Afrocentric movement has been a process by which many African-Americans have reclaimed the cultural strengths of their African heritage while offering them a positive alternative to negative messages and stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant European American society” (p.144). For the women who learn from their families to celebrate all the various hues of blackness, an oppositional knowledge of colorism serves as their point of origin. Illustrative of this notion is the case of Kira, a nineteen-year-old participant who credits the wide diversity of hues in her family for her oppositional foundation of colorism:

My family always taught me to accept everyone […] there was never any type of differentiation with anyone in my family. Everyone was always welcome in my house no matter skin tone you were. And in my family alone, there [is] a wide range of people […] my dad’s side of the family is really light skinned […] they have green eyes […] My mom’s side of the family is very dark, so there is a very big mix between everyone in my family.

Being exposed to the positive attributes of both light and dark skin, Kira learns from her family members not to discriminate on this basis, and to treat everyone the same.

U-Neek reveals that as a child she was never exposed to colorism. As the twenty-one-year-old participant notes, “I didn’t think that I was ever affected by colorism because my family
was so pro Black, and ‘Black is beautiful’ is how they talk to you. My mother is really dark skinned, my aunt is light, so we have these different variations in my family and it was never noticed.” U-Neek cites that her family’s appreciation of everything black influenced her positive viewpoints on all skin tones. However, like many women in this study, upon entering all-black environments outside the home, U-Neek is introduced to the normative viewpoints of skin color,

And then I went to Black schools [where] everyone was always focused on fashion, […] talking amongst my friends we were very focused on the color contrasts and stuff like that, and now I’m realizing that yeah, even when you meet somebody, [skin tone is] one of the first things I notice.

High school, then serves as a transformative agent that functions to make U-Neek more aware of colorism and to enact the scripts and practices attached to the normative discourse.

Callea shares a parallel experience about her family. Similar to U-Neek, she recalls no formal knowledge of colorism as a child, and confesses, “I didn’t really know colorism, I just knew that I was black.” This young woman credits her father’s strong Afrocentric values as central to shaping her positive self-image. Yet, similar to other participants, her positive valuations of dark skin and African features are challenged when she enters high school:

I had African ancestors […] that is what my father really focused on. He always told us, (my sister and I) that we’re beautiful, natural hair is African silk, and you are beautiful the way you are. I guess that is because he knew how society is […] because when I went to high school it was the lighter you are, the prettier you are. If you had long hair and you’re light skinned, you’re beautiful as opposed as to if you’re dark […] I’m not that pretty [now] because my hair is short and it’s not long-flowing or straight because I’m darker. […] I play[ed] basketball when I was in high school, and we were out in the sun five times a week, and I got really dark. And I liked that because my skin was even, so I was pretty happy, but it was because I was dark skinned I wasn’t considered beautiful [compared] to other girls who stayed out of the sun and who were lighter than me.

Contrast Callea’s narrative with the story of Jasmine, the young woman featured earlier in this chapter. While Jasmine was raised with the normative beliefs of colorism privileging light over dark, Callea instead learned at an early age to value all skin tones. Both young women enter high school and decide to participate in outdoor activities (color guard and basketball), causing
their skin tones to deepen. Pressured by the desire to be accepted, Jasmine gives up her extracurricular activity. Unshaken by dominant standards of beauty, Callea stays involved in a sport that makes her darker, and admits to being “pretty happy” despite how unattractive she is viewed by others. Both women’s high school experiences function as stabilizing events that yield different results. Jasmine learns from her mother that light skin is beautiful, and this ideology dictates how she views herself and others. On the other hand, Callea learns early on from her father to celebrate her dark-skin, and has no qualms about and getting darker and challenging normative ideologies of skin color.

There are certain cases where respondents note being socialized with both a normative and oppositional framework of colorism. For Vivica, her experiences with colorism are more complex because within her family she is presented with competing ideologies of skin tone from different family members. Vivica describes her skin tone as medium, but as many women in the study reveal, she was much lighter as a young child. “I was born the fairest of all the children,” Vivica explains. It is through her aunt that she learns the dominant ideals of colorism as she was regularly admonished for “turning.”

My auntie […] was like “why you keep on going in the sun? You keep on turning!”[…] you know kids like to go outside [and] you will turn especially if you go in the pool and stuff. We had a pool at our house. And my aunt would always say, “every time I see you, you turn darker.” […] And it’s true because I […] come from this light light child and then you know slowly but surely, I become darker.

Despite the frequent references Vivica’s aunt made to her changing skin tone, her parents refused to “play color” and make a difference between she and her siblings. Unlike this young woman’s aunt, her parents are instrumental in countering the dominant notions of skin tone, and providing Vivica with an oppositional framework. She recounts a different childhood story where she learns that divisions among skin color are not accepted within her family:
My little sister […] remained her color cause she’s stayed more inside or whatever. She has my grandma’s […] long hair and she’s kinda […] she’s not light light skinned, but one time she told my older sister who took after my father and is very dark, she was prancing through the house and she was like, “Vivica and I are the lightest ones, Vivica and I are lightest ones. We’re the prettiest ones” […] and I remember my father, […] he came running inside cause he’s dark and my older sister is dark, […] and he was upset. He was just like, “No! You know you don’t say this.”[ … ] “Don’t make her feel bad because […] she is the darkest.”

It is through her father’s reprimands that Vivica becomes keenly aware that making distinctions is neither valued nor welcomed within her immediate family. Although she admits that both her mother and father were adamant about challenging colorism, it is her subsequent exposure to extended family members, schools, and relationships that override what her parents initially fought so hard to instill within her. Vivica concedes to the dominant language, scripts, and practices of colorism, openly admitting that as a brown-skinned woman, she feels there are “still more mountains to climb.” This respondent is candid about the struggle she has with color hierarchy; at one moment she is being critical of colorism and the larger system of racism, and in another instant she is hoping that her young niece—her older sister’s daughter—does not turn out to be her sister’s dark color. Vivica’s conscious battle with the normative and oppositional forms of colorism is typical of several women in this study. Yet like so many others, it is difficult to decipher which one ultimately wins out.

School

Even though an overwhelming majority of participants cite their family as the foundation for their views on colorism, a large number of respondents further admit that they were not consciously aware of skin tone difference until they were regularly surrounded by other people their own age. It is usually in school settings where colorism (similar to racism) is institutionalized, and black women begin to understand just how skin tone makes a difference in their lives. Consider Toni Morrison’s classic, The Bluest Eye, a fictional story dealing with the
“tension[s] that can exist among Black women grappling with the meaning of prevailing standards of beauty” (Collins, 2000, p.92). Deeply embedded within the pages of this novel is the pain and heartache of colorism as narrated by two young girls, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer. At one point in the novel, the arrival of a new schoolmate provides a tough lesson in how colorism operates among young people. As told through the voice of Claudia,

The disrupter of seasons was a new girl in school named Maureen Peal. 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…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 work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to sink in the girls toilet…Freida and I were bemused, irritated, and fascinated by her. We looked hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium…but we had to do it alone, for none of the other girls would cooperate with our hostility. They adored her (Morrison, 1970, pp.62-63).

From this story we see that not all black girls are treated the same. The elevation, praise, and privilege bestowed to light-skinned Maureen Peal substantiate young Pecola’s longing for blue eyes. Similar to the young girl featured in Morrison’s work, data from the focus groups also suggest that school experiences are critical in shaping, reinforcing, or redirecting young women’s views about skin tone. Earlier sections of this chapter document that for some participants entry into high school challenged or reiterated their foundational beliefs of colorism. Yet a larger portion of participants cite various points in their education—grade school, high school, and college—as stabilizing and transformative agents impacting their awareness of colorism.

Although women on opposite sides of the spectrum remember being taunted or shunned by their schoolmates for their skin color, focus group member Shanae attributes her darker skin tone to frequent trips to the principal’s office in middle school,

[In] elementary school I would always stay in the pool and you know chlorine makes you darker so once I got to middle school, I got in a lot of trouble with other kids because the first thing they would say was, “Oh, Black.” […] so I got into a lot of fights because […] they called me black. So that’s when people started telling me, “did you know the saying
the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice?” and that’s when I accepted my skin color more […] now I’m proud of it.

Shanae’s experience is so noteworthy because she moves from a young girl who resorts to
to physical violence in order to defend herself against name-calling and harassment to a young
woman who learns to appreciate who she is. She mentions a schoolteacher who exposed her to
the adage “the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice.” Although the origins of this saying are
rooted in sexuality, the context in which Shanae discovers this idea is rooted in black pride and
appreciation. This transformative event enables Shanae to transition to an alternative
understanding of colorism where she is better able to handle subsequent experiences of
ignorance and prejudice.

For some participants, school experiences reinforce the normative values of skin tone that are originally learned in the family. Keesha’s story is one such experience. The young woman who describes her skin color as dark relates that members of her immediate family were
recognized by her extended family as the “the black sheep” because they were darkest. The
knowledge she gains in her family is solidified when she starts high school. Keesha realizes
immediate differences when she is jokingly compared to her lighter brother as “night,” while is
he is referred to as “day.” However, one specific incident serves as the most stabilizing agent of
normative colorism:

I remember hearing a group of black guys talk about who the prettiest girls in school were,
and what I noticed now is that either the girls were light skinned […] or had longer hair.
And that’s a really big thing. Those two, it’s either one or the other. If you have longer
hair then it’s great, and if you have lighter skin then it’s great too. So, it wasn’t the darker
girls in school that were the prettiest to them. I think that was important. And that kind of
hurt too, because I didn’t make that list.

It is in high school that Keesha grasps the concept of the “beauty queue,” and learns her position
within the socially constructed hierarchy of skin tone and attractiveness. As a dark-skinned girl,
she comes to understand the rejection and exclusion associated with not having the right skin
tone or hair length. Keesha’s opening comment in the focus group aptly captures what she uncovered while in high school: “it seems that the lighter you are the better you are, the prettier you are perceived.”

While school experiences are noted as central in shaping views on colorism, there are several women who specifically mention that changing from a predominately white school environment to an all-black school creates a transformative experience that propels them into a larger-scale exposure to colorism. Whereas concerns about racism are more evident in all-white settings, colorism holds more significance in places that are exclusively black. Take for instance the narratives of Beyonce, Tessa, and Tatiana, three young women who observe substantial differences upon making the transition to all-black surroundings:

Coming from my high school, it was predominantly White, […] and then coming here [to college], to be honest with you, it doesn’t feel like I’m at a predominantly White school. I know we are, but it doesn’t really feel that way just because the Black community is so tight-knit […] it’s an all Black high school almost. […] so the reason why I said earlier that I don’t really know how to define myself, you know, light, dark, medium, whatever, is because I’ve never had to talk about it before. But here, it’s like, people are describing people as high yellow, red bone, I’m just like, “OK well what exactly is that?” […] I didn’t really even hear some of the terms until I got here, and it’s because I was around more Black people. (Beyonce)

This focus group made me start thinking about school and everything, and I went to a predominantly suburban school in the South and about sixth grade, [moved] to inner city schools and from then on, I noticed that I never even understood what color I was until I went to inner city schools. That was the first time that I understood in relation to our value into our society […] And I found that so funny because I had always felt that in my family, but it had never been so explicit as when I went to school around my peers. (Tessa)

I grew up in a suburban community. I went to private school my entire life. And I started off in […] a majority White elementary school. So it was never an issue for me until I got to middle school and the only people who have said anything about it or made me think twice about “you are very dark” has been black people, and they’re only about two shades lighter than me (Tatiana)

It is clear from these narratives that being in all-black environments creates a more exaggerated focus on skin tone.
Without a doubt, classmates—whether in the form of friends or adversaries—play a role in perpetuating skin tone bias and difference within school settings. Yet findings from the analysis also point to adults within educational settings—specifically teachers—who further reinforce the stratification and hierarchy of colorism. Sociologist and colorism scholar Margaret Hunter (2007) asserts that teachers, who “exert a powerful influence of student achievement,” are indeed responsible for highlighting color difference in the classroom. “If teachers, of any race, expect their light-skinned students of color to be smarter, more academically prepared, from better families, and better behaved than their darker-skinned classmates, the students may rise and fall to meet those racialized expectations” (Hunter, 2007, p.243). Commonly, differential treatment appears in the form of light-skinned children being chosen as the “teacher’s pet.” Charles Parrish (1946) finds in his research on perceptions about skin tone that “favoritism is displayed by teachers toward the light colored pupils according to 63% of the persons questioned” (p.17). Although this conclusion was reached more than sixty years ago, there are similar beliefs and experiences shared by members in the current study. For instance, Chanel, a participant with dark-skin, jokingly recalls her perception that her elementary school teacher was “much nicer to the light skinned people in the class. […] She would give them more treats than the rest of us.” Although Chanel makes light of this remark because she is not sure if in fact the lighter children were really preferred, Kira notes a different experience in which she distinctly remembers being singled out by her fifth grade teacher:

I remember when I was in 5th grade, I had this one teacher […] who was black and she would ride me like no one else in my class. My handwriting had to be perfect, everything had to be perfect that I turned in. Everything. And if it was not perfect, she would fail me. She called my parents daily […] she was crazy.
Kira admits that it is through this experience that she becomes more consciously aware of the differences people make in relation to skin tone.

