

In Living Color: Exploring the Complexities of Colorism in the 21st-Century

Special Issue

Journal of Colorism Studies (JOCS)

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The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the question as to how far differences of race—which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair—will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.

—W.E.B. Du Bois (1900)

Are there multiple forms or species of racism or simply variations of a fundamental structure?

—Jared Sexton (2012)

I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me

—Fanon (1952)

Wherever you are reading this from, you probably heard this ad nauseam: “We do not see race.” With remarkable ease, this well-intentioned phrase is invoked by media pundits, politicians, and citizenry worldwide as a justified public defense against accusations of racism but also as a political tool for refashioning grand narratives about the declining significance of race and racism. These incredulous claims of nonracialism and post-racialism illuminate the significant social phenomenon and philosophy of *color-evasiveness*. This race-neutral ideology purports race and racism are nonfactors in shaping people’s life chances (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Seemingly the social construction of race and racism would disappear if people stopped seeing it. This vapid sentiment is disingenuous because color-coded ethnoracial inequalities *shade* almost every facet of social life in the United States (and globally) due to the pernicious manifestations of *the color line* (Du Bois, 1900).

While formal racial classifications and the overarching racial caste system were constructed during the Age of Enlightenment, the valorization of white skin, straight blonde hair, and Eurocentric physical features are rooted in antiquity (Ware, 2013). As such, the denigration of dark-complexioned people—a byproduct of this valorization—is a ubiquitous pathology exported through the European colonization of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, permeating the colonized

psyche. Delineating between white/nonwhite and Black/nonBlack, *the racial calculus* (Hartman, 2008) of the color line stratifies people's life chances, trajectories, and outcomes, based on their approximate possession of light or dark skin (Monk, 2021). Even as societies stride toward mixed-race futures (Sexton, 2008), the permanence of racial hierarchies will endure in the 21st century because skin tone will continue to serve as a proxy to race. In this racial order of things, color and colorism will employ the same hierarchy governing racism (Ware, 2013) because colorism is the *sine qua non* to racism.

Race matters (West, 1991), but so does skin color. Colorism is a hidden gatekeeper augmenting life outcomes across many significant social domains, such as education, criminal justice, immigration, healthcare, employment, banking, and marriage (Monk, 2021; Ware, 2013). While scholars have long recognized skin complexion as a determinant of social conditions (Du Bois, 1899, 1903; Frazier, 1957; Johnson, 1934; Davis, Gardner, & Gardner, 1941; Myrdal, 1944; Fanon, 1952; Banks, 2000; Hall, 2008, 2010), it was Alice Walker (1983) who first coined *colorism* and conceptualized the social construct as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (p. 3). Several scholars have further conceptualized colorism through various terms such as *being color struck* (Brown, 1965), *the color complex* (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), *skin color discrimination* (Hall, 2010; Hochschild, 2006; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007), *color consciousness* (Monroe, 2016), *color stratification* (Keith & Monroe, 2016), and *skin color bias* (Hunter, 2016). As a vestige of colonialism, colorism is as injurious as racism (Ware, 2013). While race and color are related conceptually and interchangeably used in history (e.g., colored people, color barrier), they are not synonymous. Colorism is focused on actual skin tone rather than racial or ethnic identity (Hunter, 2007). In this formulation, skin color substitutes race as a social marker for ethnoracial categories (Monk, 2021). Light and dark skin serves as a proxy for a superior or inferior race, preserving similar social pathologies and racial quality-of-life outcomes (Hall, 2018). Therefore, as Jones (2009) denoted, "while racism may affect an individual regardless of the person's color, two individuals belonging to the same ethnoracial category may face differential treatment due to their varying skin tones" (p. 223).

As a hegemonic mainstay within the Black/White racial dichotomy, colorism has deep societal underpinnings in the United States, dating back to chattel slavery (Monk, 2021), as skin color (and kinship) determined an enslaved person's work assignment (Ware, 2013). Those with darker skin worked in the farm or fields, while those with lighter skin worked in the enslaver's house because they had direct kinship ties to the enslaver through sexual violence (Monk, 2021). In *the afterlife of slavery* (Hartman, 2008), color stratification ended no more than racism did, as intra-group colorism and white supremacist political-judicial structures determined the social and occupational status of light- and dark-complexioned Black people (Jones, 2009). This foreclosure on social mobility resulted in intergenerational dis/advantages (Monk, 2021) and negative cognitive biases (Maddox, 2004). Though colorism was rendered a Black-White issue,

skin tone stratification is not exclusive to Black people in the United States (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007; Hunter, 2007) because it is a global phenomenon (Hall, 2018). Despite verbal assertions of people not seeing race, there is no shortage of examples showcasing the geographic reach of skin tone stratification, as cases exist in India (Melwani, 2007), Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan (Li, Min, & Beck, 2008); Mexico (Hernandez, 2001), Brazil (Nascimento, 2007), and the Dominican Republic (Roth, 2008). The idealization of light skin as the zenith of humanity highlights that color discrimination is a cultural and political fact worldwide (Hall, 2018).

