

THE PUBLICNESS OF THE PRIVATE:  
ARTICULATIONS OF COLORISM IN POPULAR MEDIA, 1982-2012

by

NICOLA AMANDA CORBIN

(Under the Direction of James F. Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the discursive production of colorism (intra-race gender and skin-color discrimination) in select popular media by using articulation as a theoretical and methodological foundation. Materials examined include Alice Walker's (1983) nonfiction collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* and accompanying literary reviews, a random sample of 133 issues of *Essence* magazine, and the promotional trailer for the documentary *Dark Girls*, the film's official online promotional materials and sites, and corresponding online responses. The project concludes that a key way colorism is produced discursively is through the articulation of a black women's historically produced politics of respectability within a broader opposition between the private and the public. This articulation inhibits the critical potential of some challenges that have been made to colorism. The study concludes by suggesting ways for progressive challenge to colorism.

INDEX WORDS: Race, gender, black women, colorism, *Essence*, *Dark Girls*, articulation, respectability politics, human skin color, intra-race discrimination, magazines, documentary, feminist theory, articulation theory

THE PUBLICNESS OF THE PRIVATE:  
ARTICULATIONS OF COLORISM IN POPULAR MEDIA, 1982-2012

by

NICOLA AMANDA CORBIN

B.A., Seton Hall University, 1999

M.A., New York University, 2003

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2013

© 2013

Nicola Amanda Corbin

All Rights Reserved

THE PUBLICNESS OF THE PRIVATE:  
ARTICULATIONS OF COLORISM IN POPULAR MEDIA

by

NICOLA AMANDA CORBIN

Major Professor: James F. Hamilton

Committee: Anandam Kavoori  
Elli Lester Roushanzamir  
Leara Rhodes  
Patricia Richards

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2013

## DEDICATION

For you, dearest Mackenzie, my muse, life's work and raison d'être.

And for the one person I wish was here to see me achieve this – my darling Iva A. Corbin.

You taught me to be the woman I am today and I will always cherish you.

May we rise, dark girls!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The saying “it takes a village” is not only applicable to the raising of small children. For this woman would never have reached this stage without her village. And for these villagers, I am eternally thankful and grateful. James Hamilton, there is a special honorary doctorate in store for you. For your guidance, persistence, structure, reliability and empathy, I will always be grateful. I can only hope to be half the scholar and adviser that you were to me, but I will darn well try. Leara Rhodes, I am so happy and thankful for all of your support, for granting me permanent houseguest status, and for lending me your ears complete with a glass of wine. To the rest of my committee, Elli Roushanzamir, Patricia Richards and Andy Kavoori, thank you for your time and efforts. Angela Nelson-Bishop, thank you for practically and emotionally aiding me on this journey, and for being there when my Kenzie came home. Really, it won't have been possible without you. And thanks to all my family, friends, and undergraduate mentors, Dr. Amy K. Nyberg and Dr. Maurice O. Ene, who supported, encouraged and believed in me. A special thank you to the matriarch – Ainsley Corbin for being a tireless cheerleader. Joan and Robert Alvarez, you have been such staunch practical and emotional supporters. I won't have been able to contemplate this journey without you – thank you. Finally, thank you to my parents, Pearlina David and Charles Corbin, each of whom helped me to make this achievement possible. Mom, thank you for your unwavering belief in me. CMC, you will always be an inspiring enigma, and a long stick against which I can take measure of the world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....  | v    |
| CHAPTER   |      |
| 1 COLORISM CONSIDERED .....   | 1    |
| Colorism.....   | 3    |
| Literature Review .....   | 9    |
| The Study .....   | 15   |
| Research Questions and Source Materials.....                                | 18   |
| Addressing Colorism as an Articulation.....                                 | 22   |
| 2 THE ART OF FACT: FEMINIST AESTHETICS IN THE INVENTION OF<br>COLORISM..... | 24   |
| Second-Wave Feminism and Social Theory.....                                 | 26   |
| The Emergence of Colorism.....  | 30   |
| Colorism’s Challenge Tamed .....  | 35   |
| Conclusion .....  | 39   |
| 3 SELF-HELP AND COLORISM IN <i>ESSENCE</i> .....                            | 41   |
| Assimilation, Separatism and Uplift.....                                    | 43   |
| Politics of Respectability .....  | 44   |
| Respectability and Magazines .....  | 47   |
| Colorism and Respectability in <i>Essence</i> Magazine .....                | 52   |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Conclusion .....   | 68  |
| 4 ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY AND COLORISM IN <i>DARK GIRLS</i> .....                                 | 69  |
| Transgressing Dissembling Silence .....  | 70  |
| Dissemblance and Transgression.....  | 75  |
| Documentary and the Production of Safe, Disruptive Space.....                                  | 79  |
| Conclusion .....   | 90  |
| 5 CONCLUSION: LOOSENING THE LINES OF TENDENTIAL FORCE .....                                    | 92  |
| Summary of Study .....   | 92  |
| Colorism: Articulating Respectability, Gender and Race.....                                    | 97  |
| Mapping Colorism Within a Constellation.....   | 100 |
| Extending This Study.....  | 102 |
| Conclusion .....   | 103 |
| REFERENCES .....   | 104 |
| APPENDICES   |     |
| A LITERARY REVIEWS OF <i>IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS:</i><br><i>WOMANIST PROSE</i> ..... | 117 |
| B <i>ESSENCE</i> MAGAZINE ISSUES REVIEWED .....  | 119 |

## CHAPTER 1

### COLORISM CONSIDERED

Tortured face dissolves into another tortured face. Each interviewee speaks her truth, recounting painful pasts and voicing anxieties about the future. Some speak matter-of-factly, some choke back tears, others let them run unchecked. All are women. Darker-skinned black women.

*Dark Girls*, a documentary released in 2011 about color, gender and race, brings to light “colorism” (gendered intra-racism) as it is perpetuated against darker-skinned African-heritage women and girls. It is inextricably linked to North American institutionalized slavery, and everyone with biological ties to the African diaspora is subjected to and by it. This legacy is joined to a dominant patriarchal structure within which women’s worth and value are determined by their physical appearance. As such, colorism complicates the conventional separation of race from gender, and thus the separation of racism from sexism. While the relevance of skin color for physical attractiveness and success is comparatively negligible for dark-skinned African-heritage men, the opposite is too often the case for dark-skinned African-heritage women, for whom skin color has become a dominant, if not primary determinant of physical attractiveness. It is in this way that colorism is gendered. Skin color signifies in one way for black men, but in a very different way for black women.

Buoying this argument is *Dark Girls* co-director Bill Duke’s observation that women bear the brunt of the impact of colorism (Bates, 2012). As darker-skinned men themselves, Duke and co-director D. Channsin Berry cite their own observations and experiences with female family members and friends as some of the key reasons for making this documentary.

As intra-racism/sexism, the phenomenon has been treated largely as a secret held within American black communities, but no longer. *Dark Girls* has been the subject of very public and general interest. The discussion of colorism has moved beyond exclusively black circles, thus opening up the range of the viewing audience and discussions. Not only have the filmmakers created a documentary that places dark-skinned black women at the center of the narrative, they also pursued a very public means of telling the story. It is usually a struggle for the independent film to find distribution within the U.S. film industry, and it is even more difficult for what is perceived and marketed as a “black” documentary. However, *Dark Girls* broke from this pattern. Its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2011, subsequent showing at the 2012 Pan African Film Festival (where it won the Audience Choice Award), and screenings in major U.S. cities placed it on a platform from which it was reported on by mainstream media outlets such as *The Washington Post* and *National Public Radio*, and covered by various local radio stations and Internet blogs. This coverage catapulted the film, along with the usually private issue of colorism, into the public sphere of dominant mainstream society. The film was released on *OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network* on June 23, 2013 prompting more discussion, and temporary trending status on Twitter.

While *Dark Girls*’ presentation of the dilemma of colorism is recent and stark, it is not the only example of its representation. Nor is colorism represented in other media the same way, nor with the same response. To investigate this variability, this dissertation seeks to explore the nature of colorism through a selection of prominent media representations. Foregrounding media representations is important, as this study will propose, because colorism is not biological or natural, but a socio-cultural phenomenon that has been produced through practices of communication. Furthermore, because colorism is an unstable, historically malleable

phenomenon, this study will use a similarly historical and flexible mode of analysis. It traces the explicitly named phenomenon in Alice Walker's 1982-83 literary essay, in the popular black women's magazine *Essence* over the course of the publication's existence, as well as in *Dark Girls* and attendant online discussions. By addressing colorism in these different ways, this study seeks to contribute to a vast range of scholarly work dedicated to the denaturalization of race and gender. The hope in doing so is that critical attention to the pressures and processes that form them in too-often repressive ways might assist in their reformation in more supportive, healthy and productive ways.

### **Colorism**

Colorism shares with racism both subtle and overt claims of inferiority and superiority about one's beauty, intelligence, moral character, status and other social factors based on the external phenotypic markers of skin tone, hair texture, eye color and other facial features of people regarded as being of the same race. It differs from racism in that these judgments are primarily made in-group — in this case, within the “black community.”<sup>1</sup> It is similar to sexism in that skin color judgments weigh more heavily on black women than black men. When its racial and sexist facets are both taken into account, colorism means that black women who share physical features that resemble a European phenotype commonly are considered superior (although scaled depending on how many similarities one possesses) while the opposite is true for those whose physical features appear more African.

Many scholars have helped build an understanding of the degree to which colorism in the United States is an historical product generated by a social and economic sub-hierarchical

---

<sup>1</sup> In the interests of readability, from this point on quotations around terms such as “black,” “white,” and so on will no longer be used. However, seemingly essentialized terms of race and gender should nevertheless be understood throughout this document as social and historical articulations.

structure constructed by white slave owners in attempts to deal with the consequences of interracial couplings, whether through rape, interracial marriage or otherwise (Blalock, 1967; Harris, 1964; Hodes, 1997; Hoetink, 1973; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). In such a society, whites granted greater access, privilege, and better opportunities to mixed-race people in plantation society, in part to credit their own white heritage (upholding a hierarchy of superiority) and to acknowledge their own offspring to varying degrees as allowed by the law. What resulted was a buffer class of people who were racially mixed with European, African and in some cases, Native American ancestry. In many cases, those deemed as belonging to this class had greater access to educational, employment, social and religious opportunities than those deemed more fully African (Herring, 2004). Through this process and over time, a “lighter is righter” ideology emerged (a colloquial saying based on the traditional adage “white is right”). Considered at the top of the still-subservient African totem pole due to the intricacies of the “one-drop rule” (which categorized anyone of African ancestry as black, no matter how far removed, and if only possessing even one “drop” of African blood), members of this buffer class nevertheless also sought to maintain these divisions (Herring, 2004; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

The perpetuation of this intra-race hierarchy has manifested itself historically in various ways. For example, a range of informal tests have been used to police social events and organization memberships. The more tests passed, the better one’s prospects were in society. For example, the “paper-bag test” determined who would be admitted to a social event. In this test, the skin tone of those admitted must be lighter than the color of a brown paper bag. The “ruler test” required hair texture to be straighter than a ruler. The “comb test” ensured that a fine-tooth comb can easily pass through one’s hair. Membership in the “blue-vein society” required one’s

skin tone to be light enough to see blood in the veins. Passing these tests allowed greater access to educational, social and religious opportunities (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

As only one example of how use of these tests became institutionalized, Russell, Wilson and Hall (1992) assert that the split in the Methodist Episcopal Church was a result of skin-tone discrimination using the paper-bag test, or a variation in which churches painted a shade of brown at their door to test potential members. The response to this exclusive membership took shape in the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination for darker-skinned people who were not permitted to worship in the renamed Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) congregations (later named Christian Methodist Episcopal) (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). Similarly, historically black colleges and universities such as Spelman, Morehouse and Howard have been accused of discriminatory admissions practices that privileged lighter-skinned applicants, propelling enrollment of darker-skinned applicants into colleges such as Tuskegee University and the Bethune-Cookman College (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

A growing body of research and commentary acknowledges the persistence of non-gender-specific, intra-racial discrimination. Darker-skinned African/black Americans are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status, more punitive relationships with the criminal justice system, diminished prestige and are less likely to hold elected office compared with their lighter-skinned counterparts (e.g. Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Viglione, Hannon & DeFina, 2011). Black job seekers in the 1900s advertised themselves as light-skinned in efforts to improve their chances of being employed (Staples, 2008). And newspaper personal ads have also come to display a preference toward potential mates who have light skin and long hair (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

From the children's rhyme<sup>2</sup> (re-imagined by the Rev. Joseph Lowery at the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009) that stratifies one's societal position based on skin tone, to the politically correct apology Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid made to President Obama in 2010, for once predicting that Obama was electable because he was "light-skinned" with no "Negro dialect unless he wanted to have one" (Zeleny, 2010), the history of intra-racial color stratification is long. Exemplified by the addition of a category that accounts for skin-color discrimination in the workplace, an increase in such suits have been recorded at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The number has risen from 905 resolutions in fiscal year 1997 to 3, 138 in 2012, with a high of 3, 208 in 2011 (EEOC). One notable example of such a suit is the 2003 filing by a darker-skinned Applebee's employee who accused a lighter-skinned African American manager of verbal abuse based on the employee's skin tone. The manager is reported to have called him derogatory names such as "black monkey" and "tar baby," telling him to use bleaching creams (HR.BLR.com). Applebee's settled the suit for \$40,000 and added skin-tone discrimination to its training curriculum.

Such examples need to be broadened in order to recognize the gendered nature of intra-racial discrimination, which is colorism. Everyday examples of colorism's persistence abound in popular culture. Up until the 1960s, men attending black fraternity parties with darker-skinned dates were required to pay more for admission (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). Pop singer Beyonce Knowles has been condemned (and defended) for appearing considerably lightened in her album covers and cosmetic commercials (Wilson, 2012). Publisher Bloomsbury Children Books was accused of "white-washing" when it used to a white model on the cover of the novel *Liar* - a story about a darker-skinned, nappy-haired African American girl in New York City

---

<sup>2</sup> "If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're yellow, you're mellow; if you're white, you're all right." A different version of the children's rhyme exists in the British Caribbean and Guyana: "If you white, you all right; If you brown, stick around; If you black, stay back or you betta attack"

(Ross, 2009). The cover was changed to a lighter-skinned model with big ringlets, still not in complete alignment with the character's depiction. In its defense, the publisher argued that the cover was reflective of the psychological state of the protagonist. A Detroit DJ in 2007 advertised through pictorial depictions and text on fliers a "light-skinned Libra birthday bash" to which light-skinned black women would have free admission. The DJ subsequently defended himself, after the publicity fallout, claiming that he also planned "sexy chocolate" and "sexy caramel" parties (Bennett, 2007).

This emphasis directed at African-heritage women in relation to skin color, hair type and physical features continues to manifest itself in other ways. Black-identifying women expressed relief, if not also open elation, that U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama is not the classic light-skinned, long-haired, mixed-race prototype that has come to be associated with black male high-profile figures (whether true or not) despite her documented and publicized mixed-race ancestry (e.g. Anna, 2007). In contrast to such elation, black-identifying people disparaged U.S. Olympic gymnast and gold-medal winner Gabby Douglas for her nappy hair (McEwan, 2012).

### *Colorism as gendered intra-racism*

Although colorism is privately acknowledged in many parts of African American and African-diasporic communities, the subject is still considered taboo for open discussion in mixed-race settings. One *Washington Post* writer called it "the crazy aunt in the attic of racism" (Brown, 2009). Those who have called attention to it have been accused of "airing dirty laundry" despite the knowledge of its rampant negative effects on people of color. For example, the co-directors of *Dark Girls* were publicly criticized for doing just that during one of the discussion sessions following a screening of the documentary. Film co-producer Bill Duke's response for why he

aired this dirty laundry was that “it was stinkin’ up the house” (Bates, 2012). Similarly, Spike Lee was lambasted for his depictions in his 1988 film *School Daze* (Aftab & Lee, 2005).

What makes colorism so complex is that it articulates race to and through gender, thus connecting what are often treated as separate but also making each integral to the other. It is a complexity that has been well documented in film, literature and music. Notably, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* receive acclaim in part for their attention to colorism and its negative ramifications for both darker-skinned and lighte-skinned women (Hurston, 1937/2006; Morrison, 1970/1994; Walker, 1982b). Films such as *Imitation of Life* (1959) and *Pinky* (1949) are early explorations of the tragic ramifications for lighter-skinned women. Other films that include or address issues of colorism include Lee’s *School Daze* (1988) and *Jungle Fever* (1991). Similar to *Dark Girls* (2011), *A Girl Like Me* (2005), *The Souls of Black Girls* (2008) and the Shadeism movement (Thiyagarajah, 2010) focus on the impact of skin-color discrimination on women and girls. Music artists such as India.Arie celebrate the beauty of her *Brown Skin*, while dancehall reggae artist Nardo Ranks lambasts women who bleach “to look like a browning.” (India.Arie, Broady & Sanders, 2001; Ranks, 2009).

Based on these and other instances of the production of and resistance to colorism by African-heritage women, how and in what ways race becomes articulated through gender thus continues to be a matter of great importance for critical scholars. In addition, the emergence of the documentary *Dark Girls* and the response to it have produced the need for a similar degree of attention to colorism by critical media scholars. The extent to which the documentary and the resulting online discussions reproduce and/or challenge the phenomena becomes an issue of great importance to women and girls in the African diaspora as well as to global society.

## Literature Review

Although media scholars have treated race and gender in a variety of ways, they differ greatly in their conceptualization depending on their ontological perspectives. Approaches run the gamut from treating race as a biologically, pre-defined, immutable category, to acknowledging that these and other categories intersect or work together to create different structural and subjective realities, to the argument that these “natural” categories are historically and socially constructed.

Despite the range of these approaches and their important findings, when taken as a whole, these studies have yet to fully break from essentialized notions of race and gender. While not necessarily a problem for positivist scholarship, critical and cultural scholars face a conundrum because the basis of such work is to critique these and other essentialisms. However, much work from critical perspectives on race and gender also has yet to fully denaturalize race and gender.

### *Positivist social-scientific perspectives*

While seeking to address racism and sexism, positivist social-scientific research in mass communication scholarship tends generally to essentialize race and gender, reducing these conceptual constructions to physical features such as skin color and sex. Furthermore, racism and sexism are construed as separate and discrete problems.

A considerable amount of such research works from a functionalist perspective, which incarnates itself in mass communication through an assessment of the roles or functions of mass media in society. Media functions of surveillance (a watchdog role to alert the public to threats to the status quo); correlation (an interpretive role to help the audience understand and connect the events of society), and transmission (a definitional role which, through portrayals, representation

and coverage, assists in the perpetuation and maintenance of societal norms) are originally credited to Lasswell (1949). They since have been updated and adapted to include entertainment (diversionary and enjoyment role) and economic service (business role with duties to shareholders in terms of maximizing profit and commoditizing audiences). More recently, scholars recognize that these roles are by no means mutually exclusive.

Studies of race and gender from a functionalist perspective concentrate on the relationship between the transmission function of communication and imbalances in its conduct due to having too many or too few of people of particular racial or gender categories, whether in a particular media source, the audience, or within the media message, its production or its management. Such questions are premised on a view of race and gender as static, presupposed, assumed categories that are separate and distinct from each other. They typically become two categorical variables that assist in the organization of analysis, while seldom, if ever, being the subject of the analysis itself.

Functionalist studies tend to consist of studies of uses and effects, discrimination and bias, inclusion and segmentation, and representation. Uses/gratifications and effects studies examine the reasons, motivations and resulting implications—organized along the pre-supposed categories of race and gender—for media functions. Examples of such studies include those of radio uses (e.g. Berkman, 1966); the press (e.g. Roscho, 1967; Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah & Alter, 2008); magazines (e.g. Duke, 2000); television (e.g. Hall, 2005); online games (e.g. Byeng-hee, Seung-Eun & Byoung-Sun, 2006); blogs (e.g. Sweetser & Kaid, 2008; Schradie, 2012); general Internet use (e.g. Appiah, 2003) and social networks (e.g. Shaheen, 2008).

Discrimination and bias studies examine the lack of media content about women and racial minorities. They argue that instituting a critical mass of heretofore underrepresented

people in the workplace should increase coverage and diversity of perspectives presented. The implicit assumption of such work hinges on a powerful effects/mass society model through which such adjustments alter people's personal views of women and racial minorities. However, and again, race and gender are pre-supposed as static and invariant categories, rather than viewed as a topic of analysis.

