

Colorism in the United States^[edit]

Coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), colorism in this context refers to the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their [skin] color.”^[1] Other terms for colorism include shadeism or simply [discrimination based on skin color](#).^[2] For the purposes of working within a more comprehensive analytical framework of race, the definition of colorism will expand to include skin color, facial features, hair texture and socioeconomic status.

Skin color, as a more obvious physical characteristic, acts as a means of assigning people to a set of particular, racially influenced social values.^[2] The differences in treatment between individuals of different skin colors operates on the portrayal of darker skin as inferior to lighter skin.^[2] W.E.B. Du Bois's own idea of the [color line](#) expands on the social and political significance of having darker skin color for African Americans in late 19th century North America. While the roots of the color line are founded on the difference in treatment between White Americans and African slaves and their descendants during the early 20th century, the repercussions of the color line have multiplied to encompass multiple [ethnic](#), [racial](#), [social](#) groups in more contemporary periods.

History^[edit]

Colorism in the United States is rooted in both the period of European [colonialism](#) from the 15th century to 1914 along with the perpetuation of white supremacy in all domains of life. The European colonial project disrupted and restructured ethnic groups under a system of colonial, white dominion in which dark skin is associated with barbarity, irrationality, and inferiority.^[3] On the other hand, the association of whiteness and white European heritage with civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority provides the foundational definitions of colorism.^[3] Each ethnic group in the United States and the colorism they experience within the corresponding communities is grounded on the cultural, ideological, economic, and sometimes aesthetic emulation of whiteness.^[3]

In the initial binary color line, intelligence, hard work, civilization, etc. was associated with whiteness, whereas the negative counterparts to the aforementioned characteristics in addition to many other characteristics (see [Stereotypes of African Americans](#)) associated with blackness built on the treatment of dark skin toned individuals as second class citizens within the United States.^{[3][4]} The increasing association with social, political, and economic progress with whiteness and the rich, white upper class prompted the rise in anti-Black rhetoric that was used to justify the discriminatory treatment of former African slaves and their descendants.^[5]

The results of the increasing diversification of the United States not only prompted an evolution of the binary, white-black color line into a color spectrum—reflective of new ethnic, racial, and social communities in the contemporary United States—but also resulted in a change in how colorism is defined within communities of non-Black [people of color](#) (singular: person of color, also abbreviated as POC).^[6] Though these non-Black communities of color also face discrimination, skin color still dictates the type of discrimination they face. As such, anti-Blackness is a prevalent sentiment in these POC communities; where the darker the skin tone, the more likely one is met with anti-Black rhetoric and [microaggressions](#) that manifest into off handed comments on one's appearance or behavior as two examples.^{[4][7][8]} The anti-Black sentiments present from the establishment of the United States remains prevalent in the social constructs that promote the function of American society.^[9]

Colorism by Major U.S. Ethnic/Demographic Group^[edit]

Colorism in the Chicano/Latinx or “Hispanic” Community^[edit]

After the invasion of Spaniards, Latin America had a social caste system during the colonial period. This consisted of [Spaniards](#) being at the highest status in society, followed by [Criollos](#), [Mestizos](#), [Mulatos](#), [Zambos](#), [Indigenous](#), and [Africans](#) at the lowest status in society. Those with the higher social status had more political, social and economic power. Those at the bottom had little to no power on the basis of skin-color and phenotypic characteristics. Spaniards were phenotypically white people that were born in Spain. Criollos were the children of spaniards who were born in the Americas. Mestizos were people who were mixed with European and Indigenous ancestries. Zambos were people who were mixed with Indigenous and African ancestries. Indigenous were phenotypically of indigenous descent. Africans were people that were phenotypically African descent. ^[10]

Social Movements Against Colorism

The Zapatistas: An Indigenous Movement in Mexico

The rebellion of the Mayan Zapatistas in 1994 was a social movement that was created by a group of citizens who rebelled against the Mexican government and phenotypically White citizens. They were rebelling against the oppression of indigenous peoples due to their darker skin color. The movement was created to advocate for indigenous rights. The results of this movement was the creation of the San Andres Treaty, which judicially recognized indigenous groups as part of Mexico's population. However, the treaty was never implemented because it "threatened national unity." ^[11]

An Afro-Descendant Movement in Colombia

The Afro- Descendent Movement in Colombia occurred in 1990s. This social movement consisted of Afro-Colombians who were seeking formal recognition as an autonomous ethnic group. Afro-Colombians had not been fully recognized as ethnic groups because they were perceived not to possess "native characteristics." This movement resulted in the passage of Law-70 in 1993. Law-70 granted Afro-Colombians the right to the land that their ancestors. However, the land they were granted is in regions where that have high crime rates, due to these areas being neglected by the government. ^[12]