Despite the evidence of colorism permeating all facets of social life, the attempts to characterize this multifaceted and complex social phenomenon has fallen secondary to social science research due to the primacy and gravity of race. The academic *shading* of color obscures the analysis of how skin color is relevant to ethnoracial life chances and outcomes. Coupled with the colorism's media (in)visibility and lack of political recognition, this foreclosure is quite concerning (Monk, 2021). What is to be done about this absurd drama that surrounds us? It is imperative that we theorize in living color to address these enduring and pernicious attitudes surrounding skin tone to mitigate and improve ethnoracial inequalities. As guest editors of this special journal issue in *The Journal of Colorism Studies*, we invite you to illuminate the continuously unfolding and multifaceted manifestations of skin tone stratification in the U.S. and worldwide. Moreover, we invite you to explicate how skin tone discrimination is situated, operationalized, and machinated by structures of anti-blackness, settler colonization, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, xenophobia, ableism, and classism.

While this special issue may not provide formative solutions, we are interested in perspectives and analysis that will allow us to “rise above” (even temporarily) the absurd drama of colorism. Towards that end, we want to be quite intentional about who this special issue is for and/or about with our three declarations. Our first declaration is that this special issue seeks perspectives on colorism and skin tone stratification within and beyond the mainstream hegemony of the Black/White racial dichotomy. To suspend the damage (Tuck, 2009), our second declaration is that our project is centered on dissonance as a corrective mode of truth-telling (Lozenski, 2016) to illuminate the persistent and multifaceted colonial ideologies that situate color prejudice and color evasion. The third and final declaration is that this political project is not aiming to seek *if* the U.S. and the global world participate in structural color discrimination but is centered on the *how* and *why* motivations of structural color discrimination.

The Guest Editors welcome and encourage submissions from emerging faculty of color, as well as graduate students whose work primarily lies at the intersections of colorism and/or: Black Studies, Indigenous Studies, Ethnic Studies, Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, Critical Race Theory, Feminist Thought, and Popular Culture.

Specific subtopics may include, but are not limited to:

- Skin tone as a post-colonial racialized hierarchy and the policing of ethnoracial boundaries
- “Blanqueamiento” and the globalization of skin whitening (the Bleach Syndrome) as ideology and practice
- Blood quantum, racial purity, and one-drop rules
- The psychodynamics of colonialism, color, and desire
- Skin tone, law, and immigration
- The complexity of identity within biracial and multiracial people
- Miscegenation laws, interracial relationships, and the endowment of skin tone
- Critical Skin Theory (see Hall, 2018)
- Colorism, sexuality, and gender expression
- Color Struck, Racial Passings, and “honorary white people”
- Colorism within popular culture, sports, and social media
- Colorism, employment, and labor
- Colorism and criminal justice
- Skin tone and self-hate racial pathology
- Race-shifting, Blackfishing, and Pretendians in education and society
- Anti-Blackness and people-of-colorblindness (see Sexton, 2010) in the tri-racial order (see Bonilla Silva, 2006)

Proposals:

Proposals should be a word document containing the following: (a) tentative manuscript/podcast title, (b) author(s)’ names, affiliation(s), and email(s), and (c) a proposal (~500 words) of the planned contribution that includes: a summary of the critical issues regarding skin color stratification or questions the paper will address and its relevance to the special issue. Note: Authors who do not submit a brief proposal by the February 16, 2023 deadline may still submit a full manuscript/podcast by the May 26, 2023 deadline (however, we cannot guarantee full consideration of these submissions). Please submit your via the [Journal of Colorism Studies](#)’ website. You will be required to register and create a username and password.

Manuscripts:

Manuscripts should generally be 4,000-7000 words (all inclusive) in length, 12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced, APA-style, with 1-inch margins. Manuscripts should be written for an audience that has a vested interest in colorism studies and cares about the matterings, survivance, and life outcomes of those marginalized by skin tone stratification. The Guest Editors and the editorial team will preliminarily review manuscripts submitted to this special issue. Those deemed suitable for journal publication will be sent anonymously to external peer reviewers.

Podcasts

For audio works, please include:

Audio files, please submit this file type: MP3

Title,

All contributing authors,

Abstract or introduction, and

Transcript of the audio (this is a text version of the audio)

Tentative Manuscript/Podcast Timeline:

Proposal Submission Deadline: **February 10, 2023**

Special Editor's Response: **February 17, 2023**

Submission Deadline for Full Manuscripts/Podcasts and transcripts: **May 26, 2023**

First decisions regarding submitted manuscripts/podcasts: **June 30, 2023**

Revised manuscript/podcast submission deadline: **August 4, 2023**

Publication: **Mid August/Early September 2023**

If you have any queries or questions about submission, please email the guest editors: Drs. Amir Gilmore (amir.gilmore@wsu.edu) and Vikki Carpenter (carpenter_v@heritage.edu).

Thank you again for your interest, and we look forward to receiving your proposal!

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