A number of examples help deepen understanding of this approach. From an institutional perspective, Knopf (1970) investigated journalistic practices and sensibilities, questioning pre-existing assumptions of journalists and their implications for the shaping of news coverage. Some studies advocate for the revision of journalistic ethical considerations (e.g. Klein, 1968) while others broach issues of production, primarily in the area of agenda-setting, such as story and source selection, and determination of who are legitimate sources, particularly through a racialized lens (e.g. Williams, 1970; Poindexter & Stroman, 1980). Still others examine the ways in which imbalances of race and gender affect journalistic autonomy (Liebler, 1994); how women and minority reporters use sources (Zeldes & Fico, 2005; 2010); the role of race in source and story topic selection (Owens, 2008), and race and ethical reasoning (Coleman, 2003).

Studies of race and gender that examine media representations can more accurately be termed influence studies, because they examine the implications of particular portrayals on audiences, or their roles in the shaping of the public imaginary. While studies of representation examine race and gender through images and language, too often they become simplified examinations of the text and mappings of what these mean to audiences, how stereotypes are perpetuated, or whether they are symptomatic of a fixed structural reality. More often than not, such influence studies trend toward the examination of stereotypes. Wilson II and Gutiérrez (1995) peel back the many roles of representation and stereotypes in their investigation of race

and media, as do Byerly and Ross (2006) in their analysis of women and media. This fixation on stereotypes reifies race and gender, while also explaining the mechanism of media effects as a psychological ‘monkey see, monkey do’ of social-learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

Studies originating in advertising and marketing also examine stereotypes, but with the hope of discovering how to effectively segment markets based on race and gender, or how best to represent minorities in ads. For example, they assess the different ways people of color and women might be used in advertising such as displaying both black and white people together (e.g. Cagley & Cardozo, 1970) or targeting particular markets using principals that bear physical likeness to those markets (e.g. Gould, Sigband & Zepner, 1970; Cohen, 1970; Wheatley, 1971).

While contributing some empirical understanding of the extent of these problems in media practice, the underlying essentialized notions of race render them as static, pre-existing and invariant categories. In doing so, race and gender are the taken-for-granted starting point for analysis, instead of themselves and their constitution becoming topics of analysis.

### *Toward more critical perspectives*

In contrast to positivist social-scientific work which rely on race and gender as stable attributes, other approaches attempt to account for larger social processes that help produce them and their effectivity. Notable is Gerbner’s cultivation analysis that attempted to meld microscopic, audience-based perspectives with the macroscopic cultural theories (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). Heavily criticized for its technological determinism and for a variety of methodological issues, cultivation theory also suffers from the implicit categorizations and assumptions regarding race, gender and passive audiences.

Other critical and cultural scholars who draw some insights from cultural Marxism seek to theorize race and gender not only simultaneously, but also in ways that overcome the fixed, essentialized assumptions. However, this has been done with varying levels of success

By acknowledging that race and gender are not discrete and isolated, many critical scholars have found it useful to consider them as intersecting or interlocking systems of domination, and intertwined social, political and historical constructions. For example, important contributions have been made by the critical feminist work of women of color. Drawing upon Marxist critiques of class structures, Collins (1993) argues that race, gender and class need to be considered together as interlocking systems of domination. Such a perspective arose as a critique of the feminist movement which, she argues, did not represent the realities of black women who stood at the intersections of racial and gender categories, thus resulting in entirely different experiences. Similarly, other feminist scholars of color such as Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) and Mohanty (1988) raised critiques based on other racial, social, ethnic, sexual and national categories. Despite the immense usefulness of these calls for inclusiveness and their more nuanced perspectives, the underlying assumptions still require stable categories of race, gender and every other included category, even with the acknowledgement of the historical, social, economic and political processes that combine them.

Another issue that pervades such theoretical formulations is how the commonly used structural perspective undermines the role of agency. Where such a preoccupation begs a discussion of the origin and primacy of these structures, the lack of such discussions essentializes these structures. Such issues become apparent in Gimenez' argument (2001) for class as the premier structure, or Higginbotham's (1992) premise that race is a metalanguage, or critical-race

theorists' focus on race as the primary structuring tool of analysis, just as some feminists might argue that gender is.

While scholars such as Collins (1993) attempt to overcome these problems, underlying essentialist assumptions stubbornly persist. Specific to media studies, Collins presents her argument about what she calls “controlling images,” otherwise known as stereotypes, that pervade media representation of black women.<sup>3</sup> Many media studies of race and gender that use a critical, cultural approach often make use of this or similar controlling-image theses to understand the historical construction of these phenomena and to argue for their impact on audiences.

These arguments offer valuable critiques of social realities. Yet, too often what lies behind these and similar arguments is the idea that media are passive reflections of an existing social reality, which in turn will be learned and perpetuated by a passive audience. Such an idea brings the matter back into the postpositivist ontological assumptions discussed above, as well as the problem of essentializing race and gender. Additionally, race and gender are treated as mutually exclusive regimes of domination or pre-existing regimes to consider as complexes or intersections.

### *Scholarship on colorism*

Although some scholars have addressed colorism, they too tend to employ race and gender as essentialized categories, even while being necessarily grounded in historical processes and contemporary social and political processes that assist in colorism's perpetuation. Many do little more than document the extent of the phenomenon, raise consciousness, and agitate against the

---

<sup>3</sup> Collins names these “controlling images as mammy, matriarch, jezebel/sapphire and welfare mother.” Theorists have added others to the list such as the chickenhead and video vixen.

existence of colorism and its ramifications. Formally beginning about the time of the Clark doll study (1940) that documents skin color as a factor in the racial identification of children, scholars have looked at the implications of skin tone discrimination as it affects sentencing outcomes in the criminal justice system (e.g. Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns & Johnson, 2006), hiring and promotion opportunities (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), self-esteem formation (e.g. Thompson & Keith, 2001) and marriage prospects (e.g. Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Ross, 1997) to name a few. Very often, explorations of colorism in media studies are relegated to discourses of representation in the forms of stereotypes, and social-learning perspectives complete with the attendant issues as previously discussed.

Thus, in sum, and despite many useful and important findings, current research relevant to the intentions of this study has yet to sufficiently establish a critical perspective from which to address race and gender in non-essentialized terms. Treating race and gender as natural gives reify them as pre-existing, biological realities beyond human reach and ability to change. Treating race and gender as social and historical constructions goes only so far in addressing this problem. It places race and gender back into the social and historical world, but they are too often still viewed as independent of each other or as pre-existent, necessary building blocks of more complex intersections, an implicit essentialism that retains all of its difficulties.

### **The Study**

While the logical irrationality and experiential basis of colorism as a gendered intra-race discrimination presents a strong argument for not essentializing race and gender, perspectives through which mass media scholars have conducted their analyses remain largely inadequate due to an insufficiently critical, non-essentializing position from which to address colorism. Whether

genetic/biological or historical/political, the assumptions of race and gender too often remain the starting point for analysis of colorism or pre-existent building blocks for more complex analyses, rather than topics of investigation in their own right.

Thus, as a response to this literature, and to extend the study of colorism and the understanding of the racing of gender (as well as of the gendering of race), this dissertation addresses colorism not as a biological and genetic given, nor simply as a social and historical construction, but as a fully relational phenomenon, which has no effectivity independent of its constitutive relations.

To do so, this study draws on Stuart Hall's conceptualization of articulation as theory and method. In general, articulation as a theory refers to the linking and connecting of socially constructed, oftentimes dissimilar, elements under particular conditions. As these particular conditions change, the links and connections may break or dissolve. With such action, these socially constructed elements may then connect with other socially constructed elements in different ways (Slack, 1996). Articulation's effectiveness lies in its emphasis on the contingent nature of these connections, which are often steeped in and propelled by historically specific and complex social, institutional, technical, economic and political relations (Hall, 1986). This contingency premise emphasizes the historical constructedness of social elements and posits that conditions or elements need not necessarily be as they might appear.

Articulation avoids the problems of reductionism and essentialism. It provides a non-essentializing means of analysis by focusing its attention not on the phenomenon as an essential given, but on the processes, social relations and linkages that connect different elements and thus produce the phenomenon. Further, articulation recognizes that these so-called elements are not objects, elemental and absolute, but are themselves articulations with other, different linkages

and connections (Slack, 2005). Through the theoretical lens of articulation, race and gender as evidenced in colorism can be alternatively conceptualized as an unstable, shifting articulation that produces real, material ramifications.

Hall (1986) applies articulation directly to matters of race and gender by drawing upon Gramsci's work to present a case against the essentializations and reductionisms of race, ethnicity and gender. Theoretically, he pivots sharply away from the ontological assumptions underlying much of the literature presented above that posits these categories as an unproblematic starting point.

By emphasizing the contingent nature of the articulations through their flows and movements through time and space, one avoids the reification of any one material object, practice or process. It suggests instead a relational, mutual constitution of context in and through practices, processes and so-called "things."

As much a method as a theory, articulation allows the informed and deliberate mapping of the articulations (the linkages and connections) that mutually constitute the phenomenon and themselves (Slack, 2005). The mapping of different contextual processes into constellations or assemblages brings into focus a bigger, more complex, integrative, but always fluid picture (Slack, 2005). Recognizing that race and gender are themselves articulations constituted within processes, practices and material affects, the investigation of colorism via its articulations conceives of the phenomenon as a dynamic, contingent juncture that defies static, pre-formed ideas, and that also resists essentialism and reductionism.

Moreover, the theoretical position of articulation enables a critical rather than reifying intellectual project. It involves not only the identification of constitutive forces, but also a relational mapping of how these forces are articulated and assembled. Insights thus generated can

make possible progressive paths of action (ones that are not present in studies that employ essentialized notions of race and gender) through which change might be effected.

The fact that forms of colorism appear to be just as insidious on the so-called black woman in contemporary times as during slavery speaks to what Hall (1996) calls “lines of tendential force” (p.142), those articulations that are so strongly linked or connected that they appear permanent or fused. However, as Slack (2005) points out, having a clear view of the articulations within their assemblages allows the location of these tendential lines and those looser connections. It is at this point that a critical scholar can make an informed assessment of how one might effect change.

### **Research Questions and Source Material**

Examining colorism not as a merging of pre-existing and stable categories but as an historically variable articulation generates the different questions that this study seeks to address.

- 1) What are some key cultural formations, forms and practices that articulate colorism as a named and explicit social phenomenon?
- 2) What are some key ways in which these formations, forms and practices produce colorism as a material phenomenon? And with what political implications and possibilities?
- 3) What are some important, broader implications for progressive change by addressing colorism as an articulation?

To address these questions, this dissertation explores three different points and contexts in which colorism has been discursively produced. These points and contexts were identified and selected as the result of exhaustive empirical investigation. In addition, all address black female

audiences, who are most subjected to and through colorism. Although these points and contexts are prominent in ways to be discussed, they do not claim to be the only possible sites for discussion and exploration of colorism. In addition, the variety of sites central to the articulation of colorism as a named and explicit social phenomenon should come as no surprise. It indicates the complexity of real, historical human practice.

The first case is located within the broad formation of art and aesthetics. The important cultural work within this formation is done through the form of literary composition and reviewing, and their emphasis on artistic creation and its evaluation. The particular case to be investigated in this study is the publication of Alice Walker's 1983 essay, in which the term "colorism" was explicitly introduced and developed.

The second case is located within the broad formation of social mores and manners of respectability. The important cultural work within this formation is done through the form of consumer magazines and their emphasis on self help and self improvement. The particular case to be investigated in this study is *Essence* magazine, which not only published a shortened version of Walker's essay referred to above, but which also represented colorism in a variety of additional ways.

The third and final case is located within the broad formation of activist documentary. The important cultural work within this formation is done through traditions of feature filmmaking together with social criticism. The particular case to be investigated in this study is the feature-film documentary *Dark Girls*, together with public response to it.

Using a combination of narrative and semiotic approaches for analyses, this project places each product, made by the writer, organization and filmmakers (as well as their own reflections on it) and the responses by readers and viewers, into a larger historical and cultural

context, in order to map the articulations of race and gender, and consequent assemblages. The next three chapters in this study each interrogate a specific case, while the last chapter analyzes the implications of the study as a whole. The following discussion outlines each chapter's focus and source material.

*Chapter 2: The Art of Fact: Feminist Aesthetics in the Invention of Colorism*

This chapter examines the ways in which colorism as an explicitly named phenomenon came to be articulated through literary/intellectual discourse. It analyzes Alice Walker's essay, "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like," that is widely credited for the appearance of the term colorism and the collection of nonfiction prose in which it appeared, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Additionally, it compares these materials with 24 available published reviews and analyses of the collection. These reviews were compiled after a search of the following: *Index to Book Reviews in the Humanities* 1983, 1984 and 1985; *Index to Black Periodicals* 1984, 1985 and 1986; *Book Review Index* 1983 and 1984; *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* 1983-1984, 1984-1985 and 1985; *Popular Periodical Index* 1983, 1984 and 1985; *Book Review Digest* 1983 and 1984; and *Book Review Index* 1983 and 1984. The reviews appeared in a range of publications from general interest magazines and newspapers such as *Southern Living*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Los Angeles Times Book Review* to specialized journals such as *Freedomways*, *New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly* and *Callaloo*. See Appendix A for a complete listing of reviews and publications.

### *Chapter 3: Self-Help and Colorism in Essence*

This chapter examines the ways in which colorism came as well to be articulated as an explicitly named phenomenon through self-help discourse. It analyzes *Essence* magazine, a lifestyle publication that currently markets itself as “the voice and soul of Black women” and that has a circulation of approximately 7.5 million (Essence.com). Primary materials include 133 magazine issues ranging from its inaugural May 1970 issue to December 2011. This end date is justified because it is when the first screening took place of the documentary film *Dark Girls*. Three issues a year were randomly sampled to provide a broad-based analysis, with attention to stories, editorials, advertising, reader letters, front matter and the context of the overall editorial mix of the magazine. In addition, 11 additional issues were selected for their specificity in addressing colorism. See Appendix B for complete listing of magazine issues reviewed.

### *Chapter 4: Activist Documentary and Colorism in Dark Girls*

This chapter examines the ways in which colorism as an explicitly named phenomenon came to be articulated through documentary discourse. It analyzes the following:

- the nine-minute promotional trailer of the 2011 documentary film *Dark Girls* that was most widely available for public viewing;
- the film’s promotional website (officialdarkgirlsmovie.com), which contains the trailer, information about the filmmakers, the movie’s scheduled screenings, press information, a blog tab and stories from viewers about their own experiences with colorism;
- the film’s *Vimeo* site that displays the original trailer and an updated video for a total of approximate 13 minutes of playing time, and about 217 comments which peaked during

the first release of the video. Up to August 2013, it has been played from this site 1.2 million times and “liked” 1,273 times. Sites that have embedded the promotional video from this site into their own include top blog sites, *theroot.com*, *curlynikki.com* and *jezebel.com*.

- the film’s *YouTube* channel, Rise Women Rise, in which women share their experiences of colorism. These total 11 videos and approximately 13 minutes of play time; and 21 reaction videos for a total of 9 minutes of play time. Some of the reactions have been deleted after posting. These reactions peaked in 2012 about the time of the publicity tour of the film.
- the film’s official *Facebook* page which contains more than 450 comments and 22,423 “likes.” The page’s postings include administrative posts about the film’s progress, screenings and updates, and reaction comments from and interactions with other *Facebook* users. The number of comments ramped up considerably once the film premiered on *OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network* in June 2013.

#### *Chapter 5: Conclusion: Loosening the Lines of Tendential Force*

This chapter will conclude the project. After a brief summary of the study, it analyzes the theoretical and practical implications of studying race and gender as articulations, and for the study of colorism specifically.

#### **Addressing Colorism as an Articulation**

This study addresses colorism in a way that seeks to avoid the reductionism and essentialism of other approaches. Through its attention to how articulations produce colorism differently in

various contexts, it seeks to denaturalize colorism and thus open it up to the potential for progressive change. In a similar fashion, it also seeks to identify what Hall (1986) calls “lines of tendential force” that make the phenomenon appear natural and insurmountable.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ART OF FACT:

#### FEMINIST AESTHETICS IN THE INVENTION OF COLORISM

Colorism emerged as an explicitly named socio-cultural phenomenon in the early 1980s, which was a period marked by social upheaval and the rethinking of gendered and raced inequalities. An early use of the explicit term was in an article by Alice Walker in 1982 (“Embracing the Dark and the Light,” *Essence*, July 1982), then later in a reprinted, expanded version of that essay in Walker’s 1983 collection of nonfiction prose, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose*. The 1982 essay, and even moreso, Walker’s 1983 book sparked debate within literary circles not only for claims it made about colorism, but more generally about Walker’s writing. The debate centered on Walker’s assertions about the extent and nature of colorism’s existence and other kinds of gendered and raced oppression, as well as on the ways in which the writing sought to represent these claims.

The goal of this chapter is to reconstruct the contextual map through which colorism as an explicitly named social phenomenon was first articulated. The primary materials examined for this analysis include Walker’s 1983 essay and the 24 available published reviews of the book in literary journals of the day. The analysis is informed by critical discourse analysis, which in turn draws upon semiotic and poststructuralist theories of language (for example, Barthes, 1957/1972; de Saussure, 1915/1988; Kristeva, 1979). The chapter concludes that the contextual map that rendered and produced colorism as a social reality was, in this case, a set of interlocking binary oppositions working in an uneven and historically determined relationship. Generally speaking,

on one side were fact, objectivity, social, and masculine, while on the opposing side were feeling, subjectivity, personal, and feminine. This set of oppositions forms the basis of common distinctions asserted by the dominant culture between factual social criticism and subjective personal art, and the resulting nature and authority of the claims that can be asserted using each. Social criticism purports to establish impersonal, objective fact (and thus a compelling need to address the social injustice thus documented), whereas art represents the personal, subjective insights of the artist (thus rendering a phenomenon such as colorism as an individual and psychological issue that requires a solution of similar scale).

This map makes meaningful both Walker's writing and the resulting literary commentary. Walker's critical action in the colorism essay conflates the subjective and objective, personal and social, feeling and fact. Moreover, the essay argues for race and gender as integral to each other rather than separate. These are all arguments that are central to claims regarding colorism. However, while exhibiting a range of responses to Walker's effort, literary critics sought to reassert the inviolability of the oppositions that Walker's essay called into question. Some objected to Walker refusing to make foundational distinctions mapped by these oppositions. Others lauded the collection, but refused to acknowledge her strategy and as a result positioned her essay squarely within the realm of subjective art only. The result was both the formation of colorism as well as its criticism and negation, all of which took place through the discourses of art, feminism and aesthetics.

The chapter begins by delving into the broader context within which these gendered oppositions of fact-social-masculine and feeling-personal-feminine came to be challenged in the first place. By the 1980s, intellectuals and academics had extended feminism more fully into cultural theory and philosophy, and had begun to consider how dominant epistemologies

exercised power through gendered representations. I argue that this feminist theoretical intervention, as diffused and popularized in ways such as Walker's literary experimentation, laid the key groundwork both for the emergence of colorism as an explicitly named social phenomenon that fused race and gender oppressions, and also for the reassertion of these oppressions themselves, separate and distinct.

### **Second-Wave Feminism and Social Theory**

By the 1980s, feminisms encompassed much more than liberal positions in favor of equal pay and other employment conditions. Explanations were sought for some women's resistance to addressing gendered oppressions even in the face of concrete and explicit knowledge and experience of it. To explain this contradiction, intellectuals and academics extended feminism more fully into cultural theory and philosophy, and began to consider how dominant epistemologies exercised power through gendered representations. Critical feminisms thus examined deep cultural processes and structures of patriarchy that were seen to produce and perpetuate these gendered subjectivities.

A range of philosophical and theoretical resources was important in this effort. For example, feminist scholars borrowed from Marx and Engels as well as from Freud to explain patriarchy as structural and psychological processes. Simone de Beauvoir, credited for first taking up these ruminations in *The Second Sex* (1949/2009) argued that women are defined in the context of men as always subordinate and never autonomous, and as a lesser "other." In such a framework, women also came to define themselves in the same way and thus participated in the perpetuation of gendered oppression. De Beauvoir innovatively fused the economic and reproductive explanations of women's subordination through a psychological interpretation of

both (Mitchell, 1966). On an empirical level, Friedan (1963) documented the dissatisfaction of the white middle-class women's stay-at-home experience in *The Feminine Mystique*. While this study was not grounded in social theory, it made relevant and illuminated the need for deeper and more complex explanations.

