



colourism and the politics of beauty

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Source: *Feminist Review*, 2014, No. 108, black british feminisms (2014), pp. 97-105

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24571924>

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**108 | colourism and the politics
of beauty**

Aisha Phoenix

introduction

No dark skin girls allowed. (18 May 2014, 22:49)

Light skin girls will fart in a place and we'd suspect the dark skin girls (16 May 2014, 17:26)

'Dark skin girls are winning' 'What are they winning? Hide & Seek' LMA000000000000 (18 April 2014, 20:04)

Dark skin girls make my blood boil. (19 May 2014, 05:18)

Can't trust most dark skin girls, they lie, steal [sic] and don't practice good hygiene #facts. (19 May 2014, 10:43)

A selection of tweets on Twitter

As a black woman with dark skin I find Twitter searches related to 'dark girls' or 'dark skin' quite depressing because I know only too well that I will find numerous jokes, abuse and derogatory comments directed at women with skin like mine, often started and circulated by boys and young men, some of whom have dark skin themselves.

In the midst of the abuse and some 'Dark skin girls are beautiful' tweets, there are numerous tweets like this: 'All dark skin girls aren't ugly, & all light skin girls aren't cute'. However, in attempting to counter the premise that dark skin is necessarily ugly while light skin is automatically attractive, this kind of tweet reproduces it by using the same terms, rather than rejecting them in favour of something like 'skin shade does not determine beauty'.

Twitter searches under 'light skin' or 'light girls' are no more encouraging. Amid the problematic 'light skin is the right skin' tweets and other comments on the beauty of girls with light skin, there are vulgar tweets suggesting that light skin is synonymous with promiscuity, as well as tweets that bemoan the fact that 'girls' with light skin are hard for boys and young men to attain. What the Twitter searches show is the prevalence of colourism, prejudice on the basis of

feminist review 108 2014

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skin shade and the ways in which it intersects with sexism to disempower women of colour. While colourism is an important feminist issue, it is under-explored. This article will examine the problem of colourism, with a particular focus on its effects on girls and young women. More than a decade into the twenty-first century the hegemonic ideal of the beautiful fair white woman remains powerful (see Wade, 2012) as a result of the intersection of racism, colourism (inter- and intra-ethnic prejudice on the basis of skin shade) and patriarchal patterns of desire. Racism and colourism lead to the privileging of light skin, and 'patriarchal patterns of desire' mean women are still judged disproportionately on their looks (hooks, 2003). The status that women derive from being deemed beautiful can lead to advantages in education and the job and marriage markets (Hunter, 2007). However, women with dark skin are at a disadvantage because skin shade is central to assessments of beauty, with light skin operating as a form of symbolic capital that is converted into economic capital and advantage in the 'heterosexual market' (Glenn, 2008; Jha and Adelman, 2009). People with light skin 'earn more money, complete more years of schooling, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people than darker-skinned people of the same race or ethnicity' (Hunter, 2007:237). Uwujaren (2013) uses the term 'racialised sexism' to describe how racism and sexism intersect for women of colour.

Heterosexual men of colour often perpetuate colourism by demonstrating it in their choice of partners, or in their descriptions of what they consider attractive in women (hooks, 2003; Jha and Adelman, 2009; Berry and Duke, 2013), as can be seen on Twitter. For women of colour it is psychologically difficult to live 'within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be' (Cheng, 2001:7). This epistemological impossibility is symbolically reproduced in everyday reading practices since fashion and beauty magazines regularly reproduce colourism. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the issue of colourism and masculinity, but it is an important subject that warrants further investigation.