Teresa, a twenty-one-year-old participant who identifies her skin tone as dark, shares an interesting experience involving her grade school teacher and her dad. Similar to other participants, Teresa recollects that many of her elementary and middle school teachers assigned seats and placed the lighter-skinned children at the head of the class. As she describes, “it was every class that was this way. I had a few teachers who had the light skinned or the rich family kids up front.” Acknowledging that her darker skin relegated her to “the back row with all the other kids,” Teresa notices that only until her teacher meets her father that she is awarded a new place in the class.

One day […] I was talking to my dad casually and he goes, “I don’t really like this teacher, I’d like to come in and meet her.” My dad’s a light skinned black male, […] he’s a couple shades lighter than I am. And he went there and he spoke to the teacher, not about racism or anything, but what about [my daughter’s] grades and […] about her being in the back, and then you know she pushed me up to the front. But everyday up front, she’d always be asking me about my dad, “is he single, how in love is he with my mother,” and stuff like that. And it was definitely crossing the line, and I had to think to myself, why is this? […] she obviously favored the light skinned kids, and here she was trying to be my friend, just to get some of my dad. And I figured she put me in front of the class […]because I had some light skin in [my] family.

Like Teresa, many respondents are careful to highlight that not every teacher or class experience was one in which skin tone was of premium significance. But as these narratives suggest, all it takes is one bad incident involving colorism to leave a lasting impression upon a young woman’s perceptions and life experience.

While grade, middle, and high school occurrences are mentioned to serve as transformative and stabilizing agents, college life is more often noted by the women in this study as a transformative experience relating to colorism. To be sure, the history of colorism documents the various ways in which historically black colleges and universities routinely
discriminated against darker-skinned African-Americans via fraternities, sororities, and even college admission. This is the focus of Audrey Elisa Kerr’s (2006) work. Within this study, young women note the persistent the divisions of skin color along sorority lines, as numerous women referred to the color stereotypes present on campus, including the idea that most light-skinned women are AKAs and Deltas, while darker-skinned women are expected to pledge sororities such as Zeta Phi Beta and Sigma Gamma Rho.

In spite of the obvious differences expected to reinforce colorism on a college campus, a larger majority of women in this study note a different connection to their college experience; it is through the institution of higher education that an oppositional knowledge of colorism is acquired, developed and matured. This is exhibited through the language used within the focus groups. Without prompting, a number of participants situate the following concepts within their narratives: white racism, colonialism, slave mentality, Willie Lynch, the one-drop rule, octoroon, quadroon Eurocentric and Afrocentric standards of beauty and controlling images of black women. As college students, these young women are exposed to scholarly literature, arming them with an oppositional knowledge of colorism. This is perhaps captured best by the opening remarks of Meeko, a participant who reveals that taking a class in women’s studies and learning about colorism in the course changed her entire perspective and her fueled interest in colorism:

what sparked my interest was a summer course that I took, it was women’s Studies and […] I had a lot of unanswered questions and I felt that coming to this focus group would help me gauge more, on how people see this issue, because it’s a big issue in my life and I never thought it was that big until taking the course, because it basically involves every part of my life, and I never knew that.

Majoring in and/or taking classes in women’s studies, English literature, African-American studies, and sociology (as participants mention) provides an alternative stock of knowledge on black women and skin color that easily enable many respondents to develop a critical consciousness of their everyday experiences with colorism.
Relationships

As Kelly, a bi-racial participant admits, “My skin tone has been the theme of my life when it comes to dating black men.” Although they do not function as points of origin, friendships and intimate relationships do serve as stabilizing and/or transformative agents for the women in this study. A large part for the scrutiny black women give and receive is owed to European standards of beauty, and the long-standing belief in the black community that light-skinned women are the most suitable dating and marriage partners. Even in modern-day society, as Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) remind us, “the most intimate of relationships are still governed by the politics of color and race” (p.107). This, of course impacts the relationships between black men and black women, but the underlying threat of competition invariably shapes the context of black female relationships. Margaret Hunter (2005) expounds on this issue:

The demographic reality of the African American community today exacerbates the perception (and reality) of competition for scarce male partners because of the unbalanced sex ratio of African Americans…This scarcity leads to increased tension and competition among African American women for the limited number of male partners, thus increasing animosity over issues of beauty and skin color (p.73).

On the issue of relationships with black women, a considerable number of women revealed circumstances when their skin tone impacted a friendship with another black woman. The previous chapter details how the internal scripts related to light, medium, and dark skin tones at times prevent women from making friendships across skin tone lines. Yet in the instances where friendships are forged between women of varying hues, difference in skin color may cause friction. For Stacey, building bonds with all types of black women is easy. In fact, similar to many other participants in this study, she indicates that initially skin tone is “never an issue.” This young woman notes that her current group of close friends falls on various places of the color spectrum. Yet, as she describes one particular incident when she and her friends are
preparing for a night out, Stacy quickly realizes that colorism indeed plays a role in their relationship:

I was going out and my hair, I didn’t like my hair style so I just didn’t want to go out and my friend who is half Black and half Puerto Rican was like, “Well, it doesn’t matter what you look like, you know, let’s just go out because you know, your hair is never that great looking anyway.” Hurt by that comment […] I [asked her], “are you trying to call me your Ugly Betty?”1 and we got into this huge disagreement. […] there is this issue that I would call, “the Ugly Betty.” She needs to be a part of the group in order for the other women who are a shade lighter or a tone lighter to feel better about themselves and [she] is always a dark-skinned black woman. […] I consider myself a dark skinned woman, [and…] I have to always make sure that I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and be like, “I’m a beautiful dark skinned Black woman,” and that’s one of the things that you have to be conscious about even in your everyday setting, even among your friends, [that] you’re a beautiful Black woman.

Internalizing her perceived role as the “Ugly Betty,” Stacey believes that she is only part of her peer group because her friends do not view her dark-skin and short hair as intimidating. She later confides that she feels that she has to engage in compensatory practices –such as getting a hair weave or wearing a new outfit—in order to feel on the same level with her lighter-skinned friends. Stacey recognizes the irony in doing these things because she notes that it typically results in even more scrutiny from her friends. Hearing her girlfriends react with comments like, “wow, you look so nice today,” further reinforces the ideas of colorism; there is no expectation for a dark-skinned girl to look nice and be attractive. Being in this circle of friends and going through these varied experiences provides Stacey with transformative moments that alter her thinking about colorism. At the end of the focus group experience Stacey acknowledges that she is more enlightened and determined to challenge many things in her friendships which she previously left unquestioned. Her language, internal scripts, and external practices shift to an

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1 This a direct reference to the popular television sitcom, Ugly Betty, which features a relatively plain-looking, slightly overweight woman of color as the title character.
oppositional understanding of colorism. Stacey changes from seeing herself as the unattractive friend to waking up everyday and affirming that she indeed is a beautiful woman.

Finding herself in the same situation as Stacey, Rosetta also reveals how colorism unveils itself in the context of her peer group. The young woman describes that she has a “diverse group of friends,” and when all the women come together,

[colorism] comes out and […] some people will say, “well you know, dark skinned people don’t need to wear that color or dark skinned people don’t need to wear that type of make up, or dark skinned people don’t’ need to have this type of make up on and light skinned people, they can wear any color because you can see any color on lighter people.”

Rosetta mentions that she does believe her friends’ action to be malicious or intentional. Yet, they do serve to perpetuate difference by privileging light skin.

To be sure, experiences in dating provide focus group participants with even more recollections of how colorism impacts their intimate relationships and everyday experiences with black men. Stories surrounding dating and marriage surfaced during each focus group, and many of the narratives shared reflect the normative ideology of colorism.

As the conversations in each focus group reveal, young women consider the decisions black men make in dating or marriage to be more about status and less about love. In fact, second only to beauty, the majority of participants cited colorism to revolve around how men perceive or approach other women. To no surprise, common responses from women of all skin tones were that light-skinned women carried the most advantage and privilege in relationships. Lighter-toned women are seen as more attractive, and thus are better choices in the areas of dating and marriage. For many, light-skin is synonymous with freedom and options; it is believed that fairer women have carte blanche over other women. The exception, of course is white women, who are seen to be the largest competition for black men above and beyond the fairest black girl. One downside for light-skinned women is perhaps best described by Mary, a
brown-skinned participant who admits that she harbors no feelings of jealousy or resentment toward her lighter friends because in her mind, they are the ones who have a more difficult time separating serious suitors from the “crazy guys” who are only after them for their looks. Another disadvantage noted by lighter-skinned women is the frequent assumption by women of other skin tones that they get all the guys and are always the center of attention. As one light-skinned participant added, “I have a problem with dating because I don’t want to be seen just for the way I look.” Undoubtedly, it is this popular notion of normative colorism that fuels competition and division among black women.

Consider the riveting narrative of Nia, a young woman who struggles with the fact that black people typically devalue darker skin tones. Sharing a dating story with her focus group, Nia speaks about being turned down for a second date with a young man because he “usually doesn’t date dark girls.” Talking about this experience leads Nia into a shocking yet frank disclosure about her feelings:

Nia: I used to hate light-skinned girls. I used to truly, truly hate them. And I don’t mean like “oh you’re lighter than me” no I mean like if I look at you, you look high yellow, but you’re still Black. And you will still claim Black, like that used to get on my damn nerves, because I got the impression that most will walk around all high and mighty because they are preferred […] And whenever someone says to me, “oh you’re pretty for a dark girl,” like it just, it gets me really pissed off cause it’s, that’s not a complement […].

JeffriAnne: You mentioned that you hated light-skinned women, you mentioned that earlier… I wanted to ask you…

Nia: Used to…

JeffriAnne: Used to, exactly, I want to know if you can understand this issue from their perspective what it’s like to experience the same things that you experience, but on the other side of the spectrum?

Nia: Yeah, I can definitely see how the shoe would be on the other foot with them because I mean, I’m not, the thing that I can’t wrap my [head around], I mean I’ve spoken to one, to one [laughs] but, I mean cause I don’t really care to hear your pain, you know what I mean [uhuh]. Like I hate it when it sounds like, it sounds like the […] the mulatto and …
JA: tragic mulatto?

Nia: Yeah, you know what I mean? [mocking light-skinned women] “Oh, life is just so hard for me. I’m just so light-skinned. Oh my goodness. It’s just so hard with all these men hitting on me all the time.” Shut up! You know what I mean? Come on now. I can’t fathom being in your shoes, but at the same time can we not play the “oh I’m just the victim” because and I’m not bitching as the victim, but don’t play the victim knowing good and well that you are at an advantage. I mean when it comes down to it, you really are.