Some scholars found Marxism useful as a theoretical framework by extending it in novel ways. For example, Firestone (1974) argued that class was not the ultimate divider as posited by Marx and Engels, but sex, for its pervasiveness reached into "the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature" (Kourany, Sterba and Tong, 1992, p. 282). She further contended that sex oppression "goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself," and was structured by the biological differences in reproduction. To this end, she pointed to the biological family unit as the breeding ground of oppressive power psychology. To remedy the overvaluation of dominant patriarchal culture, Irigaray privileged sexual difference and attempted to revalue the so-called "otherness" of subjective femininity (Elliot, 1991).

For other theorists, psychoanalysis provided a means to understanding the depth of gendered oppression. For example, Elliot (1991) describes how Mitchell and Rose argued against the privileged hierarchical construction of masculine and feminine subjects, while Dinnerstein and Chodorow separately examined the dependence on the mother for the unconscious personality formation of the child, suggesting that personality was the structure within which social and psychological oppressions were perpetuated. Ultimately, they argued that gender was a constructed result of parenting relationships (Elliot, 1991). Millett (1969) expanded the conception of patriarchal sex oppression to include all cultural and political interactions. She argued that it was the foundation of all social interactions ranging from the ways women thought

and felt about themselves personally to their workplace behaviors. She contended that women were taught to conform socially to the patriarchal structure by people professionals such as educators and psychologists who treated as abnormal any woman's yearning to conceive of herself outside of the stereotypical domestic-related roles.

In these and other such efforts, links between representation and gendered subjectivity became theoretically crucial. For example, Kristeva (1979/1986) engaged psychoanalysis through semiotics as a way to understand the linguistic construction of masculine and feminine subjectivities, and Mulvey (1975) argued that the symbolization of women as deficient or less than man as conceived in psychoanalytic analysis extended its structures to film. These unconscious formations set women up as passive representations or objects for the active male gaze, thereby perpetuating the existing patriarchal structure. In a similar vein, Williamson (1978) argued that because advertising used existing structures of meaning in its effort to sell products and services, it remained deeply complicit in building upon and constructing a social reality that maintained patriarchal subjectivities.

While this theorizing offered powerful explanations, it was also critiqued as being centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women, and not accounting for women of color, immigrant women, lesbians and working-class women. As such, the critique demanded that attention be given to inequalities beyond gender. As one example of this criticism, the Combahee River Collective raised political awareness about the interlocking systems of oppression on black women and lesbians, just as writers such as Wallace (1978) and hooks (1981) furthered the discussion on how race, patriarchy, class and gender intersected in the lived realities of black women in relation to feminism. They argued that anti-racist struggle often

obscured and perpetuated gender oppression, resulting in a separation of race from gender from class, and ultimately in a silencing of large groups of women.

Above all, these and other feminist critics called into question the separation of the personal from the political and subjective feeling from objective fact. This critique took on a long-standing debate about art and society. Just as legitimate realms of social understanding were enforced through oppositions of fact and fiction, and political and personal, such was also the nature of debates about legitimate artistic practice. Since at least 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism, legitimate art has been marked by its ability to transcend the everyday reality. In this sense, art is not only the opposite of the everyday world, but also should resist the contamination of its purity with the mundane concerns of life. Through this dominant way of thinking, art became art through its refusal to engage with the world and corresponding worldly concerns. As Jagger (2008) argued, such a distinction was mapped by gender. While science was centered on the pragmatic and the masculine, art served the purpose of enriching and beautifying, remaining in the private and feminine.

But in the hands of feminists, the debate about art and representation became politicized. For example, Hanisch (1969) asserted that the personal and political could not be separated, because what women experience in their personal lives is a direct result of political oppressions. Furthermore, she noted that simply to speak of these personal issues and to bring them to light was a political act, one that enabled a political project.

Feminists also argued that the separation of subjective feeling from objective fact exerted a patriarchal authority that championed and enforced a single way to produce knowledge (e.g. Millett, 1969). Consequently, feminist cultural theory and practice sought to reintegrate the personal with the political and feeling with fact. Consciousness-raising groups filled with women

speaking their own truths became overt political enterprises through which the sharing and triangulating of subjective experiences of women became valid and reliable sources of knowledge. In her defense of these, Hanisch (1969) emphasized the political value of the subjective. She argued that personal and political problems were one and the same. Just as there were no personal solutions, individual oppressions required collective action and collective solutions.

### **The Emergence of Colorism**

Within the context of this feminist cultural critique of these binary oppositions, colorism as a term emerged. It appeared explicitly in novelist, poet and self-proclaimed “womanist” Alice Walker’s book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, a collection of essays, articles and reviews from general-reader magazines and general-public speeches spanning 1966-1982. Topics of these essays run the gamut from personal reflection regarding female literary figures such as Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O’Connor to strident arguments in favor of recognizing the artistic spirit of subjugated black women, and angry denunciations of the racialized, patriarchal underpinnings of accumulated nuclear stockpiles.

In these pieces, Walker engages her own experiences, thoughts and opinions just as freely as she does so-called authoritative sources, refusing to privilege one over the other or make distinctions. Her aesthetic and epistemological experimentation can be seen in the essay titled “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?,” which focuses explicitly on what she calls “colorism.” Just as recent feminist work had done, Walker’s essay also exposes and disrupts the patriarchal linguistic and knowledge structures that held as opposites subjective experience from objective fact, the private sphere from the public, the personal from the political, as well as the gendered from the raced.

Walker's essay confronts these structures not only in the substance of her argument, but also in the form and style of her writing. While authoritative social criticism traditionally achieves its credibility at the cost of impersonalization, and authentic personal testimony is typically seen as not generalizable, Walker disrupts this conceptual map by blending the two and critiquing each with the other, thereby personalizing the social and making the personal generalizable. This is performed in a few ways.

First, Walker utilizes multiple points of view and modes of address, which close the emotional distance between the reader and writer, while validating subjective experience as objective fact. For instance, she uses first-person plural address to equate her own subjective experience with those of darker-skinned women. The effect in doing so is to make common concerns and experiences, hers as well, and thus to make the personal political. She writes: "Black black women are not supposed to notice these things. But to tell the truth, ... this is often *all* we notice. We are told that such things are not 'serious' and not 'political' and mean nothing to the black liberation struggle. And some of us, after all marry white men; who are we to complain" (p. 303) [italics in original]. Here, Walker brings into play her own life story. Having been criticized for marrying a white man, she makes no distinction between herself, who she calls a "definite brown," and the black black woman who in history has been largely passed over by black American leaders. This passage also successfully blurs the lines between race and gender.

Similarly, mixed modes of address merge the heretofore subjective and objective. The essay is organized into three distinct sections, with the first a letter to a light-skinned younger woman recalling a conversation Walker had with her about colorism, the second a published statement by Walker's high-school teacher, and the third and final section her own musings and

thoughts drawing upon literature and personal experience. This mixing frames subjective thought within an objective context. As Walker addresses the woman in the personal letter in a subjective conversation, the reader is positioned as observer – a role most often associated with objective inquiry. The inclusion of the statement from the high school teacher performs similarly as the reader is again asked to make objective evaluations about the thoughts of a third party, but is asked again to switch roles between participant and observer repeatedly. Such atypical mixing and use of objective (in her examples from literature) and subjective (from her own life and the women that she knew) evidence disrupts dominant conceptual maps of how prose should be presented. She treats all her sources as equally credible while also refusing to elevate one over the other. By doing so, the essay flattens the conventional hierarchical structure that is associated with source use. It also works successfully to make the personal political as well as public just as it equalizes the subjective and objective. Walker comments on the need to transcend these oppositions, for writers to “cleave to reality,” but a reality constituted not by statistical evidence but by “what *we* know, *we* feel, *we* think of life” (p.312) [italics in original].

It is not just the structure of her essay that critiques the separation between fact and feeling. Walker’s artistic reputation enables her to use her own self as a credible source. First, she is a woman who identifies through skin color and experience as black. She is also an accomplished and well-known novelist and poet. By the time of the original publication of this essay in *Essence* magazine, and its subsequent re-publication in the nonfiction collection, Walker had published three novels, including the critically acclaimed and Pulitzer Prize winning *The Color Purple*; three volumes of poetry, including *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* which won the Lillian Smith Book Award in 1973; and three short stories and essays, one of which was published in poet Langston Hughes’ *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* in 1967.

Walker's position creates factual credibility and legitimates her own subjective experience as well as those of other women whom she reports upon. For instance, Walker argues that being a mother of a mixed-race child helped illuminate issues of skin color. "Ironically, much of what I've learned about color, I've learned because I have a mixed-race child. Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life –in this racist, colorist society – is infinitely easier" (p.291). These observations are validated not only by the fact that she is a mother who has lived the experience, but also because she has been recognized publicly for her work, particularly as it pertains to black women.

Similarly, Walker's public position as a storyteller allows her to represent her observations of others' experiences as real-life events, blurring the boundaries of subjectivity and objectivity. For example, when she tells the traumatic experience of a woman she knew who was jilted by her suitor because of her skin color, the reader also grasps that this is simply not Walker's perspective on the issue, nor is it an impersonal retelling of events, but a fusion of art and fact. She writes:

She was, when I knew her, a brilliant, elegant, and very very black girl. To look at Doreena was as Mari Evans says in one of her poems "to be restored. For she was pure." Genes untampered with. Totally "unimproved" by infusions of white or Indian blood. She was beautiful. However, the word "beautiful" itself was never used to describe black women in those days. . . . In any case, Doreena was rejected by a very light-skinned young man whom she had been dating for some time, with an eye toward marriage. His parents said she was too dark and would not look right in their cream-colored family. And she did what many black black women do when rejected because of their color, she flung herself into the purest, blackest arms she could find (p. 292).

Time and again, Walker eliminates the traditional subjective-objective boundaries such as when she simultaneously speaks of the woman in her college dormitory who was asked by the light-skinned girls to move somewhere else because their male visitors found her

dark skin “inharmonious,” or of being pushed aside by young black men rushing to converse with the white women she was with (p. 293). Fluid movement between her own first-person experiences to the more objective reportage of other people’s but without the expected indicators or author positioning upsets the dominant conceptual map.

Tone is another feature of this essay, as well as many others in this collection that together subvert the dominant oppositions associated with nonfiction prose. For example, the essay eschews so-called objective reporting and elevates the evidence of experience, personal or otherwise, as reason for political action. It calls on readers to take action to implement change in relation to the treatment of the black black woman. Such a move takes the personal out of the private and merges it squarely with the political typically located in the public. As another example, in her call for a unification of black women against racist ideology and the re-envisioning of previous literary presentations of black women, Walker outlines an agenda and a path forward against colorism – a tactic that is antithetical to the project of objectivity, which rejects any kind of investigator involvement.

Her call to action has good reason, according to her, for “light and white-skinned black women will lose their only link to rebellion against white America if they cut themselves off from the black black woman,” and “black black women will lose the full meaning of their history in America (as well as the humor, love, and support of good sisters) if they see light and white black women only as extensions of white and black male oppression, while allowing themselves to be made ashamed of their own strength and fighting spirit” (p. 311). The essay’s tone engages the crux of black feminist criticism of the time in calling for inclusion of more categories beyond gender in feminist discussions, and doing so in the consciousness-raising spirit used in the civil rights and feminist movements. Additionally, Walker breaks through the construction of a

gendered and raced binary to join the chorus by black feminists who were calling upon the civil rights and black power movements to critically consider gender and class in addition to race (e.g. Wallace, 1978; hooks, 1981). More tellingly, Walker also makes an effort to equalize colorism with racism in treatment and effect.

To summarize, it is through the structure, form and tone that this essay works within the context of feminist and race cultural critiques to subvert distinctions between subjective experience and objective fact. This critical move elevates the issue of colorism, which had been linked but typically subordinated to racism. This linkage and subsequent subordination is precisely where another binary opposition is created. Just as colorism as a social construction itself is articulated with personal, private and subjective experiences of women, the dominant conceptual map values such an articulation as feminine in opposition to racism. Within this context, we come to understand colorism as a phenomenon that is constructed in the personal, private, subjective, and feminine sphere, while racism is oppositionally constructed and provisionally articulated as political, public, objective, and ultimately masculine. However, in Walker's critique of the subjective and objective, conflation of the personal and political oppositions consequentially blurs the feminine-masculine binary distinctions that index them.

### **Colorism's Challenge Tamed**

The complementary side to the assertions in Walker's work is the reception of those assertions within the larger culture. Attention to reception thus provides a way of assessing ways in which the dominant may or may not be reasserted. In the case of this chapter, attention to the critical response to her book of essays thus becomes an important set of texts. Overall, the response sought to tame this feminist intervention by reasserting and reinstating those key oppositions.

Whether positive or critical, reviews articulated the book's worth through binaries of the subjective and objective, the personal and political and ultimately art and fact. Such reinstatement also restores the dominant implicit associated oppositions of feminine and masculine, and as a result also colorism in opposition to racism, thus reducing it.

The reviews of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* reassert these oppositions in a few characteristic ways. First, they articulate these oppositions through Walker's celebrity status as a well-known novelist and poet. While her status brings credibility and authenticity to her writing and experience, it also constructs a traditional humanistic lens through which to judge the book as opposed to one that is more objective such as journalism, science or social statistics, for instance. A humanistic lens fixes the book within subjective genres such as memoir and essay, thus making it easier to define it as art, and typically as a result subjective and feminine.

One indication of its humanistic definition is that two-thirds of the 24 reviews mention *The Color Purple* (1982), the most popular of her work. One review opens by hailing her as the "most celebrated woman writer" who had been "featured and photographed in such diverse media as *Vanity Fair*, *People* and the *New York Times Magazine*" (Cornish, 1984). In a nod to the burgeoning attention to black women's literature in this time period, the reviewer goes on to note that Walker's role "in the rediscovery of black woman writer Zora Neale Hurston, and the long-overdue attention paid to black women writers within the past few years have undoubtedly contributed to her prominence" (Cornish, 1984). Along with the reference to *The Color Purple*, these pronouncements construct Walker as a high-profile black artist whose work engages women's issues. Such a context is antithetical to a view of Walker's work as politically engaged and someone who seeks to complicate the separation of race and gender.

The humanistic definition of the essay also explains and thus depoliticizes the essay's consciousness-raising calls to action. On one hand, issues of race are seen by reviewers to be public and legitimately documented by personal experience. They allow Walker to be black, thus legitimizing her efforts to publicly rally against racism and the evils meted out to "black black" women. On the other hand, however, issues of gender are seen to be private although also legitimately documented by personal experience. Her woman-ness and focus on women's issues is constructed as inconsequential in relation to the public and masculine. Ultimately, this pulling apart and re-categorization of what Walker sought to cleave together reinstates patriarchal oppositions that work to maintain the status quo.

In addition to defining her writing through a humanistic lens, all of the reviewers distinguish artistic creation from fact-based reportage, although in varying ways. Some critiqued the book against a standard of objectivity by citing its failure to meet criteria of accuracy and expected form. They faulted it for factual errors, thus effectually positioning the work and its claims as being dependent upon and validated only by its fidelity to so-called objective facts. For example, one reviewer writes that the author "may get a fact wrong" (Clark, 1984). Yet another complains that while "Walker is always original and provocative in her deliberations, she is not always correct" (Byrd, 1983).

Reviewers also faulted the collection for improperly extending its personal assumptions to encompass all people, thus initiating an argument about an almost statistical conception of reliability. Of all the reviews, Hairston's was the most eloquent and vociferous in this regard. "Sometimes it is not clear whether Walker is writing about the Afro-American woman as artist (potential or practiced) or as woman, and perhaps it doesn't matter. But I felt that some of her insights were too subjective to encompass a more wide-angled, in-depth view of the real world"

(Hairston, 1984). In much the same vein, Hairston indicts a range of work on a continuum from the John Updikes of the world, who altogether ignore the existence of black characters, to those such as Walker, who “deny reality in favor of their own subjective realm” despite “the reality of employment and infant mortality statistics, the black yuppies, the police blotter on Saturday night, the corporate arenas in which Blacks are denied promotion, [and] the black Republicans” (1984, p.189). To ice the proverbial cake, Hairston states that Walker “relies more on subjective rather than objective evaluations of the world around her,” consequently deeming her as irrational and disconnected from the real.

While other reviewers praised the book, they did so by applauding the degree to which the collection held up the autonomy of art from the reality and the world. Although such critics praised her book rather than damning it as Hairston and others did, both the praise and the damnation depended on construing the book as personal art and thus separating it from public fact. For example, one reviewer found the collection to be a guide into the author’s inner creative process and subjective experience. “You seldom get writers writing so personally, so feelingly about the need to be saved, about the ways in which that personal salvation can be achieved” (Okri, 1983). Even Hairston grudgingly admits that the “collection indicated a warm, complex, and sure-footed individualist, who seem in triumphant harmony with the beat of none other than her own drummer” and “she deserves high marks as a creative writer” (Hairston, 1984). Others contend that Walker is “at her best in the essays that tell her own story” (Vigderman, 1983) and when “she’s most specific,” and using “her own personality and experiences” (Allen, 1984), and that the work is distinctive largely for its abstract formal qualities of “strength and beauty” (Clark, 1984).

Despite most reviewers retaining the distinctions between art and fact, some reviewers recognized at least implicitly the critical nature of Walker's work as a mixing up of these distinctions. As one reviewer notes, "Walker often speaks subjectively, from her own center as an artist; but she does so in a way that makes *her* story *our* story [italics in original]" (Parini, 1984). Similarly, another recognizes and give due attention to Walker's reluctance to impose boundaries in her work. Munro (1984) mused that the overlap of literary insights throughout the book "underscores the interdisciplinary nature of reality, and in this sense it is extremely effective in forcing the reader to acknowledge that there are no neat divisions between the literary, social, and personal realms." However, the majority of reviews reinscribed the separations that Walker had called into question.

### **Conclusion**

The emergence of colorism as an explicit social phenomenon took place within a very specific context. Important historical and contextual elements include Walker's personal biography as a black woman, her celebrity status as a novelist and poet who writes about women, and the broader history of race and gender relations in the United States. This context was also a cultural one, composed of epistemological and representational separations of personal from social/political, subjective from objective, private from public, feminine from masculine, and art from fact.

While Walker's work attempts to erase such distinctions, reviews laboriously reassert them. They place issues of gender and, with it, colorism squarely and inviolably into the realm of the private, subjective and feminine. This literary context provides a valuable understanding of

how colorism emerged, was negotiated, but ultimately became reasserted as a feminine, private and subjective phenomenon.

## CHAPTER 3

### SELF-HELP AND COLORISM IN *ESSENCE*

The processes that constitute popular culture are both unpredictable and highly contextual. Such has been the case with colorism and its articulation in a variety of formations, another of which was through social mores and manners of respectability and its embodiment in women's consumer magazines. These publications have long been viewed as complicit in the cultural constitution and maintenance of gendered socio-cultural norms and practices (Covert, 2011; Rooks, 2004; Zuckerman, 1998). As the prior chapter noted, and although articulated through discussions of art, aesthetics and literature, colorism as an explicit term and phenomenon first appeared in a shorter version of Alice Walker's essay that was published in *Essence*, a popular and respected self-help magazine geared specifically toward black women.

Taking its cue from the consumer-magazine appearance of a shortened version of Walker's essay, this chapter explores in more detail the articulation of colorism through women's self-help magazines. The particular case to be investigated is *Essence* magazine from its inception to 2011, which is when the documentary *Dark Girls* appeared and pushed the articulation of colorism into new forms (as Chapter Four will discuss).

This chapter begins by recovering the politics of respectability, which was an important form of gendered politics in African American communities from at least the early 19th century. Like feminist aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s, which critiqued the exclusive categories of personal vs. political and individual vs. collective on the basis of their gendering, the politics of respectability also critiqued these very same oppositions but from within a very different

formation. What is more, the politics of respectability metamorphosed from community-based self-help (thus combining the collective and the individual) to individualized self-empowerment (thus emphasizing only the individual). This change was clearly embodied in self-help magazines aimed at black women, of which *Essence* was the exemplar.