The four sections that follow begin by analysing the processes at work when magazines lighten pictures of women of colour on their front pages. As evidenced by the examples in this section, technology is adding new dimensions to the longstanding issue of colourism. The article then explores the effect of impossible beauty ideals on some women (and men) of colour in the United Kingdom, briefly highlighting the problem of skin bleaching. It goes on to consider the growth of skin bleaching globally, and cosmetic surgery designed to make the features of people of colour, and particularly women, look more white and European. In the final section, the effects of racism and colourism on the politics of beauty are explored, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence as an analytical frame. The article focuses on the politics of beauty, rather than on aesthetics, because, as Davis (2003) argues, the term the 'politics of beauty' encompasses the power dynamics and injustices that help sustain this pernicious hierarchy.

skin lightening in magazines

Lupita Nyong'o, the critically acclaimed actress who played the enslaved woman Patsey in the film *12 Years a Slave*, is at the centre of a controversy over skin lightening. She is not accused of bleaching her dark skin; rather *Vanity Fair* has been criticised for publishing a photograph in which the actress appears considerably lighter than she actually is (*Daily Mail*, 2014). Whether the picture was digitally altered or lighting was used in such a way that she appeared a lighter shade, the implications are disquieting. Even after winning awards, and being nominated for others, it seems that Nyong'o's skin colour is considered too dark to feature in *Vanity Fair*.

The anger that this picture of Nyong'o has elicited needs to be contextualised. There have been many similar stories of women of colour appearing shades lighter in magazines or publicity photos, provoking accusations of skin lightening. For example, in the United Kingdom the singer and former X Factor contestant Rebecca Ferguson was so light in promotional photographs that it prompted speculation that the pictures had been digitally lightened, although a spokesperson for Ferguson attributed her lighter skin to lighting (*Daily Mail*, 2011). In 2013, the US singer India.Arie was confronted by skin whitening accusations after she appeared much lighter than usual on the cover of her single. She attributed her lighter skin to 'magnificent' lighting at the photo shoot (Wilson, 2013). The previous year there was controversy over a publicity photo of the singer Beyoncé in which she looked shades lighter (Eriksen, 2012). In 2010, the Bollywood film star Aishwarya Rai Bachchan appeared considerably lighter on the cover of *Elle* (Abraham, 2010), which was also accused of lightening the skin of the actress Gabourey Sidibe in a cover photograph in the same year (*Daily Mail*, 2010).

Irrespective of whether or not pictures of women of colour are digitally altered or lighting is used in such a way that it produces an unnatural pallor, the results and the implicit message they convey are the same: women of colour, whatever their skin shade, are not light enough for mainstream media because they are not white. The industry desire to whiten women of colour both reflects and helps sustain the racism that results in magazine circulation figures declining when black women feature on the cover. For example, the editor of British *Vogue*, Alexandra Shulman, stated, 'the evidence suggests that black cover girls don't sell as well as white cover girls' (Fox, 2010), and Carr (2002) wrote in the *New York Times* that people of colour are routinely not selected for the covers of many broad-circulation magazines 'for fear they will depress newsstand sales'.

skin whitening and 'ethnic cosmetic surgery'

In the United Kingdom some women, and men, resort to skin bleaching in an attempt to access some of the privileges of lighter skin in the relationship and/or

job market. The desire to be lighter is so great that some people with dark skin even knowingly use illegal creams that contain harmful ingredients such as hydroquinone, mercury and corticosteroids because they are believed to be stronger and thus more effective. Around the United Kingdom, Trading Standards officers are attempting to prevent the sale of illegal skin bleaching products, which are sold under the counter in some African, African Caribbean and Asian shops. However, the creams keep re-appearing because of the continued demand (Bartholomew, 2013).¹

There is much debate about the rise of skin bleaching and cosmetic surgery, with women willing to modify their bodies in pursuit of better positions in the global beauty hierarchy. Women of colour are burdened with the oppressiveness of a hegemonic beauty ideal that excludes the majority of the world's population, and are simultaneously exploited by multinational corporations determined to turn their vulnerabilities into financial gain (Glenn, 2008). As a result, the global skin lightening industry is expected to grow to US\$19.8 billion by 2018 (King, 2013), as women (and increasingly men—Paxman, 2011; Narayan, 2013) seek to access privileges afforded to those with light skin. 'Ethnic cosmetic surgery' is also proliferating. It includes rhinoplasty, or 'nose jobs'; cheiloplasty, or lip reduction surgery; and 'East Asian blepharoplasty', or 'double eyelid surgery' to create 'western eyes', an operation that accounts for South Korea being the country with the highest proportion of its population having undergone cosmetic surgery (Hunter, 2007). While cosmetic surgery is frequently presented as a matter of free choice, colourism and the politics of beauty help to show the constraints on agency. The US CBS talk show co-host Julie Chen's explanation of why she had eyelid surgery made clear that it was to advance her career after a former news director said she could not be an anchor because her Asian eyes made her look bored, and an agent refused to represent her if she did not have surgery to make her eyes 'look better' (Abraham, 2013). Sander Gilman describes 'cosmetic surgery as a form of "passing"' (Davis, 2003:77), where a person takes on a new identity to access privileges and status, leaving behind the oppression of their former identity. In US history, the term 'passing' evokes the period when the 'one-drop rule' was enforced (Davis, 2003), legally designating those with a single drop of black blood or any known black ancestry as black (Roth, 2005). Many people with black forebears who had skin light enough to 'pass' as white left their families and assumed white identities (Davis, 2003).

