

*UnPretty:* The Damaging Effects of Colorism

by

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## **The Pretty Privilege**

Many individuals are familiar with the concepts of racism and discrimination because those issues have historically been prevalent in society. However, most people are not familiar with the idea of colorism, which has also historically been an issue in society and is still prevalent in today's society. Colorism is discrimination based on skin tone. Colorism is present in every culture that has people of color. This is especially true in Latin communities.

Being Latinx is not based on race but instead of based on the country of origin. Latinos can be Black, White, Asian, multi-racial, etc. Colorism creates a singular idea of what a person of Latin descent is supposed to look.

Colorism has impacted me directly because I am an individual of African descent, but I am also Latin and Hispanic. If an individual is Black in the United States, people automatically assume they are African American. Many individuals think Black and African American are synonymous. I first realized this when people would assume just by looking at my mother that she was African American. My mother was born and raised in Panama; her first language is Spanish, and she identifies as being Hispanic and Latinx. However, when people first see her without hearing her speak, they automatically assume that she is African American. My mother does not fit society's expectations of how Latins are supposed to look. I will be investigating colorism in the Latin American community and how that impacts people at North Carolina State University.

## Why We Need to Talk About Colorism

Kids are incredibly impressionable. When I was five, my Mom told me if I kept making weird facial expressions, my face would get stuck in that facial expression. To this day, I only use two facial expressions, which are content and less content.

I have always known that I was Hispanic. From an early age, I knew that I was born in the country of Panama, and that my mother was Hispanic, and she spoke Spanish to my brother and me. I never really gave much thought to anything else. I was in fourth grade the first time someone took issue to the fact that I consider myself Hispanic and embraced my Latin heritage. For a standardized test, we had to fill out how we self-identify ethnically. When filling out the form, I immediately put Hispanic because that is how I identified. However, when my teacher saw that I put "Hispanic" on my form, she immediately told me to change it. Because I was Black, and if I was Black, and I did not "look Hispanic," I could not possibly be Hispanic. I did not know it then, but that was my first experience with the misconceptions of race, ethnicity, and how that influences colorism.

It is human nature for people to group and categorize themselves as one thing or another. That is one of the reasons why the concept of race exists. A person's race, is a socially constructed ideology that influences the world around us. Over time I have had the opportunity to take classes, study, and ideate over the concept of race. During this time, I have realized that this socially constructed system is not only discriminatory, but does not accurately group people that are supposedly part of the same group. Like my mother, I identify racially as Black and

ethnically Hispanic and Latinx, and I consider my nationality to be Panamanian-American. The way that I self-identify often surprises people, with some people even taking issue with the way I self-identify. Now and then, people accuse me of rejecting my Blackness. This often stems from the misconception that race and ethnicity are synonymous with one another. Although these two ideologies share some similarities, such as being socially constructed, they are inherently different. Race refers to a group of people believed to share common descent based on perceived innate physical similarities.

In contrast, ethnicity describes as a group of people with a shared cultural identification, based on a combination of language, religion, ancestral origin, and traditional practices (Cohen). Race relates more to the perceived biological origin, and ethnicity relates more to geographic origin. It is essential to understand that race and ethnicity are not contingent on one another; I hope to dispel the notion that just because a person is Black does not mean they cannot be Hispanic.

## **Mama, I Did Love You**

*From advertising to the way people are treated on a day to day basis, the world around us tells us if you are White, you are all right. If you are Black, you can get to the back. This was especially true in the pre-civil rights era. So, for a child of color growing up in the time discrimination can be an incredibly confusing concept to grasp. So, if a child has both parents who are of color, but they look like they are of European ancestry and can pass for White, what are they going to do? I'll tell you what they do. They are going to do*

*what they can to make life easier for them, which is presenting themselves as White. This happens to be the plot of the movie of the 1959 movie "Imitation of Life" So in this movie, the widowed Annie (who is Black and "looks" Black) has a daughter (Sarah Jane) who inherited her father's fair skin. Hence, Sarah Jane is able to pass for White, and she uses this to her advantage by going to a White school and participating in other White activities.*

*Time and time again, Sarah Jane's Mother shows up, and it is revealed that she is in fact, Black, and these privileges are essentially "taken away from her." Sarah Jane starts to resent Annie for not letting her pretend to be White, and as she gets older, she further distances herself from her mother, which takes a toll on her Annie. Sarah eventually runs away deepening Annie's depression until her mother eventually succumbs to grief and passes away, seemingly dying of a broken heart. Sarah Jane somehow finds out and is filled with regret. Sarah Jane arrives at the funeral as the casket is being placed into the hearse, then Sarah Jane runs through the crowd and starts crying on her mother's casket, saying, "Mama, I'm sorry. Mama, I didn't mean it. Mama, I did love you." But it is too late.*