The analysis in this chapter addresses colorism's articulation in *Essence* in relation to the context of the development of the magazine over the course of its 43-year history, as well as within historical and cultural discourses that constituted both the magazine and its target readership of black women. Doing so requires a general reconstruction of the enabling discourses through secondary literatures, and a detailed analysis of *Essence* to effectively characterize and map the dominant articulations in *Essence* of and about colorism. After reading three randomly sampled issues each year between May 1970 and December 2011 (a total of 133 issues), the change of greatest interest to this study can be seen within a series of 11 articles that explicitly discuss colorism, and a number of recurring features over time, including advertising, editorial comment and cover art.

The transformation of community-based self-help via respectability politics into individualized self-help reduced the problem of colorism as represented in *Essence*. Articles that tackled the issue of colorism paid attention to it, but advocated simplistic, self-help solutions to a historically and socially complex phenomenon. Additionally, colorism's articulation with the gendered politics of black women's respectability politics necessarily bears gendered implications for the proposed solutions.

### **Assimilation, Separatism and Uplift**

Grasping the significance of *Essence's* engagement with colorism requires an understanding of the historical and cultural production of gendered respectability politics and its role in the constitution of community-based self-help.

As ultimately tied to goals of economic, political and social advancement, respectability and self-help formed the bedrock of the larger concept of racial uplift, and were largely associated with entry into the American middle class. How best to accomplish racial uplift has been debated since at least the early 1900s, but it resurfaced most notably in the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Positions in the debate can be parsed into positions of assimilation, accommodation (a close cousin of assimilation) and segregation.

Generally regarded as supporting assimilation, 19th-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass steeped his arguments in the progressive and egalitarian elements of Christianity. He advocated for the eventual amalgamation of the biological races and assimilation of all into a new America (Sundstrom, 2003). Douglass promoted economic and social freedom in addition to political and civic equality (Brotz, 1992). Believing equality to be a God-given right, Douglass eschewed racial distinctiveness and exceptionalism, race pride, racial union or black nationalism (Brotz, 1992; Sundstrom, 2003).

By contrast, the approach of Booker T. Washington has generally been characterized as accommodationist, in his focus on individualized economic uplift, arguing that such ends can only be accomplished with a concentration on economic, industrial and material prosperity (Moore, 2003). Du Bois critiqued Washington most notably in his 1903 *Souls of Black Folk* for his seemingly narrow emphasis on the economic to the exclusion of concern about political and social equality.

As a third important figure in these debates, W.E.B. Du Bois exemplified a still different position on racial uplift and how to achieve it. Making his arguments later in the century, Du Bois largely promoted political and social uplift on the backs of an elite “Talented Tenth” upon whom the responsibility lay to buoy the race. In contrast to assimilation, he advocated racial pride that sought to isolate and maintain a separate and distinct black identity, a sentiment borne out in his oft-cited passage on double-consciousness (Moore, 2003). Du Bois’ most prominent racial philosophy with its emphasis on distinctiveness and black exceptionalism carried with it an assumption of ascension into the middle class, in contrast to Douglass’ assimilationist position.

These general positions have been co-opted, recycled, and advanced in the years following these debates. Organizations that developed around these ideologies, ranging from the NAACP to varying black-power organizations such as cultural/revolutionary nationalists, have generally been categorized as either assimilationist or separatist (Craig, 2002; Hall, 2007).

More recent studies, however, critique these separate and distinct notions. For instance, Hall (2007) argues that the NAACP and various black power groups were not as divergent as they seemed to be, with apparent differences due more to matters of public image and method of action. Still others, such as Gaines (1996), argues against the inherent inferiority rhetoric of racial uplift altogether, challenging its assumption that uplift came with the adoption of and acceptance of the dominant, white view of society – at least from the widely held assimilationist position.

### **Politics of Respectability**

The conceptual difficulties with these arguments regarding racial uplift can be traced to two problems. First, they focus primarily on the economic and educational attainment of middle class status, rather than other possible realms of human life. Second, they focus primarily on men.

Indeed, evidence exists that these definitions of racial uplift and the resulting categories of assimilationist/separatist were also gendered and as a result defined for men differently than they were for women. Higginbotham (1993) is one scholar who recognizes this gendering. Her work complicates the assimilation/segregation dichotomy with her in-depth examination of the women in the black Baptist church and the importance of what she calls the “politics of respectability.” What is important about this for the purposes of the current study is how it, like feminist aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s, overflowed exclusive oppositions of personal/political and individual/collective. One facet of this politics was composed of assimilationist strategies of conformity to dominant standards, which stressed that women, in particular, be of outstanding moral character and have exceptionally good manners and conduct. Yet, a very different facet contained separatist sentiments of racial pride as the strategy for the elevation of self-esteem and of self-determination. In both cases, personal conduct constituted a collective politics. As Higginbotham puts it, the women who formed the Women’s Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention in 1900 emphasized a politics of respectability that was much more than accommodation, compensation or “mindless mimicry of white behavior” (p. 187). Instead, it exhibited both, insisting on one hand morals and manners and on the other traditional forms of social and political protest.

The officers of the Women’s Convention, usually women of middle-class means and clubswomen, lauded the capacity of the poor working-class, black woman – “the poor washer-woman, cook and toiler” (Higginbotham, 1993, p.192) – to overcome dominant racist imagery of immorality, laziness, promiscuity and uncleanness through sacrifice, piety, self-esteem and self-determination. Yet, this was no isolated and individual effort, but instead was the means for social transformation. In fact, according to Higginbotham, the Women’s Convention felt that the

politics of respectability transcended the trappings of race and income (even though the discourse was inherently classed) while idealistically offering a way to achieve a pluralist and equitable American society.

Further, Higginbotham argues that respectability politics exposed socially constructed race relations in a time when social Darwinism was rampant. The convention emphasized “temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners and sexual purity” (p.193) and general conformity to middle-class values as a part of larger resistance to segregation laws. Higginbotham cites the executive board urging its members to “Fight segregation through the courts as an unlawful act? Yes. But fight it with soap and water, hoes, spades, shovels and paint, to remove any reasonable excuse for it, is the fight that will win” (p.193).

Concentrating its assimilation efforts on black women as keepers of the race, the Women’s Convention engaged public outreach campaigns that included neighborhood campaigns, newspaper articles, tract distribution and door-to-door visits with a key message of inculcating respectability. Some of the tract literature included missives on conduct such as “Take a Bath First,” “How to Dress,” “How to Get Rid of Bed Bugs” and the “Anti-Hanging Out Committee” (Higginbotham, 1993). According to Higginbotham, the convention women railed against jazz music and dance halls, “gaudy colors and conspicuous trimmings” (p. 200), slashed skirts and décolleté dresses, gum chewing and loud talking, littered yards, unclean homes and improper nutrition, among others. While the convention women ironically sometimes reinforced and perpetuated the very stereotypes they sought to combat, Higginbotham contends that the Women’s Convention advanced a particular standard of respectability for black women that emphasized hard work inside and outside the home (as evidenced in its establishment of the

National Training School for Women and Girls), piety, morality and racial self-esteem and pride (evidenced in the establishment of the Negro Doll Clubs).

The Women's Convention was only one of many such organizations with similar stances and efforts. Other scholars have investigated how various clubswomen and magazines urged conformity to middle class standards as a way to fix the public image of black women in American society (see Gaines, 1996; Moore, 2003; Rooks, 2004 for in-depth analyses).

In these early ways, the movement toward respectability—individual improvement as the means of social and racial uplift—emerged for black women as a significant social force with equally significant impact. In fact, Moore (2003) argues that the foremost goal of African American feminism has been to reclaim respectability. In doing so, the politics of respectability fused the personal and the political while it recognized how individual conduct constituted social activism.

### **Respectability and Magazines**

Given the twin emphases on personal mores and manners, and of social change as a gendered form of racial uplift, it is perhaps of little surprise that the politics of respectability has also been promoted and embodied in women's magazines. This has been the case since at least the antebellum black women's magazine, *Ringwood's Afro American Journal of Fashion* (Rooks 2004). Its stance was in one sense accommodationist, in that it replicated the editorial formula of moral and fashion instruction common in white magazines of the time (Abrahamson, 1996; Braithwaite, 1995; Covert, 2011; Gardner, 2012; Mott, 1968; Tebbel & Zuckerman, 1991; Schneirov, 1996; Zuckerman, 1998). However, the *Ringwood Journal* was also informed by historic conditions of slavery and miscegenation. As the first popular magazine aimed at an

African American readership, *Ringwood Journal* served as a conduit and tool for racial uplift. Although primarily a fashion magazine, it taught black women proper ways to dress and behave in order to achieve respectability and thus contribute toward racial uplift (Rooks, 2004).

At a time in which black women were cast either as hapless victims of rape or willing actors in shameless promiscuity, *Ringwood* urged its readers to emulate the dominant white standard in comportment as ladies. Because the editors and writers were genetically closer to such an ideal, they set themselves up as the standard bearers for such instruction. They defined and maintained a positive public perception of black women's virtue, presenting fashion not only as a personal, but group statement (Rooks, 2004). In short, respectable fashion equaled middle class, which in turn equaled respect, acceptance and a means of collective racial uplift.

While *Ringwood* sought to achieve racial uplift through moral acceptance, Rooks (2004) argues that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century women's magazine *Half-Century* reworked the politics of respectability within a very different context of post-WWII migration and urbanization. Respectability still formed its basic editorial focus, at a time when great numbers of black women moved North to places such as New York, Chicago and Washington, DC. The magazine sought to portray the ways of the North and Midwest to new black Southern migrants.

A surprising divergence existed in the respective editorial formulas of such magazines and white women's magazines of the 1940s and 1950s. White magazines stressed ways in which proper fashion, beauty and home products, and new appliances brought progress and status to female homemakers. In contrast, Rooks found that predominantly female editors of *Half-Century* argued that women should seek work outside the home, as the reality of the time demanded for black women. However, at the same time they emphasized the desirability of domestic work rather than wage work of other kinds. Essentially, if black women did not have the luxury to

work solely in their own homes, they could still embrace domesticity in other people's homes, thus still maintaining the status gained through respectability.

In some ways, little change can be seen between the *Ringwood Journal* and the *Half-Century* in terms of the gendered politics of respectability. Both embraced its socially complex politics and the ways it recognized the personal and the political as mutually constitutive. The editorial position of *Half-Century* is consistent with the earlier Women's Convention in the sense that they both argued in favor of self help (individualist) as the way to better not just one's self but, in doing so, benefit the race as a whole (collective). An example of the collective emphasis includes the establishment of the National Training School for Women and Girls (Higginbotham, 1993). It was supported by small donations of thousands of black women around the country, and sought to standardize, professionalize and unionize the largely black female domestic workforce. In fact, Higginbotham compares this school to Washington's Tuskegee Institute in terms of both of their emphasis on vocational training.

On the other hand, what brought about great differences between the *Ringwood Journal* and the *Half-Century* was the rise and acceptance of middle-class consumerism and its refocusing of the politics of respectability from individual acts that had a collective and social impact to individual acts which remained individualized. Members of the Women's Convention held in contempt what they saw as insincere efforts by the black middle-class to help poor working-class women. They also denounced the attendant middle-class appetite for conspicuous consumption that became more and more evident during and following the years of the Great Migration to cities (Higginbotham, 1993), and as promoted by magazines such as *Half-Century*. Frazier's (1957) seminal study provides an insightful assessment of the development and assimilation of the black middle class into the culture of conspicuous consumption of

mainstream America brought on by the post-War economic boom, technological advancement, mass advertising and installment buying (Zuckerman, 1998). Higginbotham also documents black Baptist women's fear of "commercialism's negative impact on the struggle for racial self-help and self-determination" (p.209). She notes: "Referring to the dress style and spending patterns of domestic servants in northern cities, the executive board described the 'pitiful state' of 'poor working girls ... dressed to death on the Installment plan'" and furnishing homes with "carpets of flaming hues, fancy clocks, lace curtains, plush furniture, brass beds" (p. 210).

Despite the growing importance of middle-class consumerism for blacks and its uncritical embrace by emerging consumerist magazines such as *Half-Century*, the politics of respectability of the Baptist Women's Convention and other clubswomen continued to exemplify a fused personal/political social philosophy. It was a complex combination of middle-class assimilation philosophies, separatist interventions that emphasized racial pride and esteem, and individualist self-determination through hard work. It celebrated both the college educated and the working class, and premised the progress of the race on the personal morality, virtue and self-determination of black women. It was a politics that was shaped by a notion that individualized self-betterment was achieved by community efforts, and that individual effort of this kind contributed to the uplift of the entire race.

Seen in this way, it becomes clear why scholars such as Higginbotham see respectability as a "bridge discourse" linking Progressive-era white reformers and middle-class black women. For most black women in America, the issue always concerns respectability, but one that is embodied in gendered and material ways. In its attention primarily to physical appearance, moral character and social responsibilities, it weighs more heavily on black women than black men as

the vanguard that determines the social fortunes of blacks as a whole in a dominant white society.

But the politics of respectability metamorphosed in later decades of the 1900s. While discussions of respectability that were prevalent in the 1950s continued to pervade middle-class discourses, they were contested (once again within an assimilationist/separatist framework) in the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s and the black power politics of the time. Craig (2002) asserts that a turn toward individual expression in the black power movement combined with a regard for the middle class as bourgeois to marginalize black women who continued to advocate on behalf of the conventional understanding of respectability. Some were even called race traitors. Black women were both the target and the prize in this debate about the middle class in African American society. Women's self-expression was caught in a struggle between cultural nationalists and revolutionaries who, while attempting to redefine class conventions, reinscribed patriarchal gender norms (Craig, 2002). More to the point, Craig argues that during this period, "middle class" was more commonly defined by self-presentation — how one looks and behaves — than by occupation.

Political-philosophic theories of race in the United States had generated the poles of separatism and assimilation. The politics of respectability consisted of an unstable amalgam of both poles. In it, assimilation in the form of adopting and practicing white behaviors and appearances was just as crucial as separatism in the form of developing specific spheres of work and activity distinct from typical white aspirations. However, this hybrid politics that fused the personal with the political soon came to be reshaped and reduced by consumerism and self-help of the 1970s and beyond. This reshaping became a formative location for the articulation of colorism as an explicitly named social phenomenon.

## Colorism and Respectability in *Essence* Magazine

This complex historical development and context produced an equally complex set of articulations through which colorism came to be produced by the 1980s and the emergence of *Essence* magazine.

The editorial formula of *Essence* shared a preoccupation for racial uplift due to the relevance of the politics of respectability for its readership. Yet, social and economic changes during its publication were manifest in the magazine's own editorial changes over time. The politics of respectability increasingly and more uniformly over time emphasized and elevated individual action as solely self-uplift instead of as community uplift. This re-definition of respectability as an individual rather than community matter accelerated within a larger turn to a neoliberal notion of self-help that pervaded popular culture beginning in the 1970s and 1980s (Lasch, 1978). While broad attention to colorism through general-reader, high-circulation magazines might be seen as a step forward in acknowledging and addressing it as a social problem, changes in *Essence*'s editorial focus devalued the critical potential of the publication's address of colorism by defining it as simply an individual matter of self improvement.

### *Defining and commodifying an audience*

*Essence* exemplified the increasingly interrelated discourses of race, gender and class (Collins, 1993). Its editorial stance was defined by a fading black power politics, the enforcement of the legislative civil rights victories (Craig, 2002), a subsequent swell of the black middle class in governmental administrative positions (Collins, 1983; Patillo, 2005), and a rising mainstream feminist movement that was being significantly critiqued by non-white and working class allies (for example, hooks, 1981; Wallace, 1978).

However, it was at the same time a commercial business that began when four black men, meeting at a business conference, apparently responded to a mother's lament about the lack of a magazine that catered to black women (Edwards & Hinds, 1995). After forming the Hollingsworth Group and subsequently meandering for investment capital and magazine publishing advice, *Essence's* inaugural issue appeared in May 1970.

As a consumer magazine geared toward blacks, *Essence* began by following the model laid down by *Ebony*, which had been launched in 1945 by Robert H. Johnson and which eventually found great success. The fortunes of *Ebony* helped define the early years of *Essence*.

According to Johnson, who also founded *Jet* and the defunct *Negro Digest*, *Tan Confessions*, *Copper Romance* and *Hue*, *Ebony* sought to replicate the mainstream *Life* magazine for black readers in order to show the lives of African Americans to themselves and world. *Ebony* embodied a spirit of racial uplift and straddled the assimilationist/separatist, personal/political dichotomies. Founder Johnson "believed in 1945 that Black Americans needed positive images to fulfill their potential. We believed then – and we believe now – that you have to change images before you can change acts and institutions" (Johnson & Bennett, 1989).

After initially refusing to accept commercial advertising and as a result being on the verge of folding every month, Johnson soon realized that he had to court major mainstream white advertising to keep *Ebony* afloat. Zenith Corporation was the magazine's first major mainstream advertiser and helped to open doors to predominantly white advertisers (Johnson & Bennett, 1989).

Daniel (1982) asserts that the securing of this major account was a major breakthrough for black journalism as Johnson succeeded in moving the magazine beyond the philanthropic ties that were common in black publications, and had finally been able to do what Kitch (2001)

names as “two businesses” – creating an audience with the magazine, and then commodifying its readers for advertisers. To do this, Johnson used a mainstream journalistic and economic formula to depict in the magazine a “two-society” nation – one black, one white (Daniels, 1982).

Johnson’s main success was in commodifying an ostensibly homogenous black audience for mainstream white advertisers. While sharing this task, the editors and owners of *Essence* had to go further. *Essence*’s major financial struggle was to convince advertisers of the benefits of further segmenting that ostensibly homogenous audience by gender and direct their advertising toward black women (Edwards & Hinds, 1995; McManus, 1976).

Although incorporating lessons learned from *Ebony*, *Essence*’s publishers and staff still had a tough two-year journey fraught with internal wrangling over direction and voice, and lackluster external interest from potential investors before the first issue was published in May 1970 (Edwards & Hinds, 1995). However, whatever the internal turmoil and external discourses, *Essence* swaddled itself initially in the long tradition of black women’s respectability politics. The publishers’ statement of the 1970 inaugural issue promised black women a pedestal upon which they could finally be lifted. In doing so, the magazine engaged separatist rhetoric and the historic yearnings and ambitions of churchwomen and clubswomen of the past, who through community vigilance and self-help sought to raise black women up in the eyes of themselves, the race and mainstream America.

This publishers’ statement foreshadows a magazine that offered new horizons for inspection, fashion, beauty, food and home decorating advice from a black perspective, and a discussion forum and showcase for literary and artistic black talent. The statement concluded by saying “Above all, *ESSENCE* is launched to delight and celebrate the beauty, pride, strength and uniqueness of all Black women” (Publishers’ Statement, *Essence*, May 1970, p 13). In this way,

*Essence* positioned itself as a medium through which black women could engage with, understand, contest and fashion their own understandings of respectability.

The terms of this respectability shared much with the *Ringwood Journal*. The *Essence* woman was educated, cared about and took care of herself and her family's appearance, and pursued educational and economic advancement while championing it in her own family. Yet, she also embodied a community-inspired sensibility of one who cared about and was involved in her church, pursued goals and aspirations and had a commitment to social issues and community involvement.

#### *Colorism in the Initial Years of Essence*

The case of *Essence* illustrates the complexity and contextual nature of the articulation of colorism with and through respectability. To make the magazine advertiser-friendly, it required some degree of appeal to readers' individual desires, defining them as isolated consumers, even as it oriented its editorial material toward racial uplift and collective empowerment. Yet, at this early point, commercialized individualism and social uplift co-existed, and even in some ways supported each other.

In these early years, intimations can be seen of the articulation of race and gender that by the 1980s would coalesce into the explicitly named phenomenon of colorism. Early issues of *Essence* were thin and carried few full-page ads, suggesting the difficulties of convincing mainstream advertisers of the value to them of a black female market. The few ads in early issues primarily pitched largely cosmetics, hair and feminine hygiene products such as Massengill. Ad copy echoed the "Black is Beautiful" sentiment of the time and used superlatives such as "honest," "fresh" and "natural" as euphemisms for authenticity.

One example of the foreshadowing of colorism were ads that referred implicitly to looking more “white” to become more respectable. For example, cosmetics, crèmes and lotions such as Palmer’s Skin Success, Ambi lotion and Bleach & Glow, were presented as the antidotes for “dry” and “ashy” skin (certainly a visible and telling marker of unkemptness), and unsightly dark spots and uneven, and dark complexions (August, 1973).