history of colourism

There is no singular history of colourism, in that it has evolved in different ways in different geographic locations. Histories of slavery and colonisation are, however, implicated. For example, colourism among the descendants of 'transatlantic slaves' dates back to the preferential treatment given to enslaved people with

¹ See also Health Protection Agency, 'Illegal skin lightening creams and health', http://www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1279888791327, last accessed 28 January 2014; Thames Valley Police 'Dangerous cosmetics: Mercury in skin lightening products', 30 November 2012, https://www.thamesvalleyalert.co.uk/da/29138/Dangerous_Cosmetics_-_important_information_from_Trading_Standards.html, last accessed 30 January 2014; and Trading Standards Institute, 'Skin lightening and underage sales court cases', <http://www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/extra/news-item.cfm/newsid/999>, last accessed 28 January 2014.

light skin who were the product of slave master rapes of, or 'relationships' with, black slaves (hooks, 2003; Harrison, 2010). In countries that were colonised by Europeans, light skin shades are privileged as a result of the legacy of colonialism, when white skin and associated features were accorded high status and dominance (Hunter, 2007; Glen, 2008).

There is debate about whether the caste system in India promotes colourism, since light skin is perceived to be more common among Brahmins, who are the highest caste, whereas darker skin is associated with lower castes (Jha and Adelman, 2009). However, Glenn (2008) argues that skin shade variation within castes makes it hard to support this claim. She suggests that light skin signified affluence in India (as in other countries—Hunter, 2007), in contrast to the darker skin of the poor or working classes, which resulted from labouring outside. This link between affluence and skin colour also pertained in Elizabethan England, for example, when women who worked outside were tanned, while the aristocracy whitened their skin with lead preparations to symbolise that they had no need to work.

Such arguments have led some historians and anthropologists to suggest that skin shade hierarchies predate European colonialism. The evidence in support of this viewpoint is that women with light brown, yellow or reddish skin shades were privileged in precolonial Africa. In South Asian cultures, particularly India, the privileging of light skin dates back to the early Aryan invasion and later British colonisation. In Japan, before the Meiji Period, which began in the 1860s, white-lead powder makeup was worn by men and women from the upper and middle classes (Glenn, 2008). Glenn (2008: 284), however, argues that a precolonial history does not nullify the contribution of colonialism in that the skin shade hierarchies 'established in areas colonized by Europeans cemented and generalized the privilege attached to light skin'.

The prevalence of colourism means that the women of colour who are rendered visible as glamorous media stars are more likely to have light skin and features similar to those of white Europeans (e.g., Halle Berry, Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys and Thandie Newton, who each has one white parent, or Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Beyoncé and Zoe Saldana, who all have light skin). Anger at the injustice of colourism has led to criticism of the casting of two actresses with light skin to play darker black women in recent years. The actress Zoe Saldana, who is of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent, was cast to play Nina Simone in the biopic *Nina* (Chilton, 2013) and has been pictured wearing an Afro wig, prosthetic nose and makeup to darken her skin for the role (Bull, 2012; Fisher, 2012). This evokes the tradition in theatre and film of white actors 'blacked up' to play black characters (Lawson, 2012). This is doubly insulting as it suggests that skin shade was important for the role of Nina Simone, but not important enough to ensure that someone with dark skin was cast to play her. Similarly, there was an outcry when Thandie Newton was cast to play an Igbo woman in the film adaptation of