*So why in the world would anyone spend their entire life trying to distance herself from their mother? Well, there are several answers which include colonialism, racism, colorism, but let's start with its origin: Slavery.*

To understand the implications that skin color has on one's place in society, we must first establish the precedent of why of being lighter is better from a societal standpoint. The discrimination based on skin color, or colorism, was a term that was first coined by author and social activist Alice Walker in 1982 that describes the preferential treatment of same-race individuals solely on their skin color. Although the term is believed to have been coined in 1982, colorism did not just appear overnight. Although the origins of colorism are not definitive, colorism in the United States, as well as Latin America, is linked to European Colonialism and slavery.

During the era of slavery, slave owners would tend to give preferential treatment to slaves that had lighter complexions, typically giving them indoor domestic tasks. At the same time, darker skin slaves would usually work in the fields and other outdoor areas. Slave owners gave preferential treatment to light-skinned slaves typically because they were often family members. Slave-owners frequently forced women into sexual intercourse, and light-skinned slaves' offspring were the result. Slave-owners usually did not officially recognize their mixed-race children, but they gave them privileges that dark skin slaves did not have the luxury of enjoying. As a result, being light skinned became an asset in the slave community, presently, colorism is tied to white supremacy. White supremacy asserts the belief that white individuals are superior to those of other races, so people of color who are lighter have European ancestry. Because of that, it automatically makes you "better" because you are less non-white than other non-white people.

Colorism in the Latin American community is one of the most complex forms of colorism for a multitude of reasons. Although colorism is described as preferential treatment to

same-race individuals, what makes colorism in the Latin American community unique is that being Latin is determined geography rather than race. Latinos do not identify with race, so they tend to use labels tied to their hair type, their skin color, and their facial features. Furthermore, Latin America never really had a racial justice movement by black people in Latin America until recently.

So why does colorism matter? Colorism has real-world implications that affect individuals economically. According to Shankar Vadantam, author of "The Hidden Brain: How our Unconscious Mind Elect President's, Control Markets, Wage Wars and Save Our Lives," there is preferential treatment for lighter-skinned individuals. Light skin Latinos make 5000 dollars more per year on average than dark skin Latinos. According to the United Nations World Population Review, one-third of the Latin American population is of African Descent. An estimated 40 percent of Afro-Latinos are among the poorest where they reside. In Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, where sizable communities of Blacks reside, they are among the poorest people. People of lighter complexion have better access to education, jobs, health care, representation in media, and better fit the European standard of beauty. These standards of beauty also influence Latin communities in the United States.

## **Dark Skins Need Not Apply**

*Have you ever heard of the actress Yalitza Aparicio? She is a Mexican actress whose film debut was in the movie Roma. This movie received much critical Acclaim. She was even*

*nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress. She was also named one of the "100 most influential people in the world" for 2019 and is the UNESCO Goodwill ambassador for indigenous people. But all of these accolades did not stop her from being subjected to people making fun of her and her features (because of her indigenous origin). There is a long history of people of color in the entertainment industry not being given opportunities to star in leading roles or being typecast for certain roles such as gang members and maids.*

Colorism has created a singular image of how a person of Latin descent is supposed to look. By reaffirming the narrative that Hispanics have to have lighter skin, straighter hair, and other Eurocentric features. It is unfathomable that Latin's can have more Afro or indigenous characteristics. Racial categorization negatively influences society because it establishes a racial hierarchy as well as allows systematic inequalities to persist. And this translates to a lack of Afro and Indigenous representation in Latin American Media. The starring roles in Telenovela's and other Latin American media almost always go to lighter skin Latinos or white-passing Latino's and leaving the part of housemaids and servants to Latins who have more Afro and indigenous features and characteristics.