Other commodity advertising distanced their claims from issues of skin color. Hair dress and hair care ads promised moister, bigger, well-conditioned and luxuriant Afros, as well as straighter, billowing manes as the decade wore on. And makeup and pantyhose ads stressed their different formulations for the unique attributes of women of color. This emphasis on hair, makeup, pantyhose and hygiene ads is also reminiscent of the Baptist Convention women who sought to police the physical appearance of black women. Even the hygienic washes and deodorants counseled strongly against odors in a manner that engaged an old stereotype of the unclean black woman. Although such ads echoed the social-uplift position espoused by the convention women’s 1900s efforts, within the commercial business of magazines, they emphasized much more exclusively physical self-presentation as the route toward respectability. In fact, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012) argues that *Essence* was transformed into little more than a conduit for white advertisers to the black female market.

Editorial content complemented the advertising. As with major mainstream women’s magazines (Zuckerman, 1998), *Essence*’s editorial content taught care and keeping of the family and home, health advice, diet, fashion and exercise. Numerous articles addressed the perpetual dismal state of black heterosexual relationships as editors and readers alike both re-inscribed and contested patriarchal and sexist dictates of how and whom black women should love. From the inaugural issue, with its cover asking woefully, “Sensual Black Man Do You Love Me?,”

(*Essence*, May 1970), to singer Eloise Laws' pronouncement that black women had no use for women's lib but they needed "most to give their men assurance" (*Essence*, November 1970, p.61), to the more recent adoption of the November issue as the "men's" issue, the magazine advised the readership how to handle its relationships with black men.

Despite this transparently rampant consumerism and nascent foreshadowing of colorism, the entire magazine was not focused entirely on individual self-help. *Essence* also included topics that helped its readers navigate their lives in the changing political climate, with articles from how to lease an apartment to how to detect and fight against employment discrimination. It engaged issues ranging from racism, political empowerment and poverty to the prevailing sentiment that contraception was tantamount to genocide – an issue with historical roots in state-sanctioned sterilization practices. And for the first half of the 1970s, *Essence's* covers for the most part, featured models, most of whom were what Alice Walker called a "definite brown" (1982), thereby falling into a safe, strategic representational position as a magazine that claimed to speak for all black women "across the spectrum" (Publishers' Statement, *Essence*, May 1970, p 13).

Foreshadowing again the matter of skin color in regards to black women, the magazine's claimed position as the voice of and for black women was vigilantly policed and guarded by its readership, who even monitored ads for racial bias. As one example, a reader wrote "the advertisements in your June [1972] issue for Love and Fabergé cosmetics were full page ads with the only woman in each, a blonde, blue-eyed woman. I fail to see how these ads could be allowed in 'the magazine for today's Black woman'." The magazine responded defensively in an Editor's note: "After two years of existence, running approximately 510 advertising pages of which the dominant whole has been Black, we felt confident that those two ads would be

excused, if not forgotten. ... Those two ads, which we regret using, surely cannot be enough for you to damn our entire magazine. ... We know we are beautiful, and one blond can't turn us around."<sup>4</sup> (Write On! September 1972, p.4). In 1974, another reader wrote: "The magazine for "Black" women has reverted to using beauty standards patterned after, and closely emulating, those of whites." (Write On!, November 1974, p. 4).

What united these disparate elements and emphases in the advertising and the editorial content during these initial years was the monthly column "Getting Down" written by the young and self-described brash editor-in-chief Marcia Ann Gillespie who assumed the position from 1971-1980. According to Taylor (1995), Gillespie refocused *Essence* to be young and hip in order to make it relevant to a broader range of black women. For her part, Gillespie claimed that she wanted to create an intimate magazine that celebrated black womanhood. She stated in the 25th year commemorative publication that she wanted it to speak to how Black women really feel inside, and for them to feel like they were in conversation with her (Edwards & Hinds, 1995).

"Getting Down" in African American cultural vernacular means straight talk, which describes well the column as calls-to-action and consciousness-raising pieces on social issues that affected the black community. Largely using collective pronouns such as "we" and "us," the column generally embodied a sentiment of community-based self-help while also emphasizing personal responsibility, commitment and action. For example, in a November 1972 issue, Gillespie's column called on the readership to vote with black concerns in mind and to "pinpoint those political lumps who take their reelection for granted, and start working to make them tremble" (Gillespie, November 1972, p. 39). Rallying her readers to take control in the uplift of

---

<sup>4</sup> According to McManus (1976), *Essence* had an early policy that all ads must include a black model.

their communities, Gillespie wrote that “one way to remake our reality is by using the ballot in November to its fullest potential ... We must start using that ballot to ‘whip ass,’ and make these elected officials on the county, city, state and federal level responsive to us” (Gillespie, November 1972, p. 39).

According to McManus (1976), as *Essence* struggled to find its voice, it moved away from strictly cause-oriented content as the readership found it “overly pedantic.” Gillespie found her stride by addressing politics as personal issues as well as personal issues as political. One example of doing so is Gillespie’s call to action in a July 1973 editorial about police-civilian violence. Highlighting the plight of the mother of a 10-year-old black boy who was shot and killed by a plainclothes police officer, Gillespie invoked the symbol of motherhood and struggle as a place of moral high ground (Moore, 2003). “And yet another mother wails in anguish while clutching her remaining brood closer to her breast. Her anguish is understood, our quiet is not. We must act to save our children from the madness. Our strength is in our children, our hope is in our children” (Gillespie, July 1973, p. 27).

Gillespie was also unafraid to engage in “straight talk” that was critical of black women and men in the interest of racial uplift. Her column in a September 1972 issue tackled the prevailing genocidal sentiments of the black community toward the topical contraceptive and birth control debate. Gillespie called out *Essence*’s readership for its participation in this demoralizing practice.

Genocide! It continues its inexorable progress among us. Further inroads are made whenever the phrase “Niggers ain’t shit” or variations on the theme are spoken by us about us. ... Genocide – when we call each other “bitch, whore and motherfucker.” True, it’s also genocide when they move to sterilize our women, but they really don’t need to rush into this as a mass activity, not when we trample on our own tattered pride, dignity, and self-respect with such programmed regularity (Gillespie, September 1972, p.35).

This column was received well by the readership. It exemplified many other magazine elements that embodied collectivist/individual action and purpose, and in doing so embodied the character and politics of respectability that helped to promote a sense of individual responsibility and action as a form of community self-help. Even as some readers challenged her use of profanity, Gillespie retorted that she was sticking to the mission of “straight talk” to galvanize the community.

It is within this no-nonsense, straight-talking, consciousness-raising context of respectability that colorism was articulated as an individual experience that constituted a communal issue. In a January 1974 beauty-themed issue, Gillespie employed her usual straight-talking tone to “get down” about the issue’s perpetuation. “God knows it was bad enough that whites had ignored and mocked our beauty, but that extra vilification from our own for too long was the crucial, crowning blow,” (p. 37) she wrote. Gillespie leveled the conversation, eliminated distance between writer and reader and implicated both the readership and herself in the issue, making it communal with the use of the collective address. She used this mode of address not only to point the finger but to also demarcate the point of progressive action, indicating that the solution lay with community resolve. “Now, finally, we seem to have come to a point where all of us are at last beautiful, no matter the hue, hair, nose or mouth. Could be we’re free of the dozens at last.” (Gillespie, January 1974, p. 37).

### *Colorism Comes to Essence*

The magazine addressed the issue of colorism again in July 1982 in a collection of short pieces that addressed colorism explicitly as a named social phenomenon. Although Gillespie was no longer at the helm pulling the magazine together with her “getting-down, straight-talk” tone,

the feature still embodied a politics of respectability in its fusion of community/individual action.<sup>5</sup>

The feature framed colorism in content and in style within the community garden of *Essence*'s sisterhood. It was comprised of two first- and second-person articles, one by a very light-skinned black woman and the second by a very dark-skinned black woman. In form, these articles sought to close the emotional distance between the reader and the writers by framing their experiences in the form of a testimonial. The third, longer article was an earlier version of novelist Alice Walker's longer essay that was reprinted in 1983 and that was discussed in the prior chapter. It discursively linked these real, raw personal experiences to larger historical, social and literary patterns.

Written by frequent *Essence* contributors and writers, Alexis De Veux, Bonnie Allen along with Walker, these women were also feminists and literary writers on their way up. In fact, Walker's article connected this social issue with the literary heroines of black writers, and in doing so named explicitly the social phenomenon as "colorism."

As the first contribution, Bonnie Allen wrote in "It Ain't Easy Being Pinky" in the first person about the ostracism she faced as a young adult and professional on the lighter end of the skin-color spectrum, and of being disparaged by darker-skinned black women because of the perceived advantages she may have been given, calling it a "no-win situation" (Allen, 1982, p. 67). On the other hand, Alexis De Veux penned in "Loving the Dark in Me" an angry letter to her aunt who, while counseling (and degrading) her niece on how to be a respectable black woman, also taught her to "act her age and not her color" (De Veux 1982, p. 121) and to see her

---

<sup>5</sup> Gillespie departed the publication in 1980 and former beauty editor Susan L. Taylor became editor after a brief interlude.

dark complexion as a hindrance, one that made it disrespectful to wear bright colors and to stand out in any way. De Veux's aunt warned her instead to "fade in."

These deeply personal and raw essays from both sides of the colorism spectrum were joined by Walker's essay, which mulled over the decidedly uncomplimentary ways in which colorism has been perpetuated in literary form. Describing herself as a "definite brown," Walker's "Embracing the Dark and the Light," sat in the middle and therefore safe representational position between Allen and De Veux.<sup>6</sup> Her essay functioned discursively as a point of connection for the personal essays, grounding these experiences in social reality and making them communal in context. It also highlighted that while the experience with colorism is personally felt, the problem itself is one that is positioned within the social milieu. As such, solutions cannot only focus on the individual. In fact, she called on the literary world to help address the problem, placing the issue, as Gillespie did, within the garden of sisterhood for address within *Essence*.

Even in its physical presentation, these individual articles were packaged as a community. All began on the same page, with the personal essays sharing the top half, and Walker's beginning on the bottom half of the same page, thus displaying a union and solidarity regarding the issue and despite the diversity of perspective and approach. The magazine's front matter previewed the package in a collective sense as well by asking "Does Color Come Between Us?" (*Essence*, July 1982). And the introduction to the package also argued against the divisiveness of the phenomenon: "Yet, if we are to stand together and survive as a people, we cannot allow color to become the wedge that divides and destroys us" (*Essence*, July 1982, p.66).

---

<sup>6</sup> Walker's essay was revised to add some of her own experiences with colorism and reprinted in her nonfiction collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), which is most cited for the initial appearance of the term colorism.

### *Self-help Culture and Essence's Content*

However, this 1982 feature about colorism was the last example in *Essence* of a fusion of individual/community-based address of the issue informed by the traditional politics of respectability. By the mid-1980s, *Essence* had as a whole begun to turn toward celebration of the success of the individual self, thus confirming what one reader had called earlier in the decade “the same direction as *Cosmopolitan*, ... out-and-out commercialism” (*Essence*, November 1974, p.4). It is at this point that *Essence's* re-articulation of self-help with heightened self-presentation began to come into focus. The magazine's individualistic direction resonated with a self-help culture that espoused what some critics more recently have called simplistic and uncomplicated answers to social issues (Ehrenreich 2009; McGee, 2005; Whitaker 1995). As such, it stood in sharp contrast to the long-standing sense of self-help rooted in community uplift and sisterhood.

While self-help and its corresponding literature has formed a consistent core of American puritanical values and progress, this ideology has informed a wide variety of popular culture aimed at black communities, particularly from the 1980s onward. A blanket of books, CDs, DVDS, seminars, television shows and, later, websites with “gurus” all offer counseling and psychological services (Effing, 2009). According to Effing, self-help became more institutionalized and positioned within the sphere of science well into the 1990s. While volumes from Covey's (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* to Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006) became American bestsellers, African American purveyors of self-help have also made their mark, most notably Oprah Winfrey with her record-shattering talk show *Oprah!* along with her *O* magazine (Miller, Brennen and Edgerton-Webster, 2005, Peck, 2007). Others, such as Iyanla Vanzant, a Yoruba priestess and lawyer, used their memoirs and experiences as the basis

of their media personas as self-help gurus. Incidentally, Vanzant got her start as a regular guest on *Oprah!* before splitting with her to host her own reality show (Danielle, 2012), then reuniting in *Iyanla, Fix My Life* on Winfrey's *OWN* network. Others such as the Rev. T.D. Jakes and actor, television host and radio personality Steve Harvey offer help and guidance on spirituality and relationships.

The importance of *Essence's* contextual editorial change becomes clearer when seen against studies of self-help as solely an individual matter. Scholars such as McGee (2005) argue that the focus on the individual is at odds with a sense of political action. Therefore, instead of producing change, such self-help simply maintains the status quo. Others, such as Ehrenreich (2009), maintain that ascribing total control of one's success to the individual self does not adequately account for external conditions outside of individual control. Individual self-help also leads to victim-blaming when things go bad. These features are clearly evident in *Essence* after its change. In fact, in her extensive work on Oprah Winfrey, Peck (2007) argues that the cultural icon's rise was precipitated by the era's neoliberal self-help politics as she found a receptive audience in educated middle class women.

#### *Colorism and Essence's Context – A Change in Content and Tone*

At *Essence*, new editor Susan L. Taylor established a different tone from Gillespie, concentrating with her "In the Spirit" column on the spiritual and the internal. The publication even engaged former Winfrey guru Vanzant to pen a similar column. This new focus stressed self-love in an individualistic sense. Concurrently, the rest of the magazine – advertising, editorial content and cover art - in formulation more and more came to resemble its mainstream counterparts in its focus on self-help as an individual matter. In this context, colorism became articulated as primarily if not exclusively an individual problem that required an equally individual solution.

Within this growth and expansion, *Essence*'s editorial content also became less in-depth. Less space was allotted to prominent black writers, and longer exposés and features on social issues were shortened in lieu of quick-hit items, quizzes, sidebars and how-to guides. Additionally, two of the usual four items comprising the features section began to follow similar instructional formats. Examples include "A Complete Guide to Birth Control," "Stress-busting yoga exercises," or "Actress Halle Berry's natural makeup" (March 1990). The magazine emphasized issues of wealth and economic success for black women, as evidenced in articles on women and work, women and finance, and a general guide to getting ahead financially.

From the late 1980s to the present, most issues touted pieces such as "Happy and Rich," "Live Your Dreams – 8 Easy Ways to Start Your Own Business," "Be a Rich Black Woman," and "Start a Business at Home and Quit Your Job" (December 2007; February 2008; April 2008). While such features existed in the first decade of the publication's existence, the difference in the latter years is the tone, the amount of space allotted and the overt concentration of the betterment of the individual self without recognizing the relevance of community uplift.

Also notably, the magazine began to regularly use high-profile and celebrity black women (and men) on the cover, such as singer Janet Jackson; actor and singer Vanessa Williams; rapper Queen Latifah, singer Jill Scott, and actors Idris Elba and Tyler Perry. (March 1990; September 1994; July 2009; May 2010; November 2011; November 2012). This focus on entertainment celebrities has not been complete, however. To its credit, personalities such as Alice Walker have also graced the magazine's covers, as well as both Barack and Michelle Obama (September 1989; March 2010; October 2011; July 2012). However, by echoing Du Bois' Talented Tenth and recognizing the concrete successes of black women and men, this emphasis on the highlighting of individual successes and with it their own self-presentation, as

the literal vision of black success, combines with the rest of the magazine content to articulate self-help as individual, consequently de-emphasizing community action.

While editor Taylor did address topical issues and urged community unification from time to time, her “In the Spirit” column also reified the individual. She counseled her readers to find their own reality within themselves and to “catch the light, learn new truths, gather the strength to resist assaults on our individual world... Each day we must go within for new life, for new strength, to where indwelling spirit awaits us. Here at the center of our being awaits us for what we want and need most: inner peace, the only freedom” (Taylor, April 1989, p. 55).

She even engaged visualization exercises to help her readership connect.

Imagine yourself stepping into an elevator on the fifth floor and descending to the basement. See the numbers lighting up as you go down. When you reach the basement, the door eases open and you feel a warm, glowing light washing over your body. You are calm, safe and secure. You’ve come before your throne, the place where you have infinite wisdom, where every problem can be solved. Ask the divinity within to give you whatever you need to be your best self, to do your greatest work. Affirm that you love yourself, believe in yourself, trust in yourself – and that you are powerful and in charge of your life (Taylor, April 1989, p.55).

*Essence* contributor Iyanla Vanzant thematically reiterates the familiar message. For example, after telling a story of a young woman’s quest for inner peace, she prescribed a five-step plan for the woman to use to transcend her issues. The plan included admitting faults, seeing “yourself as you want to be,” praying and affirming, mental housecleaning, and forgiveness. She concluded her column with the encompassing prescriptive, “to attain physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health, we must begin loving ourselves, cleansing our minds and releasing negative energy we have stored in us” (Vanzant, September 1990, p.36).

Driven by Taylor’s column, these elements together voices a narrower politics of respectability that emphasized self-help and personal success through the sole effort of the individual.

### *Colorism's Articulations in a Transformed Essence*

In a nod to the continued importance of the topic, *Essence* addressed colorism directly at least nine times in consistent intervals following the 1982 article. However, within *Essence's* re-articulated concept of self-help and emphasis on the self-presentation of the individual, the critical potential of these articles was either diffused or neutralized. While they gave due recognition to the historical roots and social pervasiveness of the issue, they psychologized the problem and relocated the solution back in the individual. Such attention to colorism became little more than lip service when placed within the context of the magazine's reduction of the range of the politics of respectability.

By demonstrating the magazine's embrace of self-help culture, most of the articles deploy expert sources in the form of psychologists and therapists (usually scholars documenting the impact of colorism), who offer solutions such as "reevaluation counseling," in which "people are able to identify, talk about and discharge their pain with the help of an aware, supportive human being, and reevaluate the behavior" (Njeri, September 1991, p.116), "honesty about and reframing our own attitudes, positive and affirmative messages and effective racial socialization of our children" (Millner, December 2011, p. 134), and "by confronting each other when we hear comments about each other's color," (Bates, September 1994, p.79).

These messages offered seemingly commonsense solutions for dealing with colorism. However, within the context of the overall editorial mix of the magazine with its emphasis on individual attainment, the social dimension and thus the critical potential is lost. More recent articles continue to emphasize the individual range in which colorism is to be addressed. Examples include a woman who used the taunts she received to write a novel (Millner, December 2011). She ends the story with a lesson. The main character ultimately found strength

to “look within and define her worth and beauty for herself.” Finally, in a turn that reflects the progressively individualizing of the issue, the last article published in the scope of this project included an “Are You Colorstruck?” quiz that presented scenarios and possible responses so that the readers themselves can self-diagnose their own levels of participation in colorism (*Essence*, December 2011).

### **Conclusion**

*Essence*'s transformation from its inception to 2011 indicates a change in the ways in which the publication articulated black women's politics of respectability. Its increasing emphasis on the self at the expense of community impaired the magazine as a vehicle for enacting purposeful change or political action regarding colorism (McGee, 2005). Indeed, its embrace of mainstream self-help publishing trends may have exacerbated if not further perpetuated the problem by doing so.

This chapter also draws attention to the ways in which simply addressing colorism cannot be taken as on its own a progressive development. It documents how the politics of respectability has been altered to individualize, psychologize and reposition colorism exclusively in the subjective, and ultimately feminine realm.

## CHAPTER 4

### ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY AND COLORISM IN *DARK GIRLS*

As discussed in previous chapters, colorism is articulated and thus constituted in and through a variety of formations and forms. Along with aesthetics and literary work, the politics of respectability and women's magazines, documentary film is a third site for such articulation and constitution. In the case of colorism, the 2011 documentary *Dark Girls* by co-directors Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry brings the account of colorism in this study up-to-date. In addition to tracing colorism's key articulations as an explicit phenomenon from its emergence in Alice Walker's 1982/83 essays in the context of feminist art and aesthetics, and its constitution in self-help black women's consumerist magazines of the 1970s and beyond in the context of the gendered politics of respectability, this chapter examines the 2011-13 theater and cable network's screenings of *Dark Girls*.