Nia’s honest and raw emotion dominated the focus group (composed of women with varying skin tones) conversation for several minutes. At the end of this young woman’s diatribe on lighter black women, Nia ends her comments on a somewhat happier note, convincing the group that she has progressed beyond those negative feelings and remains committed to moving toward a place of education and agency. Yet it is Nia’s final comments that resonated with me as a fellow black woman and a researcher: “it’s like a slap in the face though because it wasn’t until I got here that I realized how sad it is, like where does this all come from?” The answer to Nia’s question escaped me. On the surface, the knee-jerk response is colonialism and white racism. But this young woman, who is college-educated and has a keen sense of agency and a critical consciousness of colorism, simultaneously has a strong sense of conflict, bias, and discrimination. Where does Nia assess blame for her hatred? Where does her empowerment truly begin? Time and again these devastating accounts—followed by even tougher questions—point to the complex and problematic struggle of colorism for young black women in contemporary society.

While lighter-skinned women are viewed as having free reign in which men they are able to date, some brown and dark-skinned women talk about considerable limitations in their dating choices and position. Returning to Margaret Hunter ‘s (2005) notion of the beauty queue,
common responses elicited from darker-toned women in the focus groups indicate that they are less frequently sought after as potential dating and marriage partners. Supporting this widespread notion is the belief that “boys don’t look at dark-skinned girls.” This viewpoint is perhaps best illustrated from Becky, a young woman who relates an incident involving her aunt and cousin,

I have a cousin and she has a very dark complexion but beautiful skin and […] she want[ed] a boyfriend and her mom chuckled and said, “oh sweetheart, you’re just going to have to find a White man, because he’s the only one who’s going to find beauty in you. […] you’re going to have to go to Europe because […] those are the only men who are going to appreciate the beauty in a black woman.” And she was like, “you know, a Black man will never ever date a darker skinned woman.”

This “rule” associated with normative colorism is echoed from many women participating in the focus groups. As Vivica explains, in fifth grade when she noticed all the boys “flocking to the Spanish looking and light-skinned girls,” she recognizes that her brown skin tone only afforded her a certain number of dating choices. Vivica states, “You could be the prettiest dark-skinned person…but society has already set limits for you.” Likewise, Callea learns a hard lesson when she is heartbroken by a cheating boyfriend. Describing to the group that although this young man “was a lot darker than me, he was surrounded with people who had extremely light-skinned girlfriends.” Confused about why her relationship was in trouble, Callea consulted a close friend for advice,

And she said something really interesting, she said that he had a reputation to uphold […] it wasn’t that I was a bad person, [it was] just that all of his friends had light skinned girlfriends, […] And he kind of wants to be a part of that […] that’s how I interpreted what she said […] because I don’t fit the bill, I’m not light-skinned and I don’t have long hair.

Frustrated with the rejection sometimes accompanying dark skin, there are some women however, like Tessa who understands that her relationship choices are limited, and therefore engages in compensatory practices by to dating partners who are not black.
Although the women in this study blame dominant standards of beauty for impacting their intimate relationships with black men, it is imperative to highlight that in some instances, women play an equal part in colorism by discriminating against lighter-skinned men. The literature on gendered colorism clearly indicates that black women are more affected by colorism compared to black men. However, the literature also points to bias and discrimination against light-skinned men as it relates to issues of attractiveness and desirability. The adulation often reserved for light-skinned women is not extended to light-skinned men; as Mark Hill (2000) suggests, for men, dark-skin has stereotypically been associated with masculinity and sexual attractiveness. Contemporary black male celebrities, including Denzel Washington, Morris Chestnut, Djimon Hounsou and Taye Diggs are all examples of dark-skinned men who are considered sex symbols partly because of their skin tone. There are respondents who openly express bias when making decisions in dating and relationships:

Personally I’m more attracted to dark skinned guys, [...] in my mind, [...] I’m kind of light so I guess he should be darker, so if we reproduce it will be, that’s the way I think. I don’t know if that might be good, but I try to overcompensate, [...] I haven’t really seen two dark skinned people together and I know it’s weird, but I’ve never seen it. And I’ve never seen two light skinned people together either. It’s usually either one is darker than the other, like just a little, or one is really darker than the other. You know it’s never the same thing. (Kira)

I don’t know if anyone has ever heard this [...] but older people in my family, and some people that I’ve talked to [tell me], “don’t bring home a light skinned guy ‘cuz he’s not going to work, or he’s going to think he’s too pretty to work,” that kind of stuff. (Fuze)

I actually prefer darker guys because lighter guys with curly hair, they’re too pretty. I don’t think that they would be strong, and I’m sure that there are [strong] light skinned men, you know I’m sure. But I prefer the dark skin, more chestnut. (Keesha)

Kira chooses to date dark-skinned men exclusively due to the common belief among black people that light and dark-skinned people should date or marry their “color opposite.” Citing the stereotype that light-skinned men are not as capable as dark-skinned men, Fuze avoids dating men who are lighter than her medium skin tone. Likewise, Keesha’s preference for dark skin
relates to their perceived strength over lighter men. The nature of gendered colorism has reverse
effects for black men; lighter-skinned males are viewed as less attractive, intelligent, and
desirable in many of the same ways that dark-skinned women are regarded. These ideas become
the focus of one group conversation, where participants are asked about the characteristics of
their ideal mates:

JeffriAnne: If you could choose the skin tone of your significant other, what color would
that be and why?

Luann: And I know it would be light, because I know for some reason, I love red men.
I’m not sure why, and I feel terrible about it. I know it’s, I know it’s like this is like a
stereotype that I have, but I love red men. I don’t know why. I do, and I’m not sure why.
And my dad was darker, my grandpa was darker, my uncle is dark. I just don’t know why.

Kelly: Mine would be brown, because […] there are a lot of light skinned people in my
family and I would never date a light skinned person. And I don’t know why. It’s just
weird, like I’m not attracted to like red people, I don’t know […] it’s just interesting that
I’ve never dated someone red, it’s always dark or brown skinned.

Patricia: I mean, I don’t think I would like guys darker than me, I don’t know why, it just
seems like, I don’t like a lot light men and honestly, […] they’re just not attractive to me.
They gotta be either brown or a darker complexion. But there’s a reason […] light skinned
men […] they are possessive, they are controlling, they don’t want you to, I’ve heard
they’re controlling and everything, and so the red men [I know] are like that, conceited and
[…] my personality is totally different from them, so I’m just attracted to brown skinned
men.

Colleen: Um, so I have [had] two boyfriends. And one was red […] one was darker and
you’re right about the red one, he was crazy, he was possessive. He would check [my]
phone and everything, he wasn’t that smart, […] he really had security issues and it was
[the] dark skinned [boyfriend] I had more fun with. I think I loved [him] more and he was
very clever though, he would keep secrets, he wouldn’t tell me stuff, like he was very, very
smart. […] but I don’t really have a preference, I like[d] both of them […] but the dark
skinned men, they’re just something so sexy about the skin tone.

Luann: […] OK, like we all said [about] red men, […] I think because they’re red they’re
not as black, so they are men constantly trying to prove how black they are, they have to
prove how much of a man they are, let alone a Black man […].

Stacey: I just think light skinned men […] are douche bags. Because they are closer to
White […] give me a fine black brother.
This particular discussion made me aware of the ever-complex and paradoxical nature of colorism. All of the women featured in this excerpt mention at other points how their life has been impacted—for some quite negatively—by colorism. In spite of that, they openly discriminate and stereotype light and dark-skinned men. This is an excellent example of how the normative and oppositional forces of colorism compete within the lives of young black women.

**A Note on the Media**

Although family, school, and relationships are cited by the women in this study as the most central agents in shaping their ideas and experiences with colorism, there was to some extent a smaller reference to the media. As a researcher my initial assumption was that respondents would talk much more about the media shaping their lives, as this particular generation has been more affected by various media and technological advances compared to previous generations of black Americans. Yet, as Rana Emerson (n.d.) explains, “although surrounded by distorted and disparaging images of themselves, many young Black women seem to find the ability to avoid internalizing and accepting these representations as reflections of their own lives and experiences” (p. 87). Although the data from the focus groups suggest that young black women are in fact impacted by colorism, part of what Emerson is hinting at is the idea that young black women are not heavily influenced by the media. This of course, is reflected within the data, as influences from family, school, and relationships outweigh media representations. To be sure, many focus group participants have a clear understanding that the most popular and celebrated images of black women in the media embody Eurocentric standards of beauty. For example, Denise’s remarks about the members of singing group *Destiny’s Child* reflect this awareness:

Kelly [is] not even looked at, in Destiny’s Child she doesn’t really get the focus, but Beyoncé gets all the focus because she’s […] more appealing to the White and the Black, the whole entire United States, all the cultures, cause she’s fair skinned and […] more appealing to both cultures, but Kelly […] a lot of people find Kelly to be really really attractive cause she’s dark skinned […] but she doesn’t get all the limelight.
Similar to Denise’s comments about megastar Beyoncé Knowles, other entertainers-- including Alicia Keys, Halle Berry, Tyra Banks, and the cast of popular television show Girlfriends—were discussed as the most beautiful black women in popular culture. Yet respondents were equally critical of these images, suggesting that light-skinned and biracial women have always been viewed as the standard. It is common knowledge for many of the women interviewed that the media embraces colorism through the proliferation of light-skinned women in movie, singing, and television roles.

For fewer women in this study, the media serves as the point of origin for their awareness of the normative ideals of colorism. Consider the experience of Meeko, a twenty-year old African-American woman who shares that “colorism basically goes unsaid” within her family. Although she does not share similar family experiences with other focus group members, Meeko does confess how the film School Daze impacted her understanding of colorism.

I still remember the night that I was watching HBO and School Daze came on. […] I was really young. And I remember the beauty shop scene where there’s just running around dancing singing jigga-boo and wanna-be and you know, I just remember that so vividly because I never knew that there was, you know, that type of classification. I mean, they’re calling the other girls, oh wanna be, “you want to have blue eyes, you want to have straight hair, and you think you’re all that, and you’re stuck up.” And then, the jigga-boos, they were just, “oh you’re ugly and your hair is knotty” and that was the first time I knew that colorism existed.

Released in 1988, the film School Daze was written and directed by filmmaker Spike Lee. The movie, which showcased the tensions among black women as it relates to skin color and hair, was pivotal because it was one of the first contemporary films explicitly addressing colorism among young black college students. “Straight and Nappy,” the specific scene Meeko alludes to, is a musical number that draws attention to the various color names—such as high-yellow and tarbaby—and color notions that are pervasive in black culture. The entire performance is comprised of the name-calling and hostility often accompanying the divide between light and
dark-skinned women. As such, the film can function as a point of origin (as in Meeko’s case), and undoubtedly a stabilizing agent reinforcing the politics of skin color among black women.

Similar to Meeko, Jessica—a nineteen-year-old participant who describes her complexion as medium—reveals that the media was also her introduction to colorism. For this young woman, however, hip-hop music videos, made her conscious of the dominant and prevailing standards of beauty. As bell hooks (1996) articulates, rap music is indeed responsible for promoting the value of light-skinned beauty over dark skin.

It is quite rare to see darker-skinned black females among the groups of women that are seen as sexually viable and desirable. In most music videos, whether rap or otherwise, […] it is the light-skinned, preferably long-haired, preferably straightened-haired female who becomes once again re-inscribed as the desirable object. This again is one of the tragic dimensions right now of race in America because more than ever before, color caste systems are being overtly affirmed (As quoted in bell hooks on Video: Cultural Criticism & Transformation)

It is the overt placement of light-skin and long hair as the beauty standard in videos that prompts focus-group member Jessica into a color consciousness. As she describes, “when I was younger I watched music videos and I’d always see the light skinned girls with long hair, so I used to want to be light skinned [too].” This young woman, who openly admits comparing her medium skin tone to the women she saw in the videos, illustrates how this has shaped her experience:

I was never really color conscious until I really started watching “106 and Park” in school. All the girls were light skinned in the video, and like I said, coming, and after a couple of videos I was starting to notice and really started bothering me because I soon I started looking for dark skinned women in videos. […] So I’m not really that color conscious any more ‘cuz I’m starting to love myself more and more everyday.