## **Brown Paper Bag Test**

*Have you ever heard of the brown paper bag test? It's this wild concept imposed upon the Black community by the Black community. It's believed to started during the early 1920s around the Harlem Renaissance era where in order for black people to be able to*

*perform in clubs, (cotton club- Sidebar have you ever noticed how all of the entertainers at the cotton club were all light-skinned, there's a reasoning for that) attend certain events, or even be a part of Black fraternities and sororities (Divine Nine Greek organizations) they had to pass this thing called the brown paper bag test. The test is simple. Someone would hold up a brown paper bag next to you, and if you were lighter than the paper bag, you could participate, and if you were darker than the brown paper bag, you were simply turned away. And this was a common practice.*

The terms colorism and racism are not synonymous with one another. We previously discussed colorism and its' origins, but it still might be a difficult concept to grasp for those who are unfamiliar with it. So, it is important to distinguish the difference between racism and colorism. Racism involves discrimination based on many things such as skin color, but it is also dependent on power dynamics that have become perpetuated by years of structural oppression. Black and Latino men getting longer sentences for the same crime as white men is an example of racism. An example of colorism would be Black and Latino family members telling you to date and marry lighter skin men so your children would come out light, that it is an example of colorism.

Many people equate racism with skin color, which makes the idea of colorism difficult to understand. This is even more so difficult in Latin American communities because people of Latin descent can be mixed with African ancestry, Indigenous ancestry, and White European ancestry. And this all stems from Europeans bringing a Caste-like system to Latin American communities. In the 1700s, Spaniard's created extensive illustrations that depicted Spanish caste

classifications that were based on gender, race, skin color, and place of birth. These classifications set the groundwork for these hierarchies that equates whiteness with power and desirability. The implications of the 1700's caste system classifications still impact the Latinx community today. Lighter skin Latinos earn more money, complete more years of education, live in more integrated areas, and often have better mental health when compared to their darker-skinned counterparts.

Language has a significant impact on the perpetuation of colorism, like using the term mulatto to describe a mixed-race person. Cafre is a term that is used amongst people of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, the term means that you are acting low class or animalistic and is used by people of all racial backgrounds in the Spanish Caribbean. But its implications imply that you are acting dark skin in both complexions and behavior. This word carries a linguistic and cultural connection to the South African racial slur "Kaffir," which is a colonial phrase that rose to prominence during to apartheid and is often compared to the N-word in the United States. The term Cafre is an example of how colors and can become incorporated into everyday life.

Colorism alters the perception outsiders have of a particular group. Sociologist Lance Hannon of Villanova University used the data from the 2012 American national election study, and found that African Americans and Latino respondents with lighter skin were likely to be seen as more intelligent by whites compared to those with darker skin. A fact that is no surprise due to the substantial evidence of color-based discrimination in schools.

## **Dark Skinned and Dumb**

*I am by no means a hypebeast, however, I do like to keep up with the latest trends and exciting new releases of clothing, shoes, amongst other accessories. So it could be said that I was a little more than excited when I saw a picture of a mola inspired Nike Air Force One sneakers. As a Panamanian, I was obviously excited for the release of this sneaker, until I found out that this sneaker was a "Puerto Rican inspired" design paying homage to Puerto Rican culture, which was actually very upsetting to hear. You are maybe wondering why this was so upsetting. To understand it's important to know what a Mola is and where it comes from.*

*Mola or Molas are hand-made textiles part of the traditional women's clothing of the Guna (Kuna) People, which are the indigenous people of Panama. The Kuna people first used the geometric patterns which have been used for body painting. After the arrival of the Spanish, the Kuna people gained access to fabric and started transferring these designs. Mola designs often consist of flowers, animals, and humans and are considered "living history books," showing hidden symbols of medical plants, protective symbols, stories, and legends. Not to mention, Molas hold much importance to the Kuna and their traditional identity. A Mola is characterized by tiny, delicate stitches, bold designs, and bright colors, and this traditional fabric has admired from all over the world. So, it is not surprising that Nike wanted to incorporate the design into a sneaker design. However,*

*for Nike to suggest that this is a cultural practice originating in Puerto Rico, is completely tone-deaf and disrespectful to the Guna people, a simple Google search would show a ton of history that supports Mola originated from the Guna people. Eventually, an uproar ensued with people raising the same issues that I previously stated, and the release of these sneakers was canceled. I later told my Mom about the whole Nike situation and she stated she was not surprised that others were trying to take credit for the Mola designs because the Guna people are often disrespected and looked down upon.*

*The point of the story is to show that people in many Latin countries look down upon indigenous and other people of color. Believing that they are somehow less intelligent than others, and people try to take advantage of them for this.*

Understanding this subsystem of structural racism is crucial to understanding the dynamics of colorism in school because these two systems are connected and mutually reinforce one another. Although there is much evidence to support the discrimination of Latinos as a whole in school, the system of colorism describes the way that skin tone affects the intensity of discrimination amongst Latinos. Shockingly enough, these skin tone biases are not explicit and often unconscious biases. And colorism biases are conveyed in many interactions within the school environment, including student-teacher interactions, peer interactions, family-school interactions, and disciplinary procedures. (Hunter 56)