Anti-Blackness in Latinx Community

"Rather than defeating white supremacy, the immigration of Latin American people to the US demonstrates a collision between systems of anti-blackness supremacy." in other words, Latin American and Mexican countries have anti-black sentiment embedded into the culture as well. For the purpose of this page, we will group peoples of Latin American and Chicano descent into one label - Hispanic. Many Hispanic governments capitalize off of the exploitation of Black bodies. Mass migration and the resulting multiculturalism experienced by European countries have exacerbated racism and xenophobia phenomena stimulated in part and fueled by media and other social actors that spread prejudices and negative stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities^[13] ^[14]. In addition to these dynamics in the construction of racial categories and meanings across countries, the real consequences of everyday racism ^[15] are expressed in the racial stratification of societies that methodically exclude Blacks and ethnic minorities from economic, educational, political, and social participation.

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Mexico claims "racial democracy" which is the false belief that Mexico has escaped racism and racial discrimination. Afro Latino/as viewed as foreigners/ not Hispanic enough. Contradicts the idea of mestizaje which Mexico is proud of. In the 1960's, Mexican Americans considered themselves part of the white group. They claimed that Mexicans were caucasians and thus biologically white. (In an effort to appease to white people and move upward in the social/racial hierarchy. Chicanos began identifying as nonwhite only after they saw police brutality and mistreatment of Mexicans

Mexican workers are also socialized to be antiblack (similar to how poor white people still managed to be racist even though they had more in common with black people than with rich white people.)

^[7] -this article covers the current state of Anti-Blackness by the hispanic community, in the age of trump. One of the primary reasons that such a significant portion of Latinos support the current president stems from a taboo and unmentionable topic that most Latinos do not want to address – anti-Blackness. Rhetoric and practices of anti-Blackness within the Latino community are deep-seated and ingrained ^[16] ^[17] ^[18]. For example, practices like blanqueamiento (whitening) and mestizaje (race mixing) are maintained as channels of upward mobility and white superiority ^[19] ^[17]. The killing of Trayvon Martin and acquittal of Zimmerman shows how a white Peruvian was able to benefit from White supremacy and in turn get away with murdering a Black boy. Following this case, many news articles and blog posts discussed the ways in which Zimmerman downplayed his Latino identity and gained access to Whiteness ^[8] ^[20] ^[21] ^[22] ^[5].

Colorism in the Asian Community^[edit]

In Asian American communities, the manifestation of colorism and the social significance placed on skin tones are affected by the value of European features imposed onto Asian colonies during European colonialism.^[3] Long periods under the influence of European colonial regimes have led to the internalization of light skin and Anglo facial features as cultural values present within Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino communities.^{[3][4]}

Colorism within other Asian communities is affected by the existing association of lighter skin tones with the upper class that is largely unrelated to interactions with Europeans.^[23] The roots of colorism in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean communities are a few with groups whose roots of colorism are tied to classism.^[23] In these groups, darker skin tones due to the physical labor outdoors are associated with low socioeconomic status while lighter skin tones are associated with high social status.^[23] Documented experiences of immigrant Asian aversion to darker skin expresses direct ties between skin color, class, and race.^[4]

Origins aside, colorism within both immigrant Asian and Asian American communities operates on the same basis of anti-Blackness. The perpetuation of colorism within and between Asian communities in the United States is tied with the racialization of Asian Americans within the Black/White binary as neither but existing in between.^[24]

Commonly portrayed as the [model minority](#), Asian Americans occupy a space between the Black and White communities that is both exclusionist and anti-Black.^[25] The model minority myth makes use of the successes of a few Asian American groups to make the point that despite their histories of oppression, economic success and the [American Dream](#) are still attainable through effort.^[25] This idea has been called out by scholars and activists alike for its problematic areas including the exclusion of lower socioeconomic class Asian Americans such as [Bhutanese-Americans](#) whose median annual household income is one-third of highest median income found in Indian American households as of 2017.^[24] Others point out how the grouping of all Asian American communities into a monolith diminishes the experiences of marginalized groups within the community and equates the experiences of one group to the rest.^{[25][26]}

Other problematic aspects highlighted are the myth's contributions to negative stereotypes of Black folks and anti-Blackness as well as its alleviation of responsibility from white America.^[25] The rhetoric that accompanies this Asian American trope blames the black community for black failures instead of the United States' failure to uphold the rights of Black folks to the same level as white Americans.^[25]

In the Asian American community, the model minority myth has been portrayed as a way for Asians to claim space within an American society that has repeatedly excluded them through policies.^{[4][27]} The acceptance of the narrative erases the experiences of being called the [Yellow Peril](#), the [Internment of Japanese Americans](#), and the struggles of poverty and instead portrays Asian Americans as model citizens.^[27]