Jessica is able to be critical of the colorism in music videos because she as she notes, she began to love herself more. Self-love cannot be underestimated as a key strategy in battling the normative forces of colorism.
Summary

We learn in this chapter that families, school, relationships, and the media operate as the mediators of the experiences of colorism. Also illustrated in this chapter is that points of origin are typically very strong, setting the foundation for bias/conflict or alternative ideology. There are more stabilizing and transformative agents that reinforce the normative framework as opposed to stabilizing and transformative agents that re-direct language, scripts, and practices toward an oppositional view of colorism. More often than not, stabilizing and transformative agents further the struggle between the competing discourses of colorism. The following chapter engages a discussion about divergent perspectives of colorism.
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Figure 5-1. Points of origin, stabilizing agents, and transformative agents
CHAPTER 6
THE COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF EVERYDAY COLORISM

People arrive at an understanding of themselves and the world through narratives—purreved by schoolteachers, newscasters, ‘authorities,’ and all the other authors of our common sense. Counter-narratives are, in turn, the means by which groups contest that dominant reality and fretwork of assumptions that supports it. Sometimes delusions lie that way, sometimes not. --Henry Louis Gates

Speaking to the divergent perspectives of Black Americans that run counter to mainstream (white) society, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1995) defines *counter-narratives* in the above excerpt as stories or beliefs that challenge dominant ideology and narratives. Cultural theorist Martin McQuillan (2000) further explains that narratives and counter-narratives exist together, and that both are equally valid and legitimate as forms of the truth. The previous chapters show that for the young black women in this study, colorism is very much alive and well in their everyday lives. This is perhaps the dominant narrative overlapping throughout many of the stories shared in this project; albeit in various different ways, colorism impacts everyday experiences in many areas from family to relationships. Further, some young women understand colorism through a normative framework, embracing dominant ideals about skin tone inherent throughout mainstream black culture; others have developed an oppositional knowledge to these conventional ideals. It is interesting to note that despite the dominant narrative speaking to the sustained presence of colorism, three counter-narratives emerged throughout the focus groups: 1) the absence of colorism in the Northern half of the United States; 2) and increased presence of colorism in the Caribbean; and 3) the decline of the importance of skin tone in the current generation. This chapter is devoted to a discussion of these three ideas. Although these counter-narratives are not generalizeable to an entire generation of young black women, they are nonetheless useful in understanding the complex and oft contradictory nature of colorism.
“Up North, It’s Different”

The history of black America points to palpable differences in the lives of African-Americans residing in the North compared to those living in the South. From the escape of slaves prior to the emancipation of slavery to the Great Migration, many African-Americans sought better opportunity and overall quality of life outside of Southern states rife with segregation and racism. Of course, many black Americans fleeing to the Northern half of the United States still had to contend with prejudice and racism. Yet, the anti-racist ideology accompanying perceptions of life in the North becomes apparent in this project as many participants quickly made distinctions between the “North” and the “South.” As a researcher, I did not anticipate that region would come up during the focus group sessions. However it was first mentioned by participants involved in the pilot study. Since that initial discussion, differences about the North and the South re-surfaced during subsequent focus groups. The majority of the women in this study (81%) cite the state of Florida as their native state, and there is an overwhelming sense from respondents that the North is more progressive in terms of intra- and inter-racial relations. Alicia, a light-brown respondent who is African-American and Puerto Rican, grew up in various parts of the country due to her parents’ military background and considers the time she spent in the North better than her everyday experiences in the South. She states:

I grew up partly in the North and partly in the South and I do notice there is a difference in behavior [between…] black people […] in the South and in the North. You know, black women are loud […] but confident and very, you know, the matriarch, I see that predominantly in the South. In the North I kind of see […] both man and wife together.

Alicia’s comments point to a belief that there are more black female-headed households existing in the Southern parts of the United States, while there are more two-parent black families.

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1 A period of time in black American history, dating from 1910-1970, in which a significant number of African-Americans migrated from Southern states to Northern U.S. cities including Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and New York.
residing in the Northern half of the country. Agreeing with Alicia’s statement, Toni, a respondent from the same focus group makes a similar connection:

I’ve lived in the South and I’ve lived in the North and […] I always wondered why there was such a difference, […] the family was able to develop more along the lines of your typical Caucasian family where there [are] two parents in the home and they were able […] to have wealth and to pass that wealth onto generations which is why I think you find a lot more wealthy [black] people up North than you find in the South. […] I do agree that there are differences in the north and the south […] that directly relate to the differences in how women are perceived and how they act as well.

Because participants view the North as a place where black Americans are able to flourish, colorism then is viewed as insignificant there and accompanies more of the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of those blacks who are living in the South. One participant specifically ties this to its historical origins by explaining how it was that more fair-skinned Blacks moved to the North during the great migration, and those that stayed in the South were often, “not always,” those who had darker skin. Others argue that the spectrum of skin tones is wider in the North. As a result, people are more comfortable and thus more accepting of a variety of skin tones, even tones falling at the extremes. These perceptions go against the dominant ideology that colorism is an issue for blacks in all regions of the United States. The following accounts describe this counter-narrative further:

I was born […] in New York. I [spent] the majority of my younger years in New York, up North […]. And to tell you the truth, in the nine years that I was there, it was never a problem. Nobody’s ever come to me and said anything. I’ve never heard anything. And even my cousins who are up there [now], they don’t have a problem dating a lighter skinned, darker skinned [woman]. It’s just not a problem in the North. (Lela)

Lela’s viewpoint indicates that similar to an anti-racist ideology associated with Northern states, there exists a parallel discourse of anti-colorism. Chanel, a respondent who talks openly about the negative experiences she has as a dark-skinned woman, concurs that Southern black people are more colorstruck:
I know growing up here, down South, [...] men have just been so conscious about skin tone where they don’t even approach me you know. And by the time they approach it’s more like, oh, you know you kinda look good for a dark skinned girl. And I’m just looking at them saying, “you fool.” But when I go up North, it’s very different. I mean I’ll walk down the street and the men they’ll literally stop to look at me and I feel so much better up there.

The idea that dark skin is more exalted in the North is echoed by many women participating in the focus groups. Consider for instance the comments of Mary, a twenty-four-year old woman who completed her undergraduate degree in the city of Philadelphia. Contrasting this time to her current experience attending graduate school in the South, Mary recognizes that her life is distinctly dissimilar:

I’ve been up North also where “the blacker the better, the sweeter the juice” you know, she’s so beautiful, she’s so strong or the same thing, this man is so beautiful, he’s strong because he’s darker. The same thing with the [black] woman. I don’t know if it’s the whole Black Power thing, [but] you want to celebrate darkness. But [here] I think color is definitely an issue and you tend to point it out in different situations and sometimes [it is] the first thing that people look at.

Mary also mentions that as an undergraduate student she formed friendships with first-generation black immigrants from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Nigeria, and that these friends were less concerned about her dark-skin tone compared to African-Americans. In addition to the belief Mary has about the North being more accepting of black people of all skin tones, she holds the same views about black people who are not from America.

These statements are both eye-opening and ironic. The ways in which participants characterize the experiences of black Americans in the North is quite nostalgic, and a stark contrast to a number of contemporary events and books providing evidence that colorism is alive and well all over the United States, including the North. The recent controversy over a party exclusively for light-skinned black women occurred in Detroit, Michigan (for more details, please refer to Chapter 1). In 2000, Lawrence Otis Graham published *Our Kind of People*, a tell-all autobiography exposing the hidden life of America’s black elite. In this memoir Graham
outlines a number of colorist and elitist black organizations, thriving predominately in the North. Author Marita Golden published her autobiography, entitled *Don’t Play in the Sun: One Woman’s Journey Through the Color Complex* in 2004. In this text Golden shares a number of experiences dealing with colorism while growing up in Washington, D.C. Likewise, professor Audrey Elisa Kerr (2006) details the myths and folklore attached to colorism specifically in Washington, D.C. in the recent case study, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Washington, D.C.* As an African-American growing up in Cleveland, Ohio I can personally attest to the presence of colorism during my childhood and adolescence. Although I acquired an oppositional knowledge about colorism from my mother, I was, however, made aware of skin color differences through my school experiences, personal relationships, and from members of my extended family. I do admit that since moving to the Southern part of the United States I am reminded more often in my daily life about skin tone differences. I hear black people regularly make distinctions between “red” girls and “black” girls; the language of color appears more pervasive in this region. However, colorism does exist in the North—but why do the young women in this study maintain a different belief? Perhaps this counter-narrative points to the need for further research comparing the viewpoints of black women living in various regions in the United States.

**Caribbean Influences**

In addition to perceiving colorism as less of an issue in the North, many participants commented about other regional differences in their experiences with color. Certainly, issues of skin color are present throughout the African Diaspora, yet the second counter-narrative emerging from the analysis points to the idea that Jamaica and Haiti are societies that focus more on skin tone differences compared to the United States. There is an extensive amount of literature devoted to colorism within these two Caribbean societies (see for example Charles,
2003; Nettleford, 1973, or Trouillot, 1994); there has yet to be any scholarly attention on the comparative experiences of colorism between blacks living in the Caribbean, and blacks living in the United States. Furthermore, the entire body of scholarship on colorism in black American society ignores the increasing amount of Afro-Caribbeans and Africans settling in the U.S. In this project, the study sample included 24 respondents who identified as Afro-Caribbean (primarily as first or second-generation Haitians or Jamaicans); this represents forty-one percent of the study sample. Although I would not classify this project as a comparative study in relation to ethnicity, respondents who were of Caribbean descent talked freely and often about their ethnic culture. For example, there was a tendency for some participants to begin comments with phrases such as “speaking for the Jamaican community,” or “If you’re Haitian you know what I’m talking about.” However, these allusions to ethnicity do not signify a significant difference in how these young women experience colorism compared to their African-American counterparts.

What these comments do point to however is the notion that colorism is more prominent in the nations of Jamaica and Haiti. In order to illustrate this counter-narrative, I will discuss how participants construct colorism in each country.

**Colorism in Haiti**

The republic of Haiti is a majority-black society located in the Caribbean, gaining independence from French colonization in 1804. As John Lobb (1940) describes, in spite of attaining freedom so long ago, Haiti has maintained an anti-black ideology. He writes: “The prestige of lightness of skin color, along with other white physical characteristics, was so deeply impressed upon Haitian society in pre-revolutionary days, that it has unfortunately survived […] and carries great weight today” (p.26). Although Lobb articulates the presence of colorism in Haiti over 60 years ago, the young women in this study confirm the survival of this scholar’s
report. There were 11 Haitian respondents participating in the focus groups, making up 19% of the total study population. In relating their experiences of colorism to their Haitian ancestry, the majority of these women made two specific connections: bleaching and class differences. More than any other group of respondents, young women of Haitian descent talk more about using bleaching products themselves, or knowing family members who bleach their skin on a regular basis. Recall from Chapter 5 the narratives of Stacy, Vivica, and Chanel, young women who link their ritualistic bleaching habits to a specific part of their Haitian culture. A similar story is shared by Amy, an eighteen-year-old Haitian woman who notes that her mother regularly encourages her to bleach her skin:

I know that my mom is always trying to get me to use products to lighten my skin color because my mother is pretty light and she wants me to be more like that [...] she sees the other people look at being darker as a bad thing, so she doesn’t really me to go through that stereotype.

Likewise, Stacey mentions that the pressure she received from her mother to bleach her skin was due to her dark complexion, but also to the relationship between class and color often highlighted within Haitian culture. This young woman even notes that extended family members were shocked to find out that she was attending a respected four-year university, as many reacted with comments such as, “oh she’s Black […]she’s going to have to go to a community college.” As Stacey explains about Haitian culture, “these things are associated with being dark-skinned.”