These biases again originate from European colonialism with the ideology that European intellectual contribution, language, religion, culture, and beauty aesthetics are somehow superior to all others. Colorism in school is perpetuated by elevating the value of white aesthetics so that positive traits are associated with whiteness, and negative characteristics are associated with Blackness and Indigeneity. These practices often lead to the psychological phenomenon known as the Halo Effect. The Halo Effect is when positive traits, such as physical attractiveness, are equated to other characteristics such as intelligence, kindness, and likability. A color-based Halo Effect is often seen in schools with white children being perceived to have many positive traits simply because they are white. (Hunter 56).

A color-based Halo Effect operates in the same way, but the skin tone of a person would more so influence it. So lighter skin people of color are often viewed as more physically attractive based on the European standard of beauty and are often judged to be more intelligent and kinder. Color-based Halo Effect has severe implications in the classroom. Lighter skinned Latinos are often seen as more favorable to the teacher because of these racialized beauty standards. Lighter skinned Latino students are more likely to be deemed good kids by their teacher, which could also cause a student to student to perform better because of the positive influential teacher interactions. Teachers would even perceive these students to have fewer behavioral problems (Hunter 56).

Skin tone-based Halo Effect is not limited to student-teacher interaction; it is also present in parent-teacher interaction as lighter skinned parents also benefit from the Halo Effect. For example, if a parent with lighter skin meets with a teacher to discuss an improvement strategy for

the student or forgiveness for unfavorable behavior of the student, the Halo Effect suggests that this interaction is more likely to have a positive outcome than if a darker skin parent made a similar request. (Hunter 57)

Peer interaction also has a substantial impact on students in a school environment. Although boys and girls experience differences in color-based discrimination, both genders experience has serious negative implications. Dark skin girls are often subject to discrimination based more on physical appearance, which in turn will impact their social statuses, such as social elections, sports teams, and student organizations. Colorism also has a significant impact on school disciplinary procedures and policies. There is substantial evidence that shows the inequalities in disciplining Latino boys in school; they are more likely to be removed from the classroom, suspended from school, as well as experience expulsion from school entirely. This is significant because students that have experienced school disciplinary actions are more likely to be incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system as adults, known as school to prison pipeline (Hunter 58). It is well established that race-based discrimination is present in the justice system. Still, color-based bias suggests dark-skinned individuals are more likely to experience longer sentences from for the same crime. However, color-based discrimination is not a lost cause; there are ways to combat this form of discrimination in the school system. Now that people are aware of this phenomenon, we can start by changing people's attitudes and changing policies. Schools can start initiatives to educate people on the matter, for example, during Latino heritage month, rather than talking about past heroes and leaders, discussions can be had about issues that currently affect students. Combating this discrimination also involves getting more teachers and administrators that look like the students that face discrimination—and having teachers take

classes to be aware of the biases they may have (Hunter 59). Combating colorism in school will not happen overnight, it is an ongoing effort to be worked on day in and day out to see positive changes.

### **When I Say Wolf, You Say Pack, Wolf-**

*I do not know if anyone else remembers this happening, but during my first year at State, an incident occurred at Wolf Village where a student (who was Black) went to his car and found on it was a carton of chocolate milk, an Afro pick, and a box of Popeye's fried chicken. The investigation did not go far, and we did not hear much about it afterward, but any person with any sense would assume that this incident was racially motivated. The fact that I have spoken with other students who seemingly have no recollection of this happening shows that topics of racism and discrimination are not present in people's minds as most are not cognizant of issues that do not directly affect them i.e. racism.*

When it comes to issues such as colorism, it is sad to say that some of my peers are blissfully unaware that it even exists. This is not surprising because as I stated before, colorism is a subsystem of racism, and many students at North Carolina State University do not even acknowledge the racial issues that exist at NC State. But that does not mean that addressing issues of discrimination at NC State is impossible. If at any point while reading this you felt uncomfortable, good. This topic should not make you feel comfortable; you should not be satisfied with ongoing discrimination happening around you. People should take their discomfort

and put it into action so that eventually, colorism and racism are studied as history, a thing of the past.

## **Conclusion**

Colorism is a subsystem of racism. These two forms of discrimination mutually enforce one another. There is a long road ahead to combat these forms of discrimination, but it is not impossible

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