The portrayal of Asian Americans as untouched by the racialization of the United States is part of the model minority myth that, ironically, is another form of exclusion that Asians buy into in accepting the

stereotypes of the trope.^[27] This has been an ongoing critique of the Asian American community as projects like [#thisis2016](#) and other forms of [hashtag activism](#) have united Asian Americans through shared experiences of racism while simultaneously portraying the contemporary era as a post-racial and the Asian community as exempt from racism.^[27]

The [#thisis2016](#) project has also been highlighted as problematic even within the Asian American community due to its exclusion of South Asians.^[28] An open letter posted by E.J.R. David, Ali Mattu, Razia Kosi, Ernabel Demillo, & Kevin Nadal to the [New York Times](#) details the reactions of South Asians to the exclusion of Brown Asians in the [#thisis2016](#) project during [Filipino American History Month](#).^[28] As a response to the [#thisis2016](#) project, the hashtag [#BrownAsiansExist](#) circulated through social media platforms as people called out the colorism within the Asian community towards [Asian Pacific Islander](#) communities as a key part of their histories with colonialism and imperialism.^[29]

Colorism in the Black Community^[edit]

Colorism in the Black community originated in the practice of U.S. slaveholders to give preferential treatment to light-skinned Black persons over their darker counterparts. In addition to housework, light-skinned slaves "were more likely to receive skill training, and Shawn Cole (2005) reports that although less than six percent of slave sales in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Louisiana involved mulatto slaves, nearly 40 percent of freed slaves were mulattoes."^[30] Post-slavery, light-complected people were given more financial and social benefits (i.e. jobs, loans, less intense discrimination, etc.) than those that were dark-complected and Black-identifying^[30]. This reflected in the income distribution within the Black community, and continues to be an issue:

"Mulatto homogamous households in the mid-nineteenth century had between 30 and 90 percent more wealth than households with at least one black spouse. In this regard, complexion homogamy was not (and is not) an innocuous tradition. It has profound social and economic ramifications for black economic advancement."^[30]

Black immigration in the African diaspora has also been a root of colorism within the Black community. For example, Jamaican immigrants are faced with the problematic issue of racializing their blackness when coming to majority white countries like the United States and England. In the growing research about Black immigrants, scholarship has analyzed Black identity formation in both contradiction to and confrontation with African American identity.^[31] West Indians choose to avert racialization and categorization in the US by disassociating with African American stereotypes and African American communities. This is sometimes referred to as the theory of deflective manipulation.^[32] Conflict within communities occurs when powerless groups are unable to effectively challenge the forces that oppress them, so they start to attack themselves. Nonetheless, dark-skinned Jamaicans in addition to dark-skinned African Americans continue to be the most disenfranchised groups in Jamaica and the United States, respectively.^[33]

Colorism in the White Community^[edit]

"Many people cite the rise of Latino, Hispanic and Asian populations and rates of intermarriage between racial groups as the demise of white supremacy. However, this optimism lacks the foundational understanding that white supremacy is an essential relation to anti-blackness and these notions of racism still exist and are prevalent in white/non-black communities." Intermarriage does not cause the demise of racism but rather explains the effects of it. Marked by a racialized history, intermarriage and mixed-race, white babies that offspring from those relationship have had easier accessibility to things such as economic stability, political discourse and assimilation within a white culture. This is especially true for children produced by non-black, interracial pairings since they are perceived as white much more often than those children produced by black-white unions. Many non-black immigrants who have children that fit within the current parameters of whiteness and will thus benefit from the accessibility of being white.^[34]

This anti-blackness percolates in white culture when it reinforces the most Aryan standards of beauty; blonde hair, blue eyes, small nose, etc. This exclusion of anything dark, like brunette hair and dark eyes, is another systemic example of anti-blackness even within white communities. The prevalence of white, Americanized beauty standards in Miss America beauty contests where “over one-third of contestants have been blonde.” Barbie toy dolls, created in the late 1950s, were blue-eyed and (predominantly) blonde until 1980, although the early prototypes, designed in Japan, had distinctly east-Asian eyes. These beauty ideals were well represented in Hollywood movies, such as the Marilyn Monroe classic *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), which became powerful drivers of fashion standards. Even the original American Girl doll is blonde, adding to the notion that total whiteness is preferable to any measure of blackness.^[35]

Colorism Now^[edit]

Colorism in Education^[edit]

Colorism is seen through a variety of ways in today’s society. One of the main ways in which it is seen is in education. Acts such as the No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act are federal laws that require data to be desegregated on the basis of race ^[36]. The most affected by these policies are Black students because they don’t curtail the racial inequality in regard to discipline ^[36]. Discipline is regarded with a colorblind lense and creates more problems for students facing racial inequality within the education system. According to statistics provided by the National Educational Statistics from the years 2009-2010 in the United States the drop out rate between White, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black and Latinx students varied between White and communities of color. White students was 2.3%, in comparison to American Indian/Alaska Native which was 5.5%, Black and Latinx both had 5% drop out rates ^[36]. In Wilder and Cain's findings they concluded that although colorism is not a term widely used that there is an acknowledgment of interracial discrimination. Wilder and Cain also found that Black women were the most affected by this concept of colorism ^[36].