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Danielle, 2012). These casting choices help to perpetuate the marginalisation of women with dark skin by rendering them invisible even at times when people with darker skin are being represented, and should, therefore, be seen.

conclusion

There is debate about what motivates the modifications many women of colour, and some men, make to their appearances in order to achieve lighter skin and features that are closer to the white European ideal. Is it, as scholars such as Glenn (2008) argue, the result of 'false consciousness' and internalised racism exacerbated by the powerful economic forces that help to create and exploit the yearning for lightness? Is it an attempt to get away from the suffering caused by deviating from hegemonic and oppressive global norms and their consequences in the relationship and job markets (Davis, 2003) that does not necessarily equate with seeing one's own colour or features as inferior?

It seems that for some women of colour skin lightening and/or ethnic cosmetic surgery is a pragmatic response to a global marketplace where it is economically and socially beneficial to have light skin and features that approximate whiteness. Hunter (2007: 248) argues that cosmetic changes to achieve lighter skin and white European features are rational given that they are likely to result in 'better opportunities in a competitive global marketplace'. Chen's decision to have eyelid surgery to advance her career is an example of this. As hooks (2003:52) argues, 'many adult black folks who do not believe in their heart of hearts that white is better feel they must "wear the mask" to get ahead in jobs and careers'. However, in addition to recognising the potential economic and social benefits of skin lightening and 'ethnic cosmetic surgery', some women of colour have internalised the racism and colourism to which they have been exposed since birth, with resulting detrimental effects on their self esteem (hooks, 2003).

The global politics of beauty promulgates an aesthetic and hierarchy born of 'white supremacist thinking' (hooks, 2003) and a ' "white is right" ideology' (Glenn, 2008) that is bolstered by the construction of an inferior dark other. Multinational corporations are active and complicit in sustaining this racist and colourist beauty hierarchy. They derive considerable financial benefit from the cosmetic surgery industry and multi-billion dollar skin lightening industry that feeds on constructing people of colour as ugly, but remediable. Images of 'beauty' are politicised (Nederveen Pieterse, 1998:10). In order to understand these processes at work, it is important to deconstruct what Davis (2003:79) terms the 'disciplinary and normalizing discursive regimes of western culture'.

The way in which the politics of beauty operates can be seen as an example of the phenomenon that Bourdieu (2007) describes as 'symbolic power' or 'symbolic

2 The documentary *Dark Girls* (2013) was directed by D.C. Berry and B. Duke, and released by Duke Media and Urban Winter Entertainment (USA).

violence'. He argues that 'symbolic power is a power which presupposes recognition, that is, misrecognition of the violence that is exercised through it' (2007:209). In the global beauty hierarchy, people of colour are often complicit in the very colourism that disadvantages them, reproducing it in their treatment of other people of colour, including within their own families. Mama (1995), for example, found that some of her UK black women research participants had painful memories of their mothers telling them they were too dark. Two decades later, some of those filmed in the US documentary *Dark Girls*² also said this. Furthermore, many of those disadvantaged by colourism fail to see that the beauty hierarchy is an 'arbitrary social construction' (Thompson, 2007[1991]: 23) that advantages fair, white women and multinational corporations, but has deleterious consequences for many who fail to meet its strictures. Thus, the focus is often on trying to climb up the hierarchy through skin whitening and body modifications, rather than rejecting it altogether. This makes the politics of representation more complex as some people of colour seek to sustain its racist and colourist underpinnings (Davis, 2003).

The fact that colourism divides people of colour and that those with the lightest skin derive some benefits from skin shade prejudice (Hochschild, 2007) makes it all the more difficult to challenge. Colourism will endure 'as long as the structure of white racism remains intact' (Hunter, 2007:250) and multinational corporations continue to make an enormous profit from exploiting it. However, as hooks (2003) argues, people of colour can maintain healthy self esteem through decolonising the mind in spite of racism and white supremacy. In order not to individualise colourism, it is equally important for us to organise politically to disrupt the racisms that inform it and to challenge the companies that exploit colourism for financial gain.

author biography

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doi:10.1057/fr.2014.18