Through critical examination of *Dark Girls* and its accompanying critical response, this chapter locates colorism within a contextual mapping of the historically raced and gendered discourses of not only respectability, but also of uplift and silence. Such a move aims to bring into better focus the means of colorism's perpetuation in black American communities. This chapter examines the nine-minute trailer of the documentary that, unlike the film itself that has never been generally released in theaters, has been widely available for public viewing. In addition, the chapter considers the film's promotional website, which consists of the trailer, information about the filmmakers, the movie's scheduled screenings, press information, a blog tab and stories from viewers about their own experiences with colorism; its Vimeo site that

displays the original trailer and an updated video for a total of approximate 13 minutes of playing time, and about 217 comments which peaked during the first release of the video; and its *YouTube* channel, Rise Women Rise, in which women share their experiences with colorism for 11 videos and approximately 13 minutes of play time; and 21 reaction videos for a total of 9 minutes of play time; and the film's official *Facebook* page which contains more than 450 comments and 22,423 "likes." The page's postings include administrative posts about the film's progress, screenings and updates, and reaction comments from and interactions with other *Facebook* users. The comments on the *Facebook* page were consistently average over the course of the last two years while only the promotional trailer was available, but ramped up considerably once the film premiered on *OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network* in June 2013.

The chapter argues that *Dark Girls* progressively transgressed the limitations of earlier articulations of colorism. Through its public format and attention to the material effects of colorism on darker-skinned black women, the film disrupts the gendered racial silencing that reduces and depoliticizes the phenomenon.

### **Transgressing Dissembling Silence**

In one sense, the angst in black communities surrounding the public discussion of colorism could be seen as a result of valuing more fully racial solidarity. At various times, a variety of associations and organizations have been urged to "close ranks" in the interests of solidarity (Du Bois, 1918), and to debate their various issues away from outsiders' eyes. For black communities, this imperative of solidarity has been long-standing, predating the Emancipation Proclamation (1863).

This imperative is also constituted through a prism of race and gender. Calls for racial solidarity present to black women a too-commonly mutually exclusive choice between closing ranks with other women (including white women) and thus denying differences of race, or closing ranks with other blacks (including men) and thus denying gendered differences. As a result, calls for solidarity too easily lead to an erasure of differences that constitute sources of strength for black women.

Beyond Sojourner Truth's most famous "A'nt I A Woman?" plea, which she delivered at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 that argued for consideration as a woman but without mentioning race, black feminists and womanists such as bell hooks, Michele Wallace, and more contemporarily Joan Morgan seek to examine the precarious positioning of black women within calls for solidarity (e.g. hooks, 1981; Wallace, 1979; Morgan, 1999). Time and again, this call for allegiance to race over gender, or to gender over race, take center stage as evidenced in the cases against boxer Mike Tyson, who was convicted in 1992 of raping Desiree Washington, but who still enjoys popular attention while Washington was publicly disparaged (e.g. Chancer, 1998; Griffin, 2013). Other examples include those of actor and football star OJ Simpson, for whom many blacks cheered following his 1995 acquittal in the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman (e.g. Griffin, 2013); and the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas case, in which it was noted that anti-feminist black men squared off against feminist black women after sexual harassment charges by Hill emerged in 1991 during the then-Chief Justice Thomas' Supreme Court hearings (e.g. Richards & Greenberg, 2013). Consider as well the more recent domestic violence case involving pop singers Rihanna and Chris Brown, in which Brown continued to be supported from blacks even as he admitted to assaulting Rihanna, while her public discussion of the incident was tainted as a form of race-treason (e.g. Griffin, 2013).

Commentators on these cases make the dilemma clear for black women. For instance, in her examination of Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas, and Robin Givens' and Desiree Washington's allegations against Mike Tyson, Holloway (1995) argues that the positioning of the black female body in literature and contemporary cultural politics documents and reinforces silence for the sake of racial solidarity. Hine and Thompson (1998) assert that the backlash black women fear of breaking silence and speaking up about intra-race issues were confirmed by the vicious criticism leveled at Ntozake Shange for her choreo-poem/play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* and at Alice Walker for her novel *The Color Purple*. Among the key points, scholars point out that such criticism argued that the works showed black men as scheming, ruthless and unworthy of any positive attention (e.g. Hine & Thompson, 1998; Lester, 1992). Similarly, Harris (2009) cites critics such as John Cunningham and Ishmael Reed who assert that black feminist cultural critics and artists such as Walker, Wallace and Maya Angelou reinforce racial stereotypes and divide the black community.

However, this conception of mutually exclusive categories of identification and solidarity is only adequate at best. This chapter locates these objections to the airing of "dirty laundry" in a more complex articulation. Doing so will also make more visible the ramifications of the film's disruptions regarding the phenomenon of colorism.

While related to a politics of respectability in ways that Higginbotham (1993) points out, Hine's (1989) concept of a "culture of dissemblance" provides a more precise means of interrogating the gendered implications of what makes "letting the shit all hang out" transgressive. In her research on black women's migration to the Middle West, Hine (1989) recognized a phenomenon she calls "dissemblance," which refers to disguise or concealment

behind a false appearance. Dissemblance in Hine's terms referred to a phenomenon in which black women adopted behaviors and attitudes "that created the appearance of openness and disclosure ... about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma" (p. 915). For example, to counteract the pervasive stereotypes of the loud, black woman or the oversexed jezebel, black women simply avoid confrontations that perhaps may be necessary.

Produced initially as a means to shield themselves from rape and the threat of rape, Hine argues that this "culture of dissemblance" allowed "black women to accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle" (p. 915). In reaction to the conditions of their lives, black women enacted dissemblance in the form of a self-imposed silence surrounding personal issues, particularly those relating to sexuality. Higginbotham (1993) further extends this conceptualization as she traces its incorporation into the agenda of convention and clubswomen, a nationwide network of active black women who were also the preeminent purveyors of the politics of respectability.

As discussed in the prior chapter, respectability politics is a deeply gendered facet of racial-uplift discourse, through which primarily black middle-class women instructed working-class black women on morality, self-help and economic empowerment, and assimilative values in the bigger interest of racial uplift and pride (Higginbotham, 1993). As part of their agenda, these women sought to correct the public image of the black woman, which had suffered from being portrayed as promiscuous, sexually available and lacking in morals (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1993; Moore, 2003; Rooks, 2004). In attempting to illustrate the clubswomen's vision of the black woman as the bastion of morality, Higginbotham cites the minutes of the Baptist Women's Convention: "since she [the black woman] is liable to these insults and

encroachments ... she must become a tower of moral strength and by her reserve and dignified bearing defy and cower her aggressors” (p.193).

Whether in the politics of respectability or elsewhere, the culture of dissemblance was a strategy for handling and dealing with the implications of such negative imagery and stereotypes of black women, as they continued to be sexual victims to black and white men alike (Hine, 1989). Additionally, by staying silent about acts of sexual violation, they may have hoped that discussions surrounding black women’s sexuality generally would also be silenced – thereby opening space for a more positive image of an upstanding and moral black woman equal to the rights of her white counterparts to emerge.

However, no such result has uniformly occurred. While this response to repressive social conditions enabled black women to carve out some respite and psychic space, Hine argues that dissemblance also operated counterproductively. “Yet, it could be argued that their secrecy or ‘invisibility’ contributed to the development of an atmosphere inimical to realizing equal opportunity or a place of respect in the larger society,” she writes. For “stereotypes, negative images and debilitating assumptions filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities and identities of black women” (p. 915).

Whatever its reverberations in the dominant white culture, dissemblance’s articulation within the context of the cultural politics of respectability and racial uplift worked to construct multiple myths and discourses of silences. Such silences enabled the emergence and perpetuation of myths such as Wallace’s (1979) superwoman, Morgan’s (1999) STRONGBLACKWOMAN, and Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s Sisterella Complex (2003) along with implications such as depression, overeating and overspending experienced by women attempting to fulfill such impossible standards. All of these myths represent a do-it-all woman who bears up against and

through all adversity with nary a complaint, thus exemplifying the culture of dissemblance and its silences as uniformly sources of strength. For example, Wallace explains the myth of the superwoman who “does not have the same fears, weaknesses and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men” (Wallace, 1979 cited in Morgan, 1999, p.101). Morgan (1999) in plain-spoken, hip-hop vernacular extends this myth, naming the silent credo of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN: “No matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity” (p.90). Here Morgan illuminates the crux of the articulation of dissembling silence with respectability. Extending beyond matters of sexuality, this silence extends into all areas of the personal, including injury and hurt inflicted by the experience of colorism.

In addition, in a socially constructed raced-gendered caste system in which dark-skinned black women are at the bottom, dark women are likely to hold fast to their notions of respectability complete with its dissembling silence to preserve their psychic space (Hine 1989, p.915). Highlighting the relational as opposed to essential nature of colorism, this silence by dark women also manifests itself in the lives of light-skinned black women, who are victimized by the backlash against colorism and thus become subjected to it as well. Therefore, while many blacks know of colorism and understand its effects, black women due to race and gender are rendered within this mix of silence and acceptance triply invisible and irrelevant.

### **Dissemblance and Transgression**

A culture of dissemblance and the silences it engenders are particularly important to the constitution of colorism, which rests upon the historical foundations of slavery and interracial offspring and is an “everyday” occurrence for many black Americans (Wilder, 2008). While

seeming to be necessary in order to address colorism as a social phenomenon instead of as an individual problem, making available discussions of colorism to dominant white America contradicts the imperatives for racial solidarity. The silences of individual black women are thus paralleled by silences of larger communities. Much of the angst surrounding the documentary *Dark Girls* is due to having debates about colorism in public for anyone to hear. It is due to — in popular vernacular — “letting that shit all hang out.” Evidence of angst about airing this dirty laundry can be seen in a question-and-answer session following the showing of *Dark Girls*. Upon an audience member asking, “Why are you airing our dirty laundry?,” the documentary’s co-director Bill Duke replied “Because it’s stinkin’ up the place” (Bates, 2012; see also Rust, 2012).

Transgressions such as this overflow the boundaries of black respectability and of silences, particularly when performed through documentary film and its claimed status as a record of reality. As a documentary, the film *Dark Girls* breaches a cultural politics of dissembling silence, and puts black women’s hurt and pain as perpetuated at the hands of their own people at the center of the narrative.

Popular backlash regarding the airing of so-called “dirty laundry” is not unique in this instance. For example, prominent black figures open the door to chastisement and rebuke when they use their public platform to speak about the black community in perceived negative ways. For instance, actor and comedian Bill Cosby and more recently journalist and television anchor Don Lemon have and continue to receive criticism for their critique of what they see as widespread immorality and delinquency among black youth (e.g. Fernandez, 2004; Smith, 2013).

However, this comment about the airing of dirty laundry is a symptom of deeper silences in black American communities as well as their transgressions and disruptions. As transgression

and disruption are two key terms used in this chapter, more discussion of them helps clarify their place.

Transgression in the sense used here draws from Cresswell's (1996) formulation. It refers to going against accepted norms and mores, consequently succeeding in the illumination of the "common sense," "taken for granted," or ideology, thereby positioning such transgression for chastisement, criticism or rebuke. According to Cresswell (1996), "transgression, and the reaction to it, underlines those values that are considered correct and appropriate" (p. 21). For the purposes of this chapter, I use "disruption" to mean a physical act with power-imbued representations of defiance and resistance, ostensibly to make real and with effect specific transgressions.

The transgressions and disruptions produced by the film *Dark Girls* can be understood in part through Hine's (1989) notion of a culture of dissemblance and its transgression. The culture of dissemblance and corresponding silences that characterize intra-race relations regarding colorism are transgressed by the film. It breaks the silence concerning colorism and thus creates a safe space for colorism's alternative address and articulation as a public/personal phenomenon that requires an equally multi-faceted response. Further, the online discussion of the documentary extends these transgressions, thus complementing if not magnifying the film's strategy of disruption. In the documentary and the comments, black women abandon the culture of dissemblance and speak about the personal and emotional centrality of their gendered and raced experience.

*Dark Girls* transgresses and disrupts the dissembling silence that constitutes colorism as a gendered racism. It enacts a gendered indiscretion against black women's propriety and respectability politics. Something is being talked about by black women that was never meant to

be talked about, particularly by them. In doing so, the documentary also transgresses and disrupts mutually exclusive raced-gendered constructions inherent in discourses of race solidarity.

This gendered indiscretion enables colorism's articulation by troubling and contesting a set of key, but unstable, binary oppositions. In addition to the a priori assumptions of distinct and separate race and gender characteristics and constructions—which are challenged by the very concept of colorism—the documentary works in connection with black women's respectability politics through and across a similar opposition between the public sphere and the private sphere, with private articulated to the subaltern “black” community and public to the dominant, defined in this process not only in essentialized terms as “white” but also in purely relational terms as “not black.”

However, not only have the filmmakers created a documentary that places dark-skinned black women at the center of the narrative, they also pursue a very public means of telling the story. The theatrical and cable television platform the documentary assumes moves the discussion beyond exclusive black circles and opens up the range of the viewing audience and discussions.

The documentary strategically deploys this private/public binary in service of its greater goal of “starting the conversation” (Bates, 2012). Such a strategy points to the cultural complexity of this phenomenon while also emphasizing the value of an analysis using articulation rather than essentialism for recognizing these complexities. On the one hand, its exposition of what is considered a secret transgresses the private sphere and breaks silences. On the other, its successful execution relies precisely on this binary to create a safe place to address colorism publicly.

## **Documentary and the Production of Safe, Disruptive Space**

The transgression and disruption produced by the showing of *Dark Girls* is due not to some intrinsic property of the film so much as the key historical, social, cultural and textual articulations that relate the film to particular discursive frameworks which produce it as intelligible in particular ways.

The first of these discursive frameworks is traditions of the black documentary. The documentary film as a genre emerged over the past 100 years. As summarized by Ellis and McLane (2005), the documentary film is typically about something specific and factual rather than about the general human condition, and typically seeks to inform or persuade by either telling or showing (or a combination). Scholars and critics have contested it in epistemological terms, citing problems such as the degree to which a documentary can be planned and produced as opposed to simply witnessed, and the role of imaginative exposition or reconstruction in an ostensibly “factual” presentation. Despite these ongoing debates, the genre still is popularly seen as capable of what Nichols (1991) calls representing reality, although any specific instances may fall short of this goal. Nichols accounts for this faith in the factuality of documentary despite critiques and problems by noting its roots in what he calls “discourses in sobriety.” Such discourses are “sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate and transparent” (p. 4).

These complexities and debates have been influenced by a number of different traditions of documentary film, while also shaping them. While one tradition adheres to the work of Robert Flaherty, who worked in naturalist ways to document groups of people who were portrayed as unaware of the camera and of being filmed, a second tradition operates in the wake of the work of John Grierson, who used a modernist aesthetic and who promoted advocacy, concern with

social processes and a particular point of view (Barnouw, 1993). Whichever tradition or combination of traditions is used, the documentary carries the weight and assumptions of the real, whatever the actual processes in its creation and presentation. In fact, Benson and Snee (2005) emphasize the need to acknowledge how each tradition informs and constitutes the other by stating that Grierson defined documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” (p. 4).

Of more precise relevance to *Dark Girls* and its treatment of colorism is the sub-genre of the “black documentary.” Much of its practice has been fashioned in the Grierson tradition, as a forthright presentation of a particular point of view and a means of advocacy. Furthermore, much of the same aesthetic also informs the black independent feature-film tradition, which seeks to reclaim the lives, work and issues of invisible black and marginalized people, or to provide alternate renderings in the hope of changing the narratives (Klottman & Cutler, 1999). Such work was pioneered by notables such as William Greaves, popularly known for producing WNET’s *Black Journal* (1969-70) as well as many works such as *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class* (1968), and independent films such as *From These Roots* (1974) and *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (2001). As these examples suggest, the black documentary emerged largely in the form of portraits of consequential black figures, events or as critiques of social issues specific to blacks. Other key figures in black documentary cinema include St. Clair Bourne, Ayoka Chenzira, Debra Robinson and Henry Hampton.

What is also of great relevance to the showing and reception of *Dark Girls* and the consequential articulation of colorism is the distinctions between black documentary and black feature films compared to similar distinctions in dominant white filmmaking. Within the general realm of black cinema, the distinctions between fiction and documentary are inverted in relation to the mainstream, even as they retain the traditional formulations of fiction and “real.” Smith

(1992) makes such a claim in arguing that, unlike the mainstream feature film, the black fiction film bears markers that designate it as “real” and as concerned with “facticity” despite being fictional. Such a move was necessary for opening doors so that suppressed material such as slave narratives could emerge. Diawara (1993) argues similarly that the realist aesthetic typical of black documentary—which is also generally seen in black feature films—is composed with a linear storyline with a beginning, middle and end, and involves a “quest for the formation of the family and individual freedom” (p. 11). Important techniques for retaining the “real” in fictional films include a movie soundtrack composed of current and popular music (as opposed to music written exclusively for the film) along with current costumes and contemporary sets. Such techniques are part of films such as Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), Wendell B. Harris, Jr.’s *Chameleon Street* (1989) and John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* (1991).

The reason why claims of the “real” by categories of filmmaking are inverted for black cinema is to critique assumptions about filmmaking itself as well as attendant genres (Smith, 1992). The use of unusual visual and narrative techniques is evident in films such as Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Color Adjustment* (1992), and Camille Billops and James Hatch’s *Finding Christa* (1991) in which the filmmakers insert themselves in story, use poetry and dance, and even re-enact scenes to question what stands for reality.

Black documentary also engages in this experimentation as deemed from a dominant perspective. As Diawara (1993) argues, it empowers the actors and their subjectivities through the use of nonlinear narratives, specificity of identity, and mise-en-scene. For example, Diawara compares Dash’s (1991) *Daughters of the Dust*, which centers on three generations of Gullah women with Singleton’s (1991) *Boyz N the Hood* that is a coming of age story of a young black

boy. Dash's story is narrated by The Unborn Child and the circular significance of the generations is highlighted in concept and visual imagery. On the other hand, Singleton's story moves through time and space following the physical life of the protagonist. Altogether, these techniques within the symbolic paradigm "stop time to render audible and visible Black voices and characters that have been suppressed by centuries of Eurocentrism" (Diawara, 1993, p. 11).

The transgressive and socially engaged traditions of black cinema help explain its fit to the project that became *Dark Girls*. It is not so much the subject matter but how *Dark Girls* represents black reality that makes it so controversial. By voicing colorism through documentary (representing reality) and through feature-length film and online excerpts (which make it available to "outsiders" as well as insiders) attention is called to a culture of historically and socially constructed silence for women around the ostensibly private issue of colorism. The format of the black documentary draws upon the sub-genre's already established conventions, thus presenting the material as reality. Its effectiveness at doing so can be seen by comparing it to other treatments of colorism, but in fictional feature films. Works such as *Pinky* (1949) or Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988) are easier to dismiss because they occupy the genre of fiction (not fact) and art (not reportage).

A second way in which *Dark Girls* challenges black-documentary aesthetics and thus breaks the silences about colorism while also rendering it as a social/personal phenomenon is in its seeming one-sidedness. Viewer comments about the movie trailer voice concern that interviewees were cherry-picked and that question/prompts were written to fit a preconception of what the film would be about instead of adhering to a Flaherty-esque style of naturalistic observation or traditional journalistic expectations of balance. There is some textual evidence for

such a claim. While the U.S. Census estimates that by 2015 there will be 12.5 million black women living the United States, only 10 of the 18 interviewees told their personal stories.

Viewers question the film's claims to truth on a variety of bases. For instance, Mithun Kumar on the movie's Vimeo site wondered about the gendering of issue. "I wonder, just because women can cry out, does it make any more suffering than Dark-skin Men (sic)? Isn't this skin issue same across genders?" (Kumar, 2009) Another commenter drew attention to the lighter end of the colorism spectrum. "As a 'light-skinned' black woman, however, I can tell you there is another side to the story" (AtlantaJ, 2009). "Not these women but some darker Sisters (sic) truly hate light women just for being born light. ... You'd be surprised the negative things people will say about light-skinned people with a sweeping brush" (AtlantaJ, 2009).

Other commentators voice concern about the lack of representativeness in the selection of interviewees. One comments:

Its a film called "Dark Girls" starring some of the most miserable ones they could find. Come ON. The director should have sought out a wider and more properly representative spectrum of experiences for this film. As is, it makes us look even more ugly, self hating, and self pitying than we already look to people. I HATE being represented like that. I'm disgusted. (Miss Bella, 2009).