Other respondents make parallel connections about their Haitian ancestry:

You kind of know that in Haiti there is a class division and the lighter you are, the better you are Haiti and the mass of the people in Haiti are poor whatever and they’re dark. [...] you already understand it’s a systematic thing that’s been going on since you know, you great gran… I mean, it’s been going on […] the elite are light, they don’t work with their hands, they know how to read. The Black work with the soil whatever, they work with agriculture and they don’t know how to read. (Vivica)
I think I mentioned this before, but in Haiti there’s a class issue and it’s associated with the color of your skin. And in my family, a lot of them that are [still] in Haiti, they’re really light skinned and they have servants and things like that. And they’re considered upper class in Haiti. […] I don’t really know too much about slavery here,[…] but [in Haiti] people were treated differently because of their darker skin. (Karina)

Both of these statements infer that skin tone and class are two interconnected and immutable categories within Haitian society. While focus group member Charlie does not offer an experience that parallel the stories of Karina and Vivica, she does however discuss her perception that Haitians are more influenced by skin color. She relates to her focus group the following story about her light-skinned cousin, whom she noted to receive more attention:

Lighter skinned people get treated really differently in Haiti. Because whenever my cousin goes back, she says people […] treat her really differently […] because she’s lighter. I guess being light is valued there a lot like it is here. Light-skinned people are special and prettier.

While we cannot draw conclusions that apply to the entire Haitian culture, it is evident from the young Haitian women in this study that bleaching and class stratification are believed to be common features of their culture, supporting the notion that colorism is more prevalent in that nation.

**Colorism in Jamaica**

Similar to Haiti, Jamaica is a predominately black nation that was once dominated by (English) colonial rule. Also present within this Caribbean society is the elevation of light skin; in fact, Christopher Charles (2003) notes a widespread bleaching phenomenon among many Jamaican girls and young women. While there was far less mention of bleaching among the 13 Jamaican respondents in this study, the young women do believe that colorism is more blatant on the island compared to the United States. They articulate this difference in the areas of class and beauty. Similar to the racial structure in Haiti, skin color structures class status and overall
opportunity. In writing about her research on colorism in Jamaica, author Obiagele Lake (2003) observes,

my field work in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean […] indicates that the positive value placed on “whiteness” persists. If one is not actually white, then one’s education, speech patterns, place of residence, and close associates combine to codify one’s proximity to the white ideal (p.76).

This is the same pattern noted by the women interviewed. Many of the Jamaican respondents comment on spending time both in the U.S. and in Jamaica, and thus are able to pinpoint specific features of Jamaican culture. The following comments demonstrate these noteworthy differences:

I think [colorism] almost depends in a way where you are. Because if you’re in Jamaica and you’re dark skinned, it’s not good. Because you will be looked over for jobs. You won’t be considered in the upper-classes of society. You are basically looked down upon if you’re dark skinned. And the funny thing is, you can be the smartest person in your class and a light skinned kid could be the dumbest person, […] if you are compared to them, they might just win because of their light skin. (Callea)

I don’t know if it’s a Jamaican thing, but most people teach their young kids that when you’re lighter, you get more opportunities, and you get to do more things than when you’re darker. Even when we used to go to the beach in Jamaica, we weren’t allowed to stay out [in the sun] too long [we were told] “you need to stay out of the sun,” things like that. It’s going to affect how pretty I am. (Natasha)

Outside of being more aware of skin color differences in Jamaica, some participants also talk about differential treatment in Jamaica compared to the States. Indeed, this is the case for Callea, a young woman who identifies her skin tone as dark. She explains that because she has extended family still living in Jamaica, she spends a considerable amount of time there during the summers. This young woman also states that because there is a strong Jamaican community at her university, she often runs into her college-mates while visiting the island. Yet, as Callea tells the members of her focus group, skin color becomes much more of an issue once she gets to Jamaica:
But the fact is that when I was in Jamaica when I use to go home and visit, like [my friends from the States] wouldn’t even spit on me, they wouldn’t talk to me, nobody called me, nobody said anything. When I came back up to school, [my friends] would call [and ask], “Do you want to go out?” Because at school […] you want to be with your kind, you don’t want to stand out, but when you’re in Jamaica and they’re amongst their own, to hell with her, whatever. She’s not you know, Jamaican anymore.

As Callea recounts in this story, while in the United States skin color takes a back seat to ethnicity; identifying with other Jamaicans is much more important for those who wish to cling to their nationality rather than identifying with African-Americans. However, going back to the island means reverting back to the color and class hierarchy that is so commonplace there.

Although it has been documented throughout this project that the majority of women (regardless of their ethnic identity) perceive light-skin and European features as the standard of beauty, Jamaican respondents share a strong sense that these standards are much higher in Jamaica. When discussing the issue of beauty, Jasmine, a second-generation Jamaican amuses that, “there’s never any dark skinned flight attendants [in Jamaica]. They are always light skin with the long hair, the Jamaican accent and some pretty eyes.” On a more serious note Monica states, “there’s such a struggle to become like the red skinned girls, the light skinned uptown girls in Jamaica, that’s the kind of status that you want to aspire to.” Other participants recognize this pattern in Jamaica, and are quite critical of the way things are in Jamaican society. One such critique is given by Callea, who follows up her story about being snubbed by lighter-skinned Jamaicans with an interesting analysis of beauty pageants:

[My friend] and I were talking about it the other day, about Miss Jamaica, how every single year, we send a light skinned girl to the competition and 90 percent of the country is dark, is Black. We sent a White Jewish girl a couple years ago and I don’t think we’ve sent a dark skinned girl since 1978, and it’s really sad because they say, “out of many one people” but less than 10 percent is Lebanese or Indian […] the majority of us, we’re dark skinned. […] and it’s not like Jamaica is lacking in beautiful dark skinned women. You can walk any road in Kingston, in the country, Montego Bay, Ocho Rios or wherever and find dark skinned women. Short hair, long hair, […] but the thing is we don’t want to send them to represent our country because […] we can’t get past that slave mentality. 1838, we abolished slavery, and we can’t get over that, we can’t over the thought that White
people or mixed people are better than us, the house slaves are better that than the slaves out in the field.

From Callea’s comments about beauty contests, it appears that similar to black American society, many Jamaicans are still stuck in the “slave mentality.” Overall, the majority of Jamaican and Haitian respondents construct colorism as a more complex and exaggerated phenomenon in the Caribbean compared to the U.S. Their beliefs of course are connected to their social locations as first and second-generation Afro-Caribbeans. What is ironic though is that these same women simultaneously report significant (and at times negative) experiences of colorism here. Despite these experiences of colorism, the Caribbean nations of Haiti and Jamaica are believed to have a larger color complex. Undoubtedly, more research is needed to further illuminate this debate.

“Not This Generation”

Talking to the young women in this study uncover that colorism is indeed part of their everyday lives, yet it is important to note that this current generation views their experiences as radically different from previous generations of black Americans. The second counter-narrative surfacing in this project—that this cohort of black women is not as color conscious as earlier black women—develops through three factors participants cite as reasons for the overall decline in colorism.

The first idea related to this counter-narrative is that colorism is gradually weakening in presence. This belief supports predictions made by scholars researching the issue of colorism shortly after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Several empirical studies (see for instance, Anderson & Cromwell, 1971; Holtzman, 1973; Jones, 1973) examine the effect of the “Black Is Beautiful” ideology upon the generation coming of age during this era. These scholars
observe a definite shift in the attitudes surrounding skin color, and point to future generations of
black Americans who will potentially be unscathed by colorism. As Ransford (1970) suggests,

Indeed, one meaning of “black is beautiful” is that color no longer makes a difference. In
fact, for some segments of the black community (i.e. young college students), the
traditional evaluations appear to be reversed—dark skin is now admired and light skin is
not. A provocative question is whether the black pride movement has been powerful
enough to override completely the traditional stigma of dark color. One can speculate that
dark color will not lose its negative evaluation until a new generation of black children has
been exposed to “black is beautiful” values and has replaced the current generation in
power and status.

As postulated, these forecasts are supported by some of the respondents, typically toward the end
of focus group sessions when I ask how participants view skin tone bias in relation to their
parents’ or grandparents’ generation. Twenty-one year-old Fiona observes,

Definitely, definitely it’s different [...] it’s pretty much 100 percent that if I talk to
somebody in my mother’s generation about this issue, I’m going to hear the very same
thing [...] that light is right, and dark is not. But I feel like in this generation [...] it’s a lot
more common to hear opinions like the ones we’re hearing today [...] you understand that
it’s present in our society, but we don’t agree with it and we’re not going to really go along
with it. It’s fading out, I think.

Fiona’s comments are particularly interesting. At several points during the focus group, Fiona
talks about areas in her life where colorism is insignificant, yet also offers clues to the contrary.
Fiona begins the focus group by indicating that because she falls within the middle of the
spectrum, she has “escaped” the negativity attached to being too light or too dark. However,
when the subject of family comes up, she notes,

I guess my family has had a huge impact on what I think about color. And you know my
mom uses bleach cream, I’ve used it at one point in the past, and you know you’ll just hear
them make certain comments. My brother, he’s pretty light-skinned, but his father’s very
dark, so my mom [would say] “oh you know thank God he didn’t come out like his father,”
things like that.

From this remark there is evidence that runs counter to Fiona’s overall perception that colorism
is “fading out.” Yet, her previous comments about her own experiences speak to the contrary.
Similar to Fiona, Maxine—a participant from a different focus group—understands colorism to be an issue plaguing previous generations, but not hers. On the question of where the current generation of black Americans stands, Maxine answers, “My grandmother […] was very prejudice. My mother isn’t and I turned out not to be.” Maxine further explains that her lack of colorist beliefs stems from how and where she grew up:

It depends on how you raise your children and where you raise your children. That’s exactly where the division came from where in the North you don’t really see that, in the South you do.

Present within this young woman’s narratives are both counter-beliefs that she is not affected by colorism because of her age, and because of her upbringing. A particularly quiet participant, Maxine openly admits to having limited knowledge on colorism and asked for clarification from other focus group members when the brown paper bag test was brought up in conversation. Rather than developing a normative or oppositional knowledge about colorism, Maxine’s understanding of skin tone bias represents a counter-narrative that speaks to the absence of colorism in her everyday life.

The second reason given for the decline in colorism is that the current generation is more color conscious and aware compared to their older counterparts. This idea is reinforced by several participants who note that younger black Americans are more critical of colorism, and are therefore more willing to discuss and confront the issue:

[…] the new generation now is definitely more open to everyone. However, we all have that underlying thing in the back of our heads, […] I just think that everyone’s idea is maybe the same, however it’s just more spoken in our generation. (Amy)

I also believe [colorism is] changing, simply because of discussions like this. They didn’t talk about colorism in my mom’s generation and she didn’t talk about this and they didn’t gather to say, “you know that this is an issue,” because to them it wasn’t an issue, it just made sense, that’s just how it was. If you were lighter then you were good, if you were darker, you’re bad. […] So because of discussions like this and […] because you’re able to talk about it more now, I guess it’s better. (Michelle)
These statements illustrate that younger generations have learned to openly challenge colorism, indicating a belief that there has been a large-scale shift to an oppositional color consciousness.

During one particular session, Toni—a twenty-two year old participant—describes in great detail exactly how she thinks the current generation compares to older African-Americans. Telling the story of how colorism devolved within her own family, Toni explains how history has shaped this progression:

[My parents] were in college in the late 60’s, early 70’s and it was great to be Black. It was great to have an afro and it was great to you know wear dashikis and kari beads, and things like that. And both of my parents are […] my dad is darker than I am, my mom is probably about my complexion and so I think that because of the times, I think a lot of perceptions are shaped by the times, and during that time, it was acceptable, it was beautiful, it was great, it was a resurgence of appreciation of Africa and African culture. […] during my grandparents’ era, I know that my grandmother is very […] light, her mother was mixed, […] my grandfather was very dark. And it was a whole ordeal that they were getting married. Her parents did not want her to marry him, under any circumstances, [because he] was so dark. And her parents said to her, “What about your children? What are your children going to do? […] they’re going to be dark […] they’re going to have more obstacles.”