During the time of slavery in the United States, Black slaves were punished for learning to read because it was seen as a way of resisting against White owners ^[37]. Afterwards Black children endured similar instances in which they faced White mobs against desegregation of public schools in the United States. Desegregation in public schools in the United States has been one major public policy in which has affected Black individuals, specifically in regard to Education. White communities began the White flight movement in order to move their children from certain school districts as a way of fighting desegregation ^[37]. White students were then moved to different school districts, Black students were placed in underfunded schools. Black Latinos live in predominantly poorer neighborhoods with lower property values, this had led to a lack of funding for urban neighborhood schools.^[38] According to 1990 study done by Hughes and Hertel they dfound that the educational gap between White and Black folks was roughly the same between lighter skinned Black Americans and darker skinned Black Americans.^[39] Students are also affected by teacher expectations. Due to the discourse the darker skinned individuals are more savage than their lighter skinned counterparts, students who are of a lighter skin tone are expected to be smarter, and better inclined to education thus, that is one of the primary reasons as to why counselors encourage lighter skinned individuals to go to college. This also affects parents because, teachers and school administration react to parents in a similar fashion. Parents are also judged because of their skin tone.^[40]

Skin Bleaching in the US^[edit]

In the United States, the standard for beauty is lighter skin tones that reflect a White appearance. It has its origins from European colonial roots. Colorism is maintained through systematic racism in which White supremacy is maintained through the ideology that dark skin represents savagery and inferiority ^[41]. There are certain privileges granted to individuals with lighter skin such as access to resources they otherwise wouldn’t have access to if they were of a darker tone^[41]. In the United States African American celebrities tend to be of a lighter skin tone and have Anglo facial

features ^[41]. Skin Bleaching in the United States is not as popular as it used to be due to the civil rights movement during the 1960's and 1970's ^[41]. However, it is still practiced within certain communities of color. Skin bleaching techniques are usually performed with creams that are often renamed as skin lighteners, skin whiteners, skin-toning creams, skin evening creams and skin-fading gels ^[41]. These products are all labeled as beauty products in which women can enhance their beauty by becoming White. The majority of these products are made by American and European cosmetic companies. ^[41]

Conviction and Sentencing^[edit]

The effects of colorism extend to the criminal justice system where research has examined how perceived skin tone is related to maximum prison sentences and actual time served. In a research study published in The Social Science Journal, the results indicated that black women deemed to have a lighter skin tone received more lenient prison sentences and served less time behind bars ^[42]. In other words, the institutionalization of anti-blackness in the criminal justice system has led to longer and more severe sentences for dark-skinned, Black women in comparison to light-skinned, Black women and other women of color who commit similar crimes.

This new body of research explores discrimination within racial groups and the perceived darkness or lightness of Black skin tone as it pertains to socio-economic status. Blacks with lighter skin tone and facial features are more indicative of a European-American descent (narrow nose, thin lips, etc.) and are more likely to be accepted in mainstream society and thus afforded greater opportunities and privileges. ^[43] As previous research has suggested, "Skin tone elicits a cognitive bias such that as skin tone moves from light to dark, negative inferences about ability and competence increase." ^[44] As it pertains to criminalization, black men and women are already subjected to institutional state violence and this only becomes more severe as skin gets darker. ^[45]

Although the literature is limited, there are some studies that provide interesting statistics when thinking about colorism. Data has shown that black drivers are stopped at higher rates than white drivers, even when age and gender is controlled for. ^[46] Many darker-skinned individuals are at a double risk due to the greater probability that they will be stopped and given longer and more harsh sentence, there are also other forms of institutional anti-blackness and colorism such as discrimination in housing, school, and car loans along with mortgages, bonds/stock, or any investment. ^[47] All these factors can have serious detrimental effects on an individual or entire community and their ability to navigate the social landscape and move upward. This is a clear example of how much of an impact colorism has in the United States' criminal justice system while also highlighting the ways in which stereotypical thinking and racial prejudice can translate into real and dangerous experiences for people.