A fellow commenter agreed even as she acknowledged that these women on the trailer were telling their own stories. Yet another wishes the film was "more balanced" and expresses fear that "people might think all dark-brown women feel this" (hj, 2009). Another objects to what she sees as sympathy-invoking. "The previews portray it as 'For dark-skinned black women who have considered suicide when being dark is too much.' It is too much." The commenter concluded "Please start showing functional, normal, confident dark-skinned women with normal lives" (Miss Bella, 2009).

This outcry intensified on social media during and following the full-length premiere on *OWN*. Many viewers asked for a more balanced conversation, and they criticized the film for the ways in which the participants and interviewees were asked to respond. The absence of the experiences of black men, both light, dark and all the shades in-between, and black women who do not fit the dark-skinned construction prompted Salina Gray, a woman who had seen the entire film to warn on *Facebook* prior to the network premiere:

“Just a heads up: light skinned girls are most likely going to feel some kinda way. TRUST me on this one. While it is understandable I would ask you, as one light skinned sistah to another to CHILL with essays, blogs, updates and comments about your personal struggles, challenges, and light girl blues. Just for a few days at least. Cause it aint about you. This film is about our sistahs who the world over get disrespected, ignored, maligned, and even ridiculed in a world that shows too little love for Chocolate Brown beauty. So please. Watch and be uncomfortable, feel whatever you feel. But if you are TRULY in solidarity, you will not dismiss, reduce, or distract from this deep and palpable pain that this film captures. Thank you in advance.” (Salina Gray, 2013)

Again, what generates these and other criticisms is not simply the film’s features, but the articulation of the textual features of the movie and of colorism itself with the expectations of documentary. As complex as they are, the expectation of representing reality suggests the need to include opposite cases to embody journalistic balance and fulfill the claim of representing reality. No such criticism would be made of a similar film that did not make such claims.

Furthermore, this criticism is exacerbated by the public nature of its reproduction. It was not only a documentary film albeit in limited release, but that also had its television premiere on *OWN*, a network that invites and reaches a cross-racial audience, thus bringing it out of the private sphere of the black community and putting it on display for all to see. One white commentator’s point indicates the historical specificity of colorism (that it is not simply about skin color without regard to race and gender). She wrote “It made me realize that this is an issue

I never knew existed. I never realized African American women had to grow up and live with this. As a Caucasian I have never heard men discussing ‘whiteness’” (Sarah Andre, 2013).

The backlash about the lack of inclusion of other sub-groups such as light-skinned black women and black men in the depiction goes beyond just needing to embody all the features of documentary. The placement of *only* dark-skinned black women violates the culture of silence. It upsets the superwoman (Wallace, 1979) and STRONBLACKWOMAN (Morgan, 1999) myths by giving these women a platform from which they could safely accede vulnerability, be at the center of and also drive the narrative.

*Dark Girls* re-centers as subjects a group that has historically been relegated to the margins in visual culture, if seen at all, as hooks (2003) argues concerning the deeply gendered way in which colorism, or the “color caste system” as she calls it, plays out in the media when she observes that “dark-skinned females are rarely depicted at all. And even light-skinned black females get no play unless they have long straight hair” (p. 49). Other studies have examined the marginalization or absence of dark-skinned black women in film and visual culture in general (Smith-Shomade, 2002). This marginalization was most recently highlighted when Viola Davis, a dark-skinned actress, was nominated for a Best Actress Academy Award in 2012. The rarity of the nomination of a black actress in this category provided a prominent platform in popular culture, however brief, to discuss the dearth of roles or the reluctance of Hollywood to cast dark-skinned black women in leading roles (Gross, 2012). Even within black cinema, dark-skinned women occupy dubious roles and positions of subordination. One need only survey a few of Spike Lee’s films to get the gist. This need not be the case. Some filmmakers such as Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991) and Kasi Lemmons (*Eve’s Bayou*, 1997) have demonstrated the powerful ways in which directors can construct filmic spaces that empower black women.

The exclusive focus on dark-skinned black women disrupts a cultural and representational status quo, and indeed successfully gives voice to the voiceless, as co-producer Duke claims as his purpose. “The sin of omission,” Duke said, “is whenever there is anything holistic, heroic, or positive, we’re simply not there. So a child who is watching that looks at TV, at films, or at magazines, and if there is something beautiful and she’s not there, then her assumption is that she is not involved in anything that is beautiful, or confirming in anyway, or positive” (Rust, 2012).

This exclusivity in combination with the assumptions of the black documentary sub-genre (which Duke and Berry use to both center their subjects and to transgress) and its implicit criticism of black culture work together to create an ideological space that elevates and make visible in an uncomfortable and emotionally heavy, but safe manner the concerns and experiences of some dark-skinned women in black communities. Judging from the public reaction, the film also exposes the ways in which colorism has historically been situated within the private sphere.

### *Material Space*

The public/private opposition that helps constitute the silence of dissemblance as well as its transgression also organizes the film itself. The mise-en-scene, lighting, and camera angles elevate and center the trailer’s subjects, while actively performing and contextualizing the ideas of “silence” and “secret” associated with colorism. These techniques also act in opposition to the dominant mode of the modern black documentary, illuminating the context and “real-world” environment in which dark-skinned black women live, and thus reinforcing the need for a safe space.

Compared to the modern black documentary, the *Dark Girls* trailer follows a more traditional line. While using cinéma vérité-type techniques such as shooting almost exclusively on a hand-held camera, and “vox-pop” footage (in-the-street interviews of individuals) to reinforce and represent the “real,” the modern black documentary also engages hybrid formats including performance art such as dance and poetry. Riggs’ (1989) *Tongues Untied* is widely credited with making these admixtures popular and relevant in this form (e.g, Klottman and Cutler, 1999, Smith, 1992). By contrast, *Dark Girls* sets aside much of the aesthetic experimentation that has become popularly associated with the modern black documentary. From the subject matter itself with its intent on shining a light on an issue in the black community (advocacy) to the set décor that features deep, rich geometrically designed wall hangings (Afrocentrism and authenticity), the structure of the trailer follows a more traditional route of intercutting studio interviews with expert interviews.

Underscoring its advocacy role, a voice-over at the end of the trailer asks “dark girls” to “rise,” thus following a mandate laid out by the pioneers of the black documentary that these films should be socially aware, present a call-to-action and conceivably a solution, even if not *the* solution (Klottman and Cutler, 1999). This call-to-action contrasts with the sad stories of the subjects, and evokes instead hope, optimism and agency. The call “Rise dark girls” also invokes the famous Maya Angelou poem “And Still I Rise” which celebrates triumph in the face in overwhelming odds (Angelou, 1978).

The call at the end of the trailer also adheres to another tenet of the traditional black documentary in that it resists the disembodied voice of god, know-it-all approach common in mainstream documentary. In a quest to give the voiceless their own platform to speak, the black documentary remains suspicious of voiceover narration as authority and claims to objectivity.

While the trailer closes similarly with the call for dark girls to rise, the viewer becomes aware that the speaker is actually one of the interviewees in the film. This technique counteracts some of the criticism of the trailer in that there is a recognition for and placement of agency and empowerment.

In addition to narrative structure, the film trailer confronts the public/private opposition through its mise-en-scène as rendered through lighting, film stock and camera angles, which together enact Diawara's (1993) "specificity of identity." Having interviews take place in a studio or set instead of on the street places them in a private sphere. The slow film stock and resulting rich colors combined with a deep focus and dramatic three-point lighting visually places interviewees at the focus, adding calm, seriousness and even glamour.

Combined with almost exclusive use of close-up shots, steady conventional camera angles, and non-diegetic sound (quiet solo piano set in minor key) along with the spoken dialog, the interviewees both fill the screen and become the enduring focus without distractions from the outside world. While an intimacy is created within this setting, connoting the deeply personal nature of interviewees' experiences, stringing together excerpt after excerpt from interviewee after interviewee seeks to establish the social nature of the experiences as well.

Such features together help transgress and disrupt conventions of colorism and its representation. The use of such features creates what Diawara calls a "defamiliarization" not only with classic Hollywood as he states, but also with contemporary black cinema and culture, in that dark-skinned black women are the exclusive focus, not marginalized bodies or accouterments. When contrasted with the grainy, faster-moving verité style associated with the modern black documentary, it becomes apparent that *Dark Girls* is, as Diawara (1993) suggests, "stopping time to render audible and visible Black voices and characters" (p. 11). It also

performs the secret that colorism is intimated to be, and provides a secluded, warm and protected space in which these women can singly and individually speak their subjective truths, but assembled into a collective, social portrait and reproduced in a very public medium.

The content of the interviews also works within the public/private opposition in critical ways. Interviewee number two, a woman with curly hair and a green shirt, helps to contextualize the outside world in which dark-skinned black women live their lives. She says: “If we’re all just ... hanging around, and and (sic) a dark-skinned girl will pass by (inaudible) oh well, she’s pretty ... for a dark-skinned girl, and I’m like (laughs) what is that supposed to mean?” This statement constructs an image of the outside and everyday reality, which becomes reinforced later in the only verité-type interview in the trailer featuring a young black man. Shot in vox-pop style on what appears to be a college campus, he unabashedly says that he would never date a dark-skinned girl because “they look funny beside me.” With further, audible prodding from the off-camera filmmaker, he states his dating prototype. “Yeah, light-skinned pretty girl, long hair, don’t care.” This scene transitions to a related segment on dating. And, it also dramatizes the harshness of the outside world for these women compared implicitly to the private setting of the interview.

Other techniques are used to underscore the “reality” of these subjective experiences, thus continuing to upset conventions not only of black feature film but also black documentary. In one segment, a little black girl who is apparently in a classroom is asked to point out the “pretty” and “smart” children from a group of hand-drawn figures that are identical except for skin color. Predictably, the lightest-skinned child was identified by the girl as the prettiest and the smartest, while the darkest-skinned child was the ugliest and slowest. This segment is followed by a shot of side-by-side pictures of pop singer Beyoncé Knowles as visuals for

comments about skin-lightening products, with the sequence suggesting the widespread use of skin color as well as the centrality of media industries in the perpetuation of such beliefs.

Therefore, when the tears fall from the eyes of a woman as she recounts her friend's joyful reaction to not giving birth to a dark-skinned baby girl, the necessity of escape and safety that the private setting allows becomes more apparent. Within the dominant culture and when in public, tears are construed as weakness or even insincere (crocodile tears). Additionally, speaking of these personal, hurtful experiences in private but for a public viewing defies and violates the code of silence, and what Morgan (1999) names as characteristic of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN in 'handling it alone, quietly.'

### **Conclusion**

The *Dark Girls* trailer ideologically and materially transgresses a culture of dissemblance and its silences. It effectively engages in disruptive acts by focusing exclusively on the individual experiences of dark-skinned black women, but in a way that renders them as public, generalized and factual. In recognition of colorism's historical articulations, the film strategically deploys the public/private binary to complicate and ultimately to break down the distinctions. Through such an articulation, it becomes evident that colorism is gendered through its indexing to the private sphere, a sphere that has been historically constructed as female.

Filmmakers Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry claim their goal and purpose was to "start a conversation." Certainly, one has begun. On Twitter, Facebook and numerous blog sites, many viewers post their own stories and experiences, poetry, and essays of agency and triumph. For instance, Monique wrote on the film's blog site that she "felt ugly and not beautiful for most of my childhood[.] I just was not very pretty or so I was told by my family. I would hear stories

about how I was so dark as a baby and had huge eyes and my mother would say how weird I looked as a baby” (Monique, 2011). Dianna recounts her painful school bus rides. “As the doors to the yellow bus open I had to mentally prepare myself for the 45 min of teasing and taunting by the lighter skinned kids that rode the same school bus with me every morning, for some reason they felt, that just because I was a different shade of color, I was the one that was strange, I was what our African American race called ‘Dark Skinned’ the darker you are or were the more you were teased” (Dianna, 2011).

The cacophony of the online response to both the trailer and the film’s debut on cable television point to the lightning rod that is colorism. But it also holds tempered promise for permanent solutions. In short, it has angered enough people over a broad-enough spectrum to encourage varied and multi-pronged responses. This film publicly blows the lid on a secret to dominant culture and is unapologetic for its ideological and cultural indiscretions. It defies the hushed advice to “handle it alone, quietly.” It is precisely this approach that can potentially make the black status quo enraged and uncomfortable enough to begin to progressively address colorism.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION:

#### LOOSENING THE LINES OF TENDENTIAL FORCE

This study of the articulation and production of colorism through select popular media concludes by addressing the usefulness of articulation as a theoretical and methodological basis for the study of colorism. After briefly summarizing the primary conclusions of each preceding chapter, I highlight the ways in which the project addresses its research questions, and its contributions to media studies more generally as well as to what it suggests about opportunities for a progressive challenge to colorism. Finally, I suggest some studies that would extend the approach taken here.

#### **Summary of the Study**

Chapter 1, “Colorism Considered” develops a rationale for the study of colorism in popular media. It asserts that colorism is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is unstable, historically malleable, and produced through practices of communication. Based on a review of scholarly work and select examples, this chapter argues that colorism is a gendered racism by applying to dark-skinned black women much more fully than to dark-skinned black men. A theoretical position based in the concept of articulation as developed by Stuart Hall fit the selectivity and fluidity of colorism, thus providing a theoretical and methodological means of addressing its historically specific nature while calling attention to the logical unevenness of its manifestation as a form of racism, but one that applies only to African Americans rather than to all races, and more specifically to African American women than men.

Chapter Two, “The Art of Fact: Feminist Aesthetics in the Invention of Colorism” constructs a contextual map through which the term’s emergence could be best understood. Using as a point of reference varieties of feminist criticism of the day, the chapter concludes that colorism was produced through a set of interlocking oppositions that articulated it in particular ways. While the essay by author Alice Walker that introduced the explicit term “colorism” to public consideration erased societal and hierarchical oppositions between fact and feeling, objectivity and subjectivity, social and personal, and masculine and feminine, the reviews of the collection sought to reinstate said distinctions as legitimized by conventional aesthetic categories. Important historical and contextual elements such as Walker’s personal biography as a black woman, her celebrity status as a novelist and poet, the broader history of race and gender relations in the United States, and the aforementioned cultural epistemological milieu work together to construct Walker’s key essay on colorism and the accompanying collection as an aberration to the status quo. By reasserting firm oppositions between factual social criticism and subjective personal art, they also map the context within which colorism came to be articulated. These reviews place issues of gender, and subsequently, colorism, inviolably into the private sphere and into what has been constructed as feminine.

Chapter Three, “Self-Help and Colorism in *Essence*” recovers the gendered politics of black women’s politics of respectability as a formation in which colorism also came to be articulated. In its early years, *Essence* magazine produced colorism as a personal/social and psychological/political phenomenon in part through a general-reader version of Walker’s innovative essay that was addressed in Chapter Two. However, the metamorphosis by the 1980s of the politics of respectability into individualized self-help articulated colorism as primarily a psychological issue of personal strength and adjustment. As previously argued, this

rearticulation to the personal and private sphere connects colorism to a patriarchal structure that links the personal and private to the feminine. As such, recognition of colorism loses its progressive impact in a society that continues to impose binary oppositions that value the masculine over the feminine.

Chapter Four, “Activist Documentary and Colorism in *Dark Girls*” updates the popular-culture articulations of colorism to 2011-2013 by critically examining the promotional trailer for the documentary *Dark Girls* and its accompanying critical response by viewers and reviewers. Locating colorism within the historically raced and gendered discourses of respectability, uplift and silence, the chapter concludes that the trailer ideologically and materially transgresses a cultural silence through the public “airing of dirty laundry,” and disrupts conceptual maps that devalue the dark-skinned black woman. The form of the documentary transgresses again, as material discussed in prior chapters had done, boundaries between dominant aesthetic categories. It uses a public forum in a semi-private manner to bring public attention to what is deemed a secret. The chapter concludes that colorism is articulated as gendered through its dominant articulation to the private sphere.

This study addressed three key research questions. In response to the first question, “what are some key cultural formations, forms and practices that articulate colorism as a named and explicit phenomenon?” this study identified three key and interlocking formations, forms and practices. One is the formation of art and the form/practice of aesthetic criticism. In this formation, art is seen as separate from the factual, “real” world. This separation articulated the ways in which the term colorism emerged and was negotiated in popular culture. This separation constitutes a binary opposition imposed by a dominant Western cultural hierarchy that separates the so-called objective from the so-called subjective, and social criticism from personal art. As a

result, and even as Alice Walker's writing acknowledged the fusion and interconnectedness of the objective and the subjective, aesthetic criticism reinstated the division between the two, thus reducing colorism to a subjective problem requiring a subjective solution.

A second formation was neoliberal, self-help culture, with a form/practice of consumer magazine stories. As exemplified in the pages of *Essence* magazine, it also articulated colorism as a psychological defect that could be fixed only on an individual level. Finally, a third formation was black women's politics of respectability. In addition to articulating with neoliberal self-help culture, it also articulated the form/practice of black documentary filmmaking. These formations and forms/practices not only impact the ways in which black American women are socialized as gendered/raced beings, they also emphasize what is perceived as "good" and "respectable" to the dominant culture, while remaining silent about everything else, including colorism.

The second research question asks, "What are some key ways in which these formations, forms and practices produce colorism as a material phenomenon? And with what political implications and possibilities?"

Despite their diversity, they work in similar ways to produce the same societal binary opposition of private against the public. Furthermore, this private/public binary becomes articulated to the feminine/masculine respectively with attendant implications (public to male, and private to female). As such, these deeper underpinnings work to structure the art/fact formations, the individual and the community, and the practice of respectability politics into a private, feminine sphere. The political implications that result from such a structuring is that colorism itself, as articulated and produced through these forms and practices, becomes positioned in the private and feminine sphere which, in the parlance of dominant Western

society, is an inferior position, and not a place where the “really important” issues are being addressed. From this political position, it is reasonable and justified to speak publicly of the experiences of race and racism, for it also affects black men (and sometimes even perceived to affect *only* black men), but not so of colorism. For colorism’s articulation to the feminine makes it a female issue (even as evidence exists that it affects black men) and thus is governed and structured by the private. Such a position inhibits the address of colorism and actually assists in its perpetuation.

However, it is also a position that may enable possibilities for progressive action. By forcefully and consistently addressing the issue out in the open – in numerous and disparate ways - we may begin to find ways to examine and effectively address the forms and embedded practices that perpetuate colorism, and continually undermine a larger binary opposition by making the feminine public.

The last research question asks, “what are some important, broader implications for progressive change by addressing colorism as an articulation?” Addressing colorism as an articulation of race and gender elevates the conversation surrounding the phenomenon from being just an issue about and for black women. Such an address enables a couple of key considerations. First, by bypassing the reductionist and essentializing (and limiting) race/gender starting points, we come to understand that these categories aren’t things themselves, and more importantly that colorism is produced in and articulated to larger social milieu beyond race and gender. We also understand colorism to be more than an historical phenomenon, but a dynamic practice that is consistently being re-articulated within current historical conditions and practices that enables its perpetuations. We are also allowed to envision a more expansive picture that identifies key underlying formations that structure the existences of so many.

More to the point, such an address enables a consideration of the detrimental effects of separatist logics and brings into focus larger consistent patterns. We see oppositional separations between art and fact, individual and community, private and public, feminine and masculine, gender and race, colorism and racism. In these separations, one becomes dominant, the other subordinated, “othered” and not fit for the mainstream. Under this treatment, we see the ways that colorism is rendered exotic and an aberration that affects only “that group of dark-skinned black women with low self-esteem.” This consideration opens up dialogue not just about effects, but also about larger processes and practices that enable production and perpetuation. Addressing colorism as an articulation negates the separatist and ultimately secret, individualized ways in which dominant culture parses the world by drawing due attention to the fusion and interconnected nature of living – a key consideration for cultural studies.

### **Colorism: Articulating Respectability, Gender and Race**

Through examination of these disparate and important popular media forms, this study identifies and locates black women’s politics of respectability as a key cultural formation and practice that assists in the articulation of colorism as a named and explicit phenomenon.

It is a politics that socializes black women to buoy and keep the race. It is a politics that tells them that their problems are theirs alone and should be handled alone, in private. It is a politics that emphasizes that the respectable black woman is “together,” for after all she is the keeper, the standard bearer, and the locus around which “respectable blackness” revolves. She is the hope for the rectification of the image of the black race in the U.S. R&B singer Ne-Yo says it best in his song *Miss Independent* (2008):

'Cause she walk like a boss;  
Talk like a boss;

Manicured nails to set the pedicure off;  
She's fly effortlessly

...