From Toni’s narrative, it is apparent that her grandmother’s decision to marry across color lines, combined with the widespread celebration of blackness during her parent’s generation, resulted in a better experience for her own generation. As she notes,

when my grandparents were getting married it was Jim Crow South you know, it was a very different time than it is now and so I definitely think that our generation has more awareness, more ways to gain awareness, more venues for talking about the issue, like this one.

The mere fact that this research project is being conducted is a signal for Toni that the nature of colorism has improved since her grandmother’s generation. Nevertheless this idea remains a counter-narrative in that it contradicts the majority of the other stories Toni shares during her group session. The following statement is illustrative of this point:

I definitely think that [colorism] exists, I think that it is perpetuated on a day to day basis by the media and, in our communities and in businesses. People that you see that are very wealthy and successful - majority of the time they are light, unless they’re maybe a
basketball player or something […] the only way to I guess deal with the issue is for people to first realize that the issue exists and no one wants to believe [it], no one wants to think that we’re still back in that house slave field slave kind of mentality.

Toni’s beliefs, along with the viewpoints expressed by many other women in this study, undeniably show that colorism is at times inconsistent and paradoxical in the everyday lives of these women. While in one breath respondents are confident that today’s young women have transcended colorism, another moment quickly reflects that there in fact has been no change. Although these young women are not comparing their experiences with older black women, it was quite apparent that the idea of colorism being different today than it was in previous decades is a counter-narrative that is symptomatic of the denial that characterizes the contemporary nature of colorism.

The last factor associated with this counter-narrative deals with the perception that colorism is better now because African-Americans today are no longer deliberate and obvious in their intentions; colorism is much more muted in contemporary society. Consider the parallel statements of Vivica and Chanel, young women who illustrate in a previous section of this chapter the presence of colorism in Haiti. They also share a belief that colorism operates on a more subtle basis for their generation:

[…] at least we’re not doing the brown bag test any longer and we have moved from that. You know, […] we might be doing it might [but] it’s not as prominent. […] I will say that for my generation (Vivica)

[…] in terms of generational differences, […] I would say [that] people just aren’t as blatant as they used to be and say “you are ugly because… I think you are ugly because you’re dark skinned.” You know, they do it in different ways (Chanel).

This commonly-held idea appeared across focus group sessions. In comparing old and new generations of black Americans, the majority of women in this project agree that colorism has reached a point of progression. Of course, what makes this idea a counter-narrative is that
similar to the other beliefs expressed in this chapter, they prove to be quite contradictory to the majority of the narratives shared.

**Summary**

In this chapter we see respondents talk about colorism as a phenomenon that is worse in the South, stronger in the Caribbean, and improved compared to earlier generations. However, their larger narratives, stories, and experiences show that colorism is a vital force in their daily lives. In the previous chapters we learn that the ideas offered by the young women interviewed are shockingly similar to the ways in which black Americans talked about colorism before the Civil Rights Movement. Yet simultaneously these counter-narratives represent ideas that are distinctly different from previous points in history. To be sure, these young women’s experiences speaking for and against colorism are equally legitimate and valid. Perhaps this underscores that this generation of young black women battle more with the two competing ideologies of colorism. In this day and age that is marked with a “color-blind” racist ideology—a discourse of attitudes that minimize and downplay discrimination and racism—colorism, too has become minimized and downplayed. The matter of skin tone bias and hierarchy then becomes abstracted as something that fluctuates depending upon where you live and how old you are. This leads to the greater inquiry of this research: Has colorism improved or degraded? Do modern-day forms of colorism look like the colorism of yesterday? The concluding chapter attempts to shed light on this discussion.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION: IF THE PRESENT LOOKS LIKE THE PAST, WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

I would say that the problem of the twenty-first century will still be the problem of the color line, not only “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea,” but the relations between the darker and the lighter people of the same races, and of the women who represent both dark and light within each race. --Alice Walker

In Alice Walker’s 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, she devotes a chapter to the topic of colorism that is so aptly titled, “If the Present Looks like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” In many ways, Walker (1983) reminds us of the survival of the color hierarchy within black society, and challenges black women to recognize the limitations of a (future) black sisterhood that continually pits the “light-and white-skinned black women” against the “black black women” (p. 311). The focus groups narratives of the 58 women participating in this study provide interesting and enlightening answers to the inquiry Alice Walker posed over twenty-five years ago. Although the findings from this research project are not generalizeable to an entire generation of young black women, they are nonetheless quite useful in assessing where young black women today stand on the issue of colorism.

**Does the Present Look Like the Past?**

This dissertation began with a story about a three-month old baby girl, and how the “turning” of her skin tone from light to dark created confusion and anxiety for the infant’s mother and close friend. Attached to their concern was the fear that this baby girl’s dark skin color would negatively impact her future, that perhaps her life would be more challenging compared to other black girls with lighter skin. What we learn from this incident is that colorism remains a legitimate force in the lives of many black women, even in the twenty-first century. Part of what prompted this research journey was my own experience growing up. Fortunate enough to be raised by a mother who rarely mentioned skin tone differences (other than to say
that it was wrong), I grew up with a less common knowledge of colorism, learning not to think better or worse of myself because of my skin color. It was only until I entered college that I really began to see colorism at work on a regular basis. From the competition for men to the membership in exclusive organizations, skin color appeared to be an important factor, even at the predominately white college that I attended. Since that time I have encountered many young women who have been constrained by the silent, yet commanding nature of colorism.

Based upon my personal and academic experience, I embarked upon this dissertation project to explore how young black women between the ages of 18 and 25 are affected by their skin complexion, examining how colorism manifests itself in the age after the Civil Rights Movement, and during this period of a “color-blind” society. Central to this study is an exploration of how young black women talk about colorism reflects a shift in color consciousness, or if there has been no change compared to previous research and documented accounts of skin-tone bias within African-American culture. Developing a theoretical framework of colorism grounded within the experiences of young black women, with an ultimate goal for empowerment and social change, was also of chief concern to this project.

Predictions from scholars studying colorism in the 1960s and 1970s show an overwhelming optimism about future generations of black Americans (Drake and Cayton, 1962; Goering, 1972; Jones, 1973). They forecast a general shift in attitudes about skin color—that people born after this time will no longer embrace the anti-black attitudes and ideals of generations past. Researchers envisioned that for future cohorts of African-Americans, skin color will lessen in importance and no longer function to structure experience and opportunity. What we learn from these narratives is that in spite of these predictions, in the face of the twenty-first century, beyond race, class, and gender—color plays an integral role in shaping the life
experiences of these young women who have barely reached adulthood. This finding may not appear that remarkable considering the growing body of literature examining the endurance of colorism in the post-Civil Rights era. Yet, what is noteworthy is how this form of internalized racism impacts the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of young black women in much of the same way that studies illustrated colorism before the Civil Rights movement. This is rather significant considering the large-scale disappearance of blatant colorist practices such as the brown paper bag test and the apparent integration of black organizations and institutions that once excluded members based upon their phenotypic features.

Based upon the focus groups, young black women articulate their everyday experiences of colorism through language, internal scripts, and external practices. Although respondents talk mainly about their daily interactions, there is a broader, macro-level connection to these occurrences as these individual experiences are oftentimes embedded, created and reproduced via such institutions as the family, school, and the media. Given this, I am suggesting the term *everyday colorism* to capture how these women understand and acquire knowledge about colorism in their lives. In employing this framework, I borrow from Philomena Essed’s idea of everyday racism. Similar to Essed, I highlight the everyday as way to discuss the interconnected nature of micro and macro-level processes. Everyday colorism then is a starting point for a theoretical foundation of the daily occurrences of colorism operating through structural and interpersonal domains of power.

Recall from Chapter 3 that everyday colorism is comprised of three elements. The first element, language refers to the color names that participants hear and/or use on a regular basis relating to the various categories of skin tones. Pointing to a somewhat seamless transmission of color terms across generations, the analysis in Chapter 4 reveals that there is an extensive
vocabulary of color present in the lives of these women. In keeping with the traditional language of light skin, the majority of respondents recognize that the labels used to refer to light skin are rather positive, while the majority of the terms for dark skin are loaded with negative and derogatory connotations. There are fewer names for medium skin tones, and these terms appear to be rather neutral. The persistence of such terms as yellow, caramel, and tar baby indicates a survival of a color terminology originating in the nineteenth century.

In addition, we learn that the language of skin color influences the second component of everyday colorism, internal scripts. Similar to Bordieu’s (1983) concept of habitus, or even Bonilla-Silva’s interpretation of white habitus, the internalized scripts constitute the socially constructed ideas and expectations of various skin tones. Based upon the common color names, young women develop a “mental sky” about what it means to be light, dark, or brown-skin, regardless of their own skin tone. While the participants in this study represent a variety of skin tones and experiences, they do share a somewhat collective color habitus about certain skin tones. Many of the stories shared suggest that the predominant stereotypes and perceptions about light and dark skin (i.e. all light skinned-girls are pretty, all dark-skinned girls are ghetto) signify an inheritance of similar attitudes documented in earlier generations of black Americans. A cursory glance at classic studies such as Black Metropolis and Black Bourgeoisie show parallel internalized scripts held by black Americans prior to the “Black Is Beautiful” movement. What is new, however, is the perceived sanctuary of brown skin. Young women in this study articulate the experiences of being brown-skinned distinctly different from the experiences of women who are light and dark-skinned. Previous literature suggests that future cohorts of African-Americans would embrace brown skin over light and dark complexions. Although this is not proven within
the analysis, it does appear that the current generation talks differently (and in a neutral manner) about medium skin tones.

The findings from Chapter 4 also highlight how the internalization of color scripts influences behavior. The final component of everyday colorism—external practices—appears in several forms: ritualistic, compensatory, and discriminatory practices. Young women learn to execute certain rules of colorism, from avoiding the sun to bleaching their skin. At times respondents note engaging in certain practices (such a getting a hair weave or dating outside the race) in order to level the playing field in the color hierarchy. Further, respondents more commonly note that their inner-viewpoints about skin color limits and prevents their interaction with other black women. Some mention avoiding friendships with certain women based on ideas that they will either not relate to women with differing skin tones or that friendships across color lines could potentially bring them down. Oftentimes the practices of everyday colorism are carried out with very little thought, while other actions and quite deliberate and planned.

In addition to the three elements of everyday colorism, we also gain knowledge about the distinctive features of colorism. Although it can be argued that these characteristics have typified the nature of colorism throughout history, based on how these young women talk about their experiences, I am suggesting the following key features describing the contemporary nature of colorism.

First, it is important to underscore that colorism is a byproduct of racism. As stated earlier, colorism is a form of internalized racism, and as such colorism mirrors many of the same qualities of racism. The analysis shows the reification of racism through various aspects of the language, internal scripts, and external practices of colorism. To that end, it remains crucial to situate colorism within the larger context and discussion of racism.
Second, it is imperative to note that although colorism is a derivative of racism, colorism exists as its own structure operating at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. The women in this study understand and experience colorism apart from racism. Yet colorism functions as a structure that interacts and co-exists with the larger structures of race, gender and class; colorism therefore must be understood within the context of these other societal structures.

Within the structure of everyday colorism there exist two competing ideologies: normative and oppositional. This aspect represents the third feature of contemporary colorism. The normative ideology characterizes the dominant discourse of colorism that privileges light skin over dark skin\(^1\). Alternatively, the oppositional discourse of colorism represents an ideology of skin color that equalizes all the various shades and hues of blackness. Many of the women interviewed note shifting back and forth between both ideologies, causing on numerous occasions an inner-conflict and struggle. A recurring point of contention lies in the reality that while many participants have acquired the knowledge to challenge colorism, they still find themselves in positions of prejudice and discrimination. As illustrated in Chapter 5, points of origin, stabilizing agents, and transformative agents function to mediate movement between the normative and oppositional forms of colorism. We also see this displayed through the counter-narratives of colorism highlighted in Chapter 6.

Fourth, colorism operates as a three-tiered structure, rather than a binary one. The vast majority of scholarly research (past and present) has situated colorism within an opposing, two-fold hierarchy: light skin versus dark skin, “good” hair versus “bad” hair, etc. Correspondingly, our knowledge of colorism has been informed by those women who fall into either one of these categories; oftentimes light and brown-skin gets conflated into one category (light). Yet, what

\(^1\) Although the majority of this discussion has been devoted to skin tone, it is important to highlight that colorism also extends to hair texture and facial features.
we discover from this project is that placing colorism within a binary frame leaves out the unique experiences of women who are neither light nor dark. The analysis shows three groups of women: those who are red, brown, and black. As we learn in Chapter 4, while the majority of language and internal scripts relate to light and dark skin, there is a separate experience offered by women who fall in the middle of the color spectrum.

The next feature of colorism is concerned with the classification of the structure as a one-dimensional hierarchy. The framing of colorism as a hierarchy assumes that the interactions and experiences of colorism are one directional. In clarification, oftentimes the literature on colorism suggests that although light-skinned women occupy the highest rung of the color ladder, they are simultaneously victimized for their position (see for example, Hunter, 2005 or Zook, 1990). Dark-skinned women are always noted as the victimizers, partly because of their lower place in the color hierarchy. The results of this research points to a different pattern of colorism where victimization occurs at all levels (we even see brown-skinned women talk of victimization, too). Although the young women concur that the ability to “move” within the hierarchy is fixed, the experiences however, of light and dark-skinned women are quite similar. The findings illustrate that light and dark-skinned women find themselves in the position of proving, disproving, legitimizing and de-legitimizing the socially constructed perceptions of who and what they should (or should not) be because of their skin tone. This points to variable relations of control within the system of colorism. At the structural level the language and scripts of colorism are institutionalized, and all women become casualties of bias and discrimination. However, we also learn from this study that women have dual roles of victims and victimizers. There are

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2 It is important to underscore that in the larger racial and gender structure, black women—regardless of skin tone—have traditionally occupied the bottom rungs of social status and position. I understand this is different in relation to the smaller structure of colorism, and am careful not to point out or assume that black women possess power and control in these larger forces of domination.
many narratives that show women of various skin tones perpetuating and reinforcing colorism at the individual level. As bell hooks (1989) points out, “women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetuators as well as victims—that we dominate, that we are dominated” (p.20). To that end, colorism is a multi-directional (and perhaps, multi-positional) hierarchy that exhibits unsteady relations of domination.

Finally, the analysis shows that colorism is a strong, yet covert phenomenon. Throughout the process of conducting the focus groups, it was surprising to learn that many young women do not even recognize the term colorism or initially believe that this issue shapes their daily experience. But as the group discussions progressed, participants realized just how much they are in fact impacted by the various forces of colorism. Overall, the young women in this study note that colorism—like racism—is much better in their generation because overt expressions of skin tone bias are now just a piece of black history. The findings suggest that “old-school” colorism has been replaced with more quiet manifestations appearing through casual name-calling, subtle comments, carefully-hidden stereotypes, and subconscious avoidance and exclusion. These same findings reveal that colorism continues to produce pain, bias, discrimination and disappointment. So, the present indeed looks like the past.

**What Does the Future Look Like?**

On July 9, 2007, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held a public burial in Detroit, Michigan for the controversial and politically-charged term “nigger.” A formal and public funeral for the N-word was deemed necessary as a first step in challenging the racism, hatred, and internalized oppression accompanying the usage of the term. As Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick stated on the day of the ceremony, “Today we're not just burying the N-word, we're taking it out of our spirit. We gather burying all the things that go with the N-word" (Retrieved April 22, 2007 from www.washingtonpost.com). According to an
article written for the Washington Post, there was a similar funeral held in 1944 to symbolize the death of Jim Crow segregation and discrimination. To be sure, this recent event marks a sign of the times; although there are many black and non-black people alike who will not doubt continue to use the n-word in their day-to-day lives, there are similarly many people who will openly challenge and resist the use of such language. To a certain extent, it appears that a growing population of everyday citizens is beginning to develop a level of critical consciousness and awareness that interrogates the traditionally-held structures of inequality and injustice in society.

In many ways, colorism mirrors some of the same qualities as the n-word. Skin-tone bias and discrimination is also rooted in racism and colonialist ideology. Despite having a much broader language base, like the n-word, colorism has survived in the black community for generations, being internalized in the mind and externalized through practice. Given this, what does the future of colorism look like? According to the young women interviewed, does colorism share the same fate as the n-word?

As the women in this study candidly reveal, there is unfortunately no end in sight. When asked about whether there will ever be an end to colorism, the majority of women were overwhelmingly pessimistic about the future. As one woman pointed out, “As long as racism is around, I think colorism will be around.” Participants provide concrete reasons for the continuing significance of colorism. One such explanation is provided by Monica, who considers colorism an inherent part of human nature:

I don’t think [colorism is] something that can be fixed because as far as human beings are concerned, we always look at a way to differentiate ourselves. Whether it [is…] where we live or neighborhoods or the schools we go to […] we find a way to separate ourselves and I don’t see why skin tone is going to be something different. I’m always going to look like at somebody and […] form opinions […] based on their skin tone. […] I think that’s something that can’t be fixed, […] I don’t think that’s something that people are going to easily let go.
For this young woman, a core feature of society includes division and separation. A similar reason is given by Yolanda, a nineteen-year old respondent who adopts a functionalist perspective of society:

> Even if [colorism] stops being an issue, there will be another issue to separate us. Because in the wonderful world of America and everywhere across the world, we base ourselves on capitalism, and you have to have somebody on top and someone on the bottom. So that means you have to put somebody on the bottom, that’s how it works.

Yolanda blames the political and economic structures present within our society for the survival of colorism. This perspective was shared among many focus group participants.

There were several women interviewed who cited the common presence of colorism for all minority groups as another reason for maintaining a presence in the future. As Tessa explains,

> I’m really not optimistic on colorism not being an issue. [...] it’s just so engrained in not just our society, but [...] trans-nationally [...] Latinos, Asians, Indians, Blacks, it’s everywhere. Because there’s always going to be a way to segregate people and I think the easiest way to do that is color. It’s just the easiest way to hurt people. And I just don’t think it will stop being an issue. There might be a day when dark skinned people are on top and light skinned people are on bottom, but I don’t see that happening.

This young woman is alluding to the notion that skin color may one day hold a more important social value compared to race. She of course points to the various ranges of minority groups who internalize the privilege of light skin and the stigma of dark skin. More importantly, Tessa’s argument about the continued (and perhaps, more significant) existence of skin color reflects Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s framework for the “Latin Americanization” of the United States. A paradigm based on this scholar’s projection of race in the future, Bonilla-Silva (2004) asserts that racial classification in the United States will move from a binary system to a three-tiered one: inclusive of whites, honorary whites, and collective blacks. What is interesting to note in Bonilla-Silva’s model is that classification into one of these three groups will not be based on race, but rather skin tone. The group at the bottom includes dark-skinned Asian-Americans, Latinos, Blacks, and Native-Americans. Those minority group members with lighter skin tones
are predicted to fill the middle category of honorary whites. Bonilla-Silva’s model, in conjunction with the voices of the women interviewed, point out that colorism will endure and could ultimately edge out the prevalence of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Keith & Herring, 1991).

To that end, holding a funeral for colorism would mean doing away with the structure of color, in addition to eradicating the interconnected structures of race, class, and gender. Further, abolishing colorism is particularly challenging given that many of the women in this study have never heard, used, or have a firm grasp of the term’s meaning. The N-word—and its meaning—are both infamous and undeniable in American culture. What we see from the analysis is that colorism is at times unwitting and elusive. And this makes it much more difficult to bury.

Recommendations for Change: Towards A Collective Oppositional Knowledge

The major finding of this study reveals that colorism is a mainstay in the lives of young black women; the broader finding suggests that despite the exterior hegemonic structures that work to cripple black women as a whole, the divisions between black women are just as great. As Barbara Smith (1983) states, “the gulfs between us hurt and they are deeply rooted in the facts of difference. Class and color differences between black women have divided us since slavery. We have yet to explore how riddled we are by this pain” (xlvii). Contemporary scholars are continually looking for ways to bridge the gaps that prevent black women from attaining a universal sisterhood in the twenty-first century. Sheila Radford-Hill (2000) writes about the crisis of black womanhood, blaming divisions from within (particularly class) and a lack of activism for this crisis. Similarly, sociologist Katrina Bell McDonald (2007) highlights the contemporary state of black women through black sisterhood and step-sisterhood. Through her in-depth conversations with black women, she uncovers how differences in social class
impact the potential for unity and detachment among an ever-increasing diverse population of black women. While a large emphasis (and rightly so) has been placed on class divisions, it remains important to address how color differences between black women can be effectively challenged and transformed. Failing to challenge this particular gap also threatens the strength and potential of a universal black sisterhood in the twenty-first century.

In searching for concrete solutions, I suggest that we look to the core features of black feminist theory. As earlier noted, standing at the foundation of this theoretical framework is knowledge, empowerment, and reclamation. More importantly, black feminist theory looks to the lives and experiences of everyday women for the production of such knowledge and empowerment. Many women in this study admit struggling between the normative and oppositional forms of colorism. I argue that in order to conquer this struggle, a collective oppositional knowledge of colorism should be created. The normative language, scripts, and practices that function to divide black women need to be permanently replaced with language, scripts, and practices that function to unite. The young women participating in this study proved to be wealth of knowledge about the everyday, lived experiences of colorism. Included in this knowledge are concrete strategies for change and empowerment. Their suggestions, combined with my own recommendations for change, have guided the following informal and formal methods for disempowering the dominant discourse of colorism.

First, it remains important to debunk and de-institutionalize the myths about light skin, dark skin, and brown skin. Although this may appear to be a step that individuals alone are unable to accomplish, feminist scholars suggest that individuals hold the key to changing institutions. This achieved through personal politicization and activism. Patricia Hill Collins (2006) notes the utility of the “personal is political” platform particularly for young women of color in the hip-
hop generation. Hernandez & Rehman (2002) point out that for young women, the road to change is reached through collectively strategizing via their own everyday transformative feminism. So many women in this study mention a variety of people and events that served to redirect their ideas and behavior about colorism—in both positive and negative directions. In order to challenge colorism at all levels, it is necessary for individual black women to work as everyday feminists and activists, becoming the agent of transformation.

In Chapter 3, I write about the importance of naming colorism. Because the term is not readily acknowledged among black Americans, the issue becomes even more difficult to recognize and address. The second strategy for change lies in talking about colorism. Talking and naming go hand in hand. Just like naming, talking allows for empowerment. Bell hooks reminds us in Talking Back (1989) that “true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (p.8). My suggestion then is that black women not be afraid about openly confronting colorism “in the moment.” I personally find this task at times quite difficult. Although I have been academically enthralled in this issue for over a decade, I still find myself in positions where I miss the opportunity to challenge colorism in my own daily life. The story that opens this dissertation illustrates one such example. I watched and listened while two black women lamented over the dark skin tone of a three-month-old baby. I have even allowed colorism to impact my own friendships with black women. Yet, as one participant in this project suggests, talking is of chief importance in the fight against colorism:

I think it all comes down to talking about it. I mean when you don’t talk about something, […] it and then it turns into a big boil, and it’s a lot more dramatic. So I think if you as a community, or as a race, if you voice these issues and you say, “well you know this is what’s going on,” and you ask yourself why is this, rather than just accepting it for […] the situation that it’s always been. I think things can get a lot better. (Natalie)
At the end of many focus groups, participants later told me that the dialogue and conversation about colorism changed their perspectives and level of consciousness. This of course was my initial motivation in developing a method for this project. Given the importance of talking, dialoguing about colorism in small groups can function as a transformative moment in creating a collective, oppositional knowledge. As focus group member Natasha describes,

these focus groups are very good if light skinned people, or medium, dark skinned people [can] talk and share their views because [...] people always thought that [light-skinned people] had it easier, but if you let people know that you [...] still have struggles and you still go through stuff, if we share our views and put everything on the table, I think it would help.