There's somethin' oh so sexy about  
Kinda woman that don't even need my help  
She said she got it, she got it, no doubt  
There's something about her  
'Cause she work like a boss, play like a boss  
Car and a crib, she 'bout to pay 'em both off  
And her bills are paid on time

It is the undergirding practice that gives Wallace's (1979) "superwoman" and Morgan's (1999) STRONGBLACKWOMAN myths continued relevance – myths that continue to be regarded as aspirational embodiments of black female perfection even in the face of critique.

This politics of respectability is a cultural form and practice that historically emerged as a challenging response to oppressive conditions. It was one that sought to repair a decimated, or arguably even create a competing image of black women to fit into a particular historical standard of femininity, one that was white, American, patriarchal. It is a politics that was and continues to be articulated as sets of complex and fluid practices. For even as the clubswomen of the 1900s sought image rectification/creation so that black women could take a respected place in American society, it simultaneously and strategically emulated and critiqued white femininity and black masculinity. Its multidimensionality and complexity historically encouraged practical alternatives for black women that were anathema to white femininity in the way of educational attainment and employment while at the same time policing physical appearance and self-expression.

It is a politics that has been massaged and articulated in different ways through subsequent decades within social, economic and cultural processes. In the context of colorism's articulation in popular media, we also observe the refocusing of practices of respectability

politics as a sole individual project alone. Within the confines of the popular and arguably, the most influential magazine geared toward black women in America, *Essence*, respectability politics fuses with the economic realities of the publication, amplifying a shift from the community-minded outcomes of racial uplift to personal uplift in the form of appearance as self-expression and respectability. Within the pages of *Essence*, we can observe constitutions and reconstitutions of this politics – and of its strong linkages to mainstream consumer consumption, physical appearance and respectability.

This is a politics that has been both help and hindrance. This is a politics that will never die, but like energy, be rearticulated in same and different ways. For now, its current multifaceted and contradictory articulation is evident in the popular television drama *Scandal*, embodied in the take-charge, high-profile, crisis-managing Washington-insider Olivia Pope who is at her problem-solving best when she is stoic and feelings are concretely under wraps even in times of personal turmoil, and her wardrobe the epitome of sartorial excellence. Olivia Pope, played by dark-skinned black American actress Kerry Washington, is the embodiment of black women's respectability – save for the fact that she engages in an adulterous affair with the president of the United States – certainly a blow to the clubswomen's work of the 1900s. The fact that this show, particularly Olivia Pope, enjoys much popularity among black women as evidenced in social media reasonably points to resonance in the main character's portrayal and embodiment of a cultural form that has shaped the lives of many black American women.

Undoubtedly, this project is as much about respectability politics as it is about colorism. For in the examination of colorism as a gendered and raced phenomenon, a deeper and more expansive story emerges. I argue that this politics of respectability, for all its positive intentions and attributes, assist in the perpetuation of colorism. It is particularly evident in its insistence in

policing the ways in which seemingly personal matters should be handled – in private. It underscores the larger issue of branding black women as the keepers of the race, for when seeming intra-racial matters, such as colorism, are broached in public, the broachers are branded traitors and the actions treasonous. This politics encourages an articulation of colorism as the secret that everyone knows, but that no one should talk about publicly, particularly for nonblack communities to hear. In its gendered/raced/physical appearance-focused rendering, this politics makes colorism's address by tearful, dark-skinned black women out in public shameful.

In its “handle-it-alone, quietly” iteration, this politics articulates colorism as a personal self-esteem issue that only the affected individuals can address for themselves. After all, we all want self-improvement to become quintessential “together” black women. Within this larger conceptualization of respectability politics, the mantra of personal responsibility, self pride, self presentation and privacy are paramount. It is an articulation of respectability politics that has created a mesh that ensnares and impedes some of the ways in which colorism has been challenged.

### **Mapping Colorism Within a Constellation**

This study also identifies another and perhaps a more pervasive societal formation that perpetuate colorism and inhibits its challenge. For each case study, the larger implications point to imposition or challenge of the private/public binary opposition and a correlational feminine/masculine opposition. This consistent thread through all this project's cases ties colorism to a larger, deeper narrative than intra-race discrimination (not discounting its importance). I call this thread a line of “tendential force” (Hall, 1986), which remains hidden in plain sight in all the continued and exhausting discussions about colorism. This is a force that normalizes and organizes the ways in which discussions of colorism occur. When mapped in

constellation-like pattern to articulations of masculinity, femininity, race, gender and respectability politics, this private/public binary institute particular prisms through which colorism is viewed.

It effectively works to assemble and prioritize raced/gendered articulations in particular ways in line with U.S. patriarchal norms. In the context of colorism, these private/public, feminine/masculine oppositions articulate colorism to racism, in ways that colorism become subordinate to racism. Race and racism become acceptable and (respectable) forms of public racial discourse in ways that colorism should never be. Within this prism, race and racism are articulated to the public, the masculine with the opposite corresponding effect for colorism – private and feminine. This is an overdetermined result in a dominant culture that values and encourages the public and the masculine.

Therefore, colorism is articulated not only as a phenomenon that affects dark-skinned black women to a greater extent than it does dark-skinned black men. It is also labeled and constructed feminine. Feminine, in this sense, speaks the subordinated, devalued, un-empowered and disenfranchised – and private in relation to the public sphere of the masculine. In a society that continues to impose hierarchies that subordinate feminine gender identifications, and to the extent that these hierarchies aid in the constitution of meaning, colorism's articulation within the larger constellation of race, gender, public, private, masculine, feminine, and articulations of respectability politics is one that places the phenomenon firmly in an intricate web that makes effective challenge a consistent battle.

However, as this study suggests, there is room for progressive action. Even as some scholars argue that we must move away from the light-skinned/dark-skinned dichotomy toward more nuanced understandings of race and colorism (e.g. Blay, 2013), I argue that thoughtful

examination, and creative challenge through popular media of the dominant patriarchal iterations of the private/public binary opposition would bear fruit. Working simply from the basis of colorism's effects does not go far enough and leads down the path of chasing our own tails in effect. For all its criticism, *Dark Girls* mounts an effective and smart challenge to this binary, and also to black women's respectability politics. It constructively straddles and critiques this private/public binary, and puts black women's hurt and pain on display. The film's publicity and release within the current participatory media environment enables wider direct response and interaction. It ignites more easily a conversation that, if continued, broadens the scope of address beyond individual, psychological issues, in a public manner thus producing the potential for progressive community-minded responses.

### **Extending This Study**

The conclusions reached through this study suggest key benefits of the use of articulation as theoretical basis for the study of historical processes such as race and gender and their amalgam in colorism. It also suggests additional studies that might extend the insights and conclusions suggested here. For example, this study might be extended by examining other media forms and discourses to determine if the private/public binary continues its cultural work of inhibiting progressive challenge to colorism. Such an expansion would also enable a more comprehensive understanding of how and where challenges have been effective. As seen in the response to *Dark Girls*, the interactive capabilities of newer popular media forms also open avenues for study. An extension of this study might specifically address the ways in which women enact, perpetuate, find agency or otherwise negotiate colorism within digital contexts.

## Conclusion

Through study of particular media forms, this study places and locates one avenue through which colorism as an historically specific, gendered racism is perpetuated. However, even as I write about location and feminist aesthetics and respectability politics and binary oppositions, a little girl in Oklahoma named Tiana Parker was told that her dreadlocked hair wasn't acceptable for school (Tinouye, 2013). Even as I write, I struggle with my own conflicts between and within my version of black women's respectability politics as I teach my daughter self-sufficiency, and how to find strength in being black and female in the U.S.

But, as I write, I also marvel at the outpouring of community love and support for little Tiana Parker from black dreadlocked women all over the U.S., ranging from writers such as Alice Walker to ordinary, but no less important, women who have made inroads against colorism's iterations and articulations. These are women who evidently can enact community-minded pathways to change. Such actions are encouraging and progressive. They give hope to me and mine—two dark girls.

## REFERENCES

- Abrahamson, D. (1996). *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of The Post-War Periodical*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Aftab, K., & Lee, S. (2005). *Spike Lee: that's my story and I'm sticking to it / as told to Kaleem Aftab*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Allen, B. (1984). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. *Smithsonian*. 14 (Jan.): 133-4.
- Angelou, M. (1978). *And Still I Rise*. New York: Random House.
- Anna (2007, December 12). Michelle Obama Is Not A Lighter Shade Of "Trophy" Wife. *Jezebel*. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/332777/michelle-obama-is-not-a-lighter-shade-of-trophy-wife>
- Appiah, O. (2003). Americans Online: Differences in Surfing and Evaluating Race-Targeted Web Sites by Black and White Users. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47(4), 537-555.
- AtlantaJ (2009). Dark Girls: Message posted to <http://vimeo.com/24155797>
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Barnouw, E. (1993). *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. (Annette Lavers, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang. (Original work published in 1957).
- Bates, K.G. (2012, April 5). Many Colors Of Prejudice Are Revealed In 'Dark Girls.' *NPR*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/05/148921156/many-colors-of-prejudice-are-revealed-in-dark-girls>
- Benson, T. W., & Snee, B. J. (2008). *The Rhetoric of the New Political Documentary*. (Benson, T. W., & Snee, B. J., Eds.). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Berkman, D. (1966). The segregated medium. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 5(3), 29-32.
- Bennett, G. (2007, October 17). For Light-Skinned Only? *NPR*. Retrieved from [http://www.npr.org/blogs/newsandviews/2007/10/for\\_lightskinned\\_only.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/newsandviews/2007/10/for_lightskinned_only.html)

- Billops, C. & Hatch, J. (1992). *Finding Christa*. USA.
- Black Journal*. (1969-1977). USA: NET-TV
- Blalock, Jr., H. M. (1957). "Per Cent Non-white and Discrimination in the South." *American Sociological Review*, 22, 677-82.
- Blay, Y. (2013, June 24). Color Me Beautiful: A Dark Girl Reflects on "Dark Girls". [www.clutchmagonline.com](http://www.clutchmagonline.com) Retrieved from <http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2013/06/color-me-beautiful-a-dark-girl-reflects-on-dark-girls/>
- Braithwaite, B. (1996). *Women's Magazines: The First 300 Years*. Peter Owen Ltd.
- Brotz, H. (1992). *African-American social and political thought, 1850-1920*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Brown, D. L. (2009, July 12). The Legacy of Colorism Reflects Wounds of Racism That Are More Than Skin-Deep. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/10/AR2009071000022.html>
- Byeng-hee, C., Seung-Eun, L., & Byoung-Sun, K. (2006). Exploring factors affecting the adoption and continuance of online games among college students in South Korea: Integrating uses and gratification and diffusion of innovation approaches. *New Media & Society*, 8(2), 295-319.
- Byerly, C. M., & Ross, K. (2006). *Women & media: A critical introduction*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell.
- Byrd, R.P. (1983). Sound Advice From a Friend: Words and Thoughts From The Higher Ground of Alice Walker: In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. *Callaloo*, 18 (Spring - Summer), 123-129.
- Byrne, R. (2006). *The Secret*. New York: Atria Books.
- Cagley, J. W., & Cardozo, R. N. (1970). White response to integrated advertising. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 10(2), 35-39.
- Clark, K. B. & Clark, M. K. (1940). Skin Color as a factor in racial identification of Negro preschool children. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1, 159-169.
- Clark, B.L. (1984). Alice Walker. *Modern Fiction Studies*. 30, 334.
- Chancer, L. S. (1998). Playing gender against race through high-profile crime cases: The Tyson/Thomas/Simpson pattern of the 1990s. *Violence Against Women*, 4(1), 100-113.

- Cohen, D. (1970). Advertising and the Black Community. *Journal of Marketing*, 34.
- Coleman, R. (2003). Race and ethical reasoning: The importance of race to journalistic decision making. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 80(2), 295-310.
- Collins, P. H. (1993). Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection. *Race, Sex & Class*, 1(1), 25-45.
- Collins, S. M. (1983). The Making of the Black Middle Class. *Social Problems*, 30(4), 369.
- Cornish, S. (1984, Feb. 3). Alice Walker: her own woman. *The Christian Science Monitor*. B1
- Covert, T. (2011). *Manipulating Images World War II Mobilization of Women through Magazine Advertising*. United Kingdom: Lexington Books.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Free Books.
- Craig, M. (2002). *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cresswell, T. (1996). *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Daniel, W. (1982). Ebony. In *Black Journals of the United States*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Danielle, B. (2012). Help From Our OWN. *Jet*, 121(19), 34.
- Dash, J. (1991). *Daughters of the Dust*. USA: American Playhouse. Geechee Girls.
- Davis, K. (2005). *A Girl Like Me*. USA: www.kiridavis.com.
- de Beauvoir, S. (2009) *The Second Sex*. (Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York: Random House: Alfred A. Knopf (Original work published in 1949).
- de Saussure, R. (1988). *Course in General Linguistics*. With contributions by Charles Bally. (Roy Harris, Trans.). Chicago: Open Court Publishing. (Original work published in 1915).
- Dianna (2011, Aug. 10) Message posted to <http://officialdarkgirlsmovie.com/category/rise-women-rise/>
- Diawara, M. (1993). *Black American Cinema (AFI Film Readers)*. London: Routledge.
- Du Bois, W.E. B. (1918, July) Close Ranks. In *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal; An African American Anthology*, (Marable. M. & Mullings, L. Eds.) pp. 242-243. New York: Bowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

- Duke, B. & Berry, D. C. (2011). *Dark Girls: The Story of Color, Gender and Race*. United States: Urban Winter Entertainment and Duke Media Production.
- Duke, L. (2000). Black in a blonde world: Race and girls' interpretations of the feminine ideal in teen magazines. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77(2), 367-392.
- Eberhardt, J. L., Davies, P. G., Purdie-Vaughns, V.J. & Johnson, S. L. (2006). Looking deathworthy: Perceived stereotypicality of black defendants predicts capital-sentencing outcomes. *Cornell Law Faculty Publications*. Paper 41. Retrieved from [http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/lrsp\\_papers/41](http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/lrsp_papers/41)
- Edwards, A., & Hinds, P. (1995). *Essence: 25 years Celebrating Black women*. (Mignon Hinds, P. Ed.) New York : H.N. Abrams.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009). *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Elliot, P. (1991). *From Mastery to Analysis: Theories of Gender in Psychoanalytic Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Emancipation Proclamation (1863). National Archives and Records Administration. Retrieved from [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/emancipation\\_proclamation/](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/)
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Retrieved from <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/color.cfm>
- Fernandez, M. (2004, Sept. 9). Cosby Defends Criticism of Black Community Actor Urges Better Parenting At Education Forum in D.C. *The Washington Post*. B03. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A6615-2004Sep8.html>
- Firestone, S. (1974). The Dialectic of Sex. In Kourany, J.A., Sterba, J.P. & Tong, R. (Eds. 1992) *Feminist Philosophies*. (282-287). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Frazier, E. (1962). *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. USA: A Free Press.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton.
- Gaines, K. (1996). *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Gardner, J. (2012). *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 173-199.

- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Jackson-Beeck, M., Jeffries-Fox, S., & Signorielli, N. (1978). Cultural indicators: Violence profile no. 9. *Journal of Communication*, 28(3), 176–207.
- Gimenez, M. E. (2001). Marxism, and class, gender, and race: Rethinking the trilogy. *Race, Gender & Class*, 8(2), 23-23.
- Gould, J. W., Sigband, N. S., & Zoepner Jr., C. V. (1970). Black consumer reactions to "integrated" advertising: An exploratory study. *Journal of Marketing*, 34(3), 20-26.
- Greaves, W. (1968). *Still a Brother; Inside the Negro Middle Class*. USA.
- Greaves, W. (1974). *From These Roots*. USA.
- Greaves, W. (2001). *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. USA: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- Griffin, R.A. (2013): Gender Violence and the Black Female Body: The Enduring Significance of "Crazy" Mike Tyson. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 24:1, 71-94
- Gross, T. (2012, Feb. 13). Viola Davis: The Fresh Air Interview. *NPR*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/13/146708601/viola-davis-the-fresh-air-interview>
- Gumbs, A. (2012). Black (Buying) Power: The Story of Essence Magazine. In Hill, L.W. & Rabig, J. (Eds). *The Business of Black Power*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Hairston, L. (1984). Alice in the Mainstream. *Freedomways*. 24(3) 182-190.
- Hall, S. (1986). Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, 5-27.
- Hall, A. (2005). Audience Personality and the Selection of Media and Media Genres. *Media Psychology*, 7(4), 377-398.
- Hall, S. (2007). The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966–1969. *Historian*, 69(1), 49-82.
- Hanisch, C. (1969). *The Personal is Political*. Retrieved from <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>
- Harlan, L. (1972). *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader 1856-1901*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, M. (1964). *Patterns of Race in the Americas*. New York: Walker.

- Harris, D. (2009). *Black feminist politics from Kennedy to Clinton*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris, W.B. (1989). *Chameleon Street*. USA: Gathsemane 84.
- Harrison, M. S., & Thomas, K. M. (2009). The hidden prejudice in selection: A research investigation on skin color bias. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(1), 134-168.
- HR.BLR.com. (2003, August 8). Applebee's Settles Color-Bias Lawsuit. Retrieved from <http://hr.blr.com/HR-news/Discrimination/Civil-Rights-Employment-Discrimination/Applebees-Settles-Color-Bias-Lawsuit/>
- Herring C. (2004). Skin Deep: Race and Complexion in the “Color-Blind” Era. In Herring, C., Keith, V. M. & Horton, H. D. (Eds.) *Skin/Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era*. (pp. 1-27). Chicago, Ill: University of Illinois Press.
- Higginbotham, E.B. (1992). African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race. *Signs*. 17(2) 251-274.
- Higginbotham, E. B. (1993). *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hine, D. (1989). Rape and the Inner Live of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance. *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture & Society*, 14(4), 912-920.
- Hine, D & Thompson, K. (1998). *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women In America* New York: Broadway Books.
- hj (2009). Dark Girls: Preview. Message posted to <http://vimeo.com/24155797>
- Hochschild, J. L., & Weaver, V. (2007). The skin color paradox and the American racial order. *Social Forces*, 86(2), 643–670.
- Hodes, M. (1997). *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Hoetink, H. (1973). *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas: Comparative Notes on Their Nature and Nexus*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Holloway, K. (1995). *Codes of Conduct: Race, Ethics, and the Color of Our Character*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- hooks, b. (1981). *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self Esteem*. New York: Atria Books.

- Hughes, M., & Hertel, B. (1990). The significance of color remains: A study of life chances, mate selection, and ethnic consciousness among black Americans. *Social Forces*, 68, 1105-1120.
- Hurston, Z. (2006). *Their eyes were watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- India.Arie, Broady, C. & Sanders, S. (2001). *Brown Skin. On Acoustic Soul*. USA: Motown.
- Jagger, A. M. (2008). The Humanities. In *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*. (pp. 1-6). Jagger, A.M. (Ed). Boulder: Paradigm Publishers
- Johnson, J.H. & Bennett, L. (1989). *Succeeding Against the Odds*. New York: Warner Books.
- Jones, C., & Shorter-Gooden, K. (2003). *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black women in America*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kazan, E. (1949). *Pinky*. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
- Kitch, C. L. (2001). *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Klein, W. (1968). News media and race relations: a self-portrait. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 7(3), 42-49.
- Klottman P.R. & Cutler, J. K. (1999). *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*. (Klottman P.R. & Cutler, J. K., Eds.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S., Appiah, O., & Alter, S. (2008). News Selection Patterns as a Function of Race: The Discerning Minority and the Indiscriminating Majority. *Media Psychology*, 11(3), 400-417.
- Knopf, T. (1970). Media myths on violence. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 9(1), 17-23.
- Kristeva, J. (1979). *Women's Time*. (Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, Trans.). In Moi. T. (Ed. 1986). *The Kristeva Reader*. 187-213. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lasch, C. (1978). *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1949). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The Communication of Ideas* (pp. 37-51). Oxford England: Harper.

- Lee, S. (1988). *School Daze*. USA: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, Columbia Pictures Corporation.
- Lee, S. (1991) *Jungle Fever*. USA: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, Universal Pictures.
- Lemons, K. (1997). *Eve's Bayou*. USA: Trimark Pictures.
- Lester, N. A. (1992). Shange's men: For Colored Girls revisited, and movement beyond. *African American Review*, 26(2), 319.
- Liebler, C. (1994). How