Continuing to cultivate small group discussions within everyday settings—and not just the formal ones used to conduct academic research—can serve as the starting point for a critical consciousness that dispels the divisive myths of colorism (hooks 1989).

Several participants suggest a more formalized strategy of education to combat the normative discourse of colorism. Many of these women note their exposure to black studies and women’s studies courses in college exposes them to an oppositional knowledge that counters their initial socialization and mentality. To that end, focus group members call for the education of children and the education of self as concrete strategies for change. The following remarks illustrate this idea:

I think that it’s just important to educate [and] teach kids and young people that we all come from different backgrounds and therefore we’re all going to be different and one of the most beautiful things about being Black is that we do have so many different complexions, we have such a range of colors and features and hair texture and that’s one of the things that makes being Black so beautiful. And I think that’s just something that needs to be ingrained in the minds of young people. (Toni)

You [should] try to prevent the stereotypes of those names [like] midnight, you cannot allow children to use that name and [...] let them know that there’s not a difference between skin tones. [...] So like I think that if you teach children from a young age—like I was taught—that there really is no difference between anyone’s skin color it would help. (Kira)
we need to reprioritize what’s important to us, so that we can educate ourselves, so that we can know our history, so that we can know we’re worth something and so that we can realize that what’s your problem is my problem because we are all Black […] You can be whatever you want to be, but at the end of the day, you are still a Black woman, […] use all of your tools that you have for the betterment of your people and to teach each and every person that you come across [about colorism] because knowledge is power, and that’s the only we’re gonna ever dismantle racism and colorism at the systemic level. (Trina)

I would extend these suggestions by placing a formal emphasis of the education of young black women. Of course, colorism impacts black women more than men; therefore the public awareness and resistance of colorism must include this special focus on young girls. Ironically, this is a suggestion provided by Anderson and Cromwell (1977). However, they note that specific attention be given to “the darker-skinned Negro, especially the black-skinned male” (p.87). While the positive valuation of young black males was important at the time, in dealing with the issue of colorism, I argue that even though all black Americans should gain awareness—in light of this study’s findings, young black females deserve attention.

Lastly, the final strategy for change requires true coalition building among black women. Individual empowerment, naming, talking, and education can only go so far if there is not a concerted effort to unify black women across color lines. As focus group member Keesha so rightly observes,

we are all African American. I think that’s the problem because you assume that because you are light skinned you are different, but from society’s point of view, if you are dark then you are Black, so regardless of your color, we still need to work together to get to where we need to be despite what shade we are.

In the new millennium, this is an immediate need. It is imperative for young black women to first recognize colorism, admit that they actively participate in this form of discrimination, and find ways to eradicate this issue in the twenty-first century. Bell hooks (1989) writes,

Black women must identify ways feminist thought and practice can aid in our process of self-recovery and share that knowledge with our sisters. This is the base on which to build
political solidarity. When that grounding exists, black women will be fully engaged in feminist movement that transforms self, community, and society. (182)

In order to recover from the past and to protect the future, building an oppositional knowledge through individual politicization and collective action is essential.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This research contributes to the existing body of literature because it focuses specifically on the voices of young black women, addresses micro-macro linkages, and concentrates on whether colorism has changed or remained the same. Despite these contributions, I would like to attend to the limitations of this study.

The focus group participants were drawn from a convenience sample of young black women attending a large university in Northern Florida; this is perhaps the largest limitation of this project. Although the university itself has a diverse student population with a fair amount of young black women, I did not include in my scope of recruitment young women who are residents of this college town but are not college students. Despite the heterogeneity of focus group members, they are arguably part of a different social standing because they are in college. This of course creates in many ways a one-dimensional sample. Additionally, the majority of women interviewed fell into the middle three skin tone categories—light brown, medium, and dark—while there were only five respondents who reported their skin tone in the very light and very dark categories. This unequal distribution of skin tone categories presents another limitation to the study. Further, it was assumed that the sexual identity of all participants was heterosexual. There were no questions directed toward same-sex relationships, nor did any respondents share stories related to their intimate-partner relationships with other women. This points to a gap not only in this research project, but also in the broader realm of research on colorism. Further studies should consider the experiences of lesbians, as those voices would
surely illuminate how colorism is similar or different for this subgroup of black women.

Ultimately, there is a definite need for more empirical studies on the continuing significance of colorism among more diverse groups of young black women.

I envision a number of directions for future research that builds upon the foundation of this current project. The analysis highlighted in Chapter 6 point to several other areas for further exploration. Perhaps one of the most complex findings in this research is the perception that experiences of colorism are varied for people who live in different parts of the country. Many of the women interviewed shared a strong belief that colorism is not as prevalent in the Northern portion of the United States; impending studies could benefit from a regional analysis of colorism. Further, the black Caribbean women in this study indicate that experiences of colorism are more significant in places like Jamaica and Haiti. Given the growing literature on the comparative experiences of African-Americans and blacks living in the United States with Caribbean heritage (see for e.g. Shaw-Taylor and Tuch, 2007), there is a demonstrated need for future research to address this other regional difference in colorism.

The core of this research relies on the views and perspectives of young black women between the ages of 18 and 25. Although I am careful to point out that my goal is to contextualize the current day experience of young women, I am aware that this project could have been strengthened by the inclusion of the voices of older black women. This idea also becomes apparent in Chapter 6 as many of the same women who note a clear presence of colorism in their own lives consider their experiences to be not only better, but vastly different from their mother’s or grandmother’s generation. Although not included in the data for this dissertation project, I conducted two focus groups with older black women (between the ages of 26 and 40), and their stories show parallel experiences to the younger cohort of black women. In
order to draw more concrete conclusions on whether or not there has been a definite shift in attitudes and beliefs, soliciting the perspectives of black women who came of age for instance at the height of the Civil Rights movement would undoubtedly fill a gap in the current study, better informing our knowledge on this complex issue.

Although they are mentioned far less within this study, black men to some extent influence the ways in which young black women interact with each other. To that end, I recommend that more research is needed to illuminate the perspectives of young black men as they relate to colorism. As scholars Margaret Hunter (2002) and Mark Hill (2000; 2002) remind us, colorism affects black men as well. It was my ambition several years ago at the onset of data collection for this research project to include the comparative experiences of black men. In fact, I conducted a pilot focus group with college-aged black men to assess their viewpoints on colorism in their lives and in the lives of young black women. Interestingly, the results of the pilot data suggest that those young men are not impacted by skin tone bias and discrimination. Of course, this information is not generalizable to a larger group, yet there is a need to address the nature of gendered colorism in the lives of black men.

When I graduated from college in 1997, I can vividly recall that the “world wide web” was gaining ground in popularity and importance. Just over a decade later, the internet has moved from a place of limited networking to the destination for all public information. In connecting the relevance of the internet to the subject of colorism, I find it much easier to locate information about colorism online compared to scholarly information. With the advent of virtual communities and the growth of internet activity, there now exists a myriad of online resources in the form specialized websites (such as BlackAmericaWeb, Black College Wire, and MySistahs), blogs, forums, and social networking sites (including MySpace and Facebook) that serve as
public outlets for discussing pertinent issues in black American society. Although we know that minorities have less access to the internet compared to whites, we are also aware that younger people engage in higher levels of internet activity versus older Americans (Madden, 2003 Pew Internet and American Life Project). Given this significant shift in our culture and today’s generation, I argue that scholarly research should consider embracing new and alternative means for collecting data that will keep pace with the current generation.

Finally, it is imperative not to underestimate the value of this study as merely a one-dimensional project addressing the contemporary significance of colorism among young black women. Although this remains the focal point of this study, this research also contributes to the broader body of knowledge currently examining the continuing significance of skin color in the lives other women of color. The recent work of Gomez (2000; 2008), Hunter (1998; 2005) and Rondilla & Spickard (2007) show analogous patterns of colorism in Asian-American and Hispanic communities. Further research comparing and contrasting the experiences of colorism across racial and ethnic lines could certainly help to explain the contemporary nature of colorism, as well as advance our theoretical understandings of this inequality.
Black Women Wanted to Discuss Issues of “Light Skin, Dark Skin, Good Hair & Bad Hair”

Who Is Eligible?

College-aged Black women (ages 18 -25) who want to express their experiences and views about colorism (issues of skin color, hair, and facial features) within the black community.

What Is the Study About?

This research will address the common attitudes and beliefs associated with having light skin or dark skin. Also, this project aims to understand how black women understand colorism in their day-to day lives. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview or focus group.

How to Sign up?

If you are eligible and would like to participate, please call the study coordinator to get more information and to sign up for the interview. Please leave your name, phone number, e-mail address and the best time to call you.

Contact JeffriAnne Wilder
via e-mail jeffrian@ufl.edu
OR at (440) 241-1444

All Participants Will Be Compensated!!
APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC FACESHEET

Pseudonym/Alias:

How would you describe your skin tone?
[ ] Very Light
[ ] Light Brown
[ ] Medium
[ ] Dark
[ ] Very Dark

What is your birth date?
(mm/dd/yyyy)

Please indicate your ethnic background (i.e. Jamaican, Nigerian, or African-American):

How much is your **YEARLY** family income (Before taxes, including income from all sources and from all members who live in your household)?

[ ] under $9,999
[ ] $10,000-$19,999
[ ] $20,000-$29,999
[ ] $30,000-$39,999
[ ] $40,000-$49,999
[ ] $50,000-$59,999
[ ] $60,000-$69,999
[ ] $70,000 or more

In what city and state did you spend your childhood?

What is the highest grade of school or years of college you have completed?

What types of names, either positive or negative, have you used or heard when referring to people with light skin? (List as many as you can think of…)

What types of names, either positive or negative, have you used or heard when referring to people with a medium skin tone? (List as many as you can think of…)

What types of names, either positive or negative, have you used or heard when referring to people with dark skin? (List as many as you can think of…)
Let’s first start by defining **what colorism means to you:**

1. How would you define colorism? What prompted you to decide to participate in this discussion? (ALL)

2. How is (has) your life shaped because of your skin color? (i.e. What does it mean for you to be a “X” skinned Black woman?)

3. Following up on the demographic facesheet, what stereotypes do you think are associated with light-skinned women? Dark-skinned women? Women of medium skin tones?

4. If you could choose, would you be light, medium, or dark? Why did you choose that skin color? What might have influenced your decision?

- **Learning About Colorism**

5. At what age did you become conscious of your skin color and the meaning/value of different skin tones? Can you tell me about any memorable experiences you had growing up when you first became aware of the differences associated with skin color?

6. Did your family play a role in emphasizing skin tone difference? How so?

7. Does your ethnicity play a role in how you learn or understand the issue of skin tone?

8. Can you recall any sayings or advice that you may have received from friends, family, or your community regarding skin color?

- **Friendships/Relationship**

9. In reflecting on your everyday experiences, how are you made aware of colorism in your day-to-day interactions?

10. How significant is the issue of colorism among your peers?

11. In what ways does skin color affect your interactions and relationships with other black women? Black men?

12. What are the skin tones of the black women in your current friendship groups? In what ways (if any) have your views/beliefs about skin tone impacted who you have developed friendships?

13. If you could choose the skin the skin tone of your spouse, what color would that be? Why?
14. If you could choose the skin tone of your baby/children, what color would that be? Why?

• Other Issues

15. How do you think your generation views this issue, compared to other generations? (i.e. How are you a product of your generation in light of this issue?)

16. Participants from previous focus groups indicated they felt that the issue of colorism was more prevalent in the South compared to the North or other regions of the country. What are your thoughts on the differences between the North and the South?

• Closing

17. What things do you personally think can be done to prevent colorism and to educate others about its consequences? (ALL)

18. Did I miss anything? Is there anything else that you would like to say?
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

JeffriAnne Wilder is originally from Cleveland, Ohio. She completed her undergraduate degree from Allegheny College in 1997, and later completed her master of arts degree in sociology from Cleveland State University in 2002. Upon completing her doctorate from the University of Florida in August 2008, she will begin teaching in the Sociology Department at the University of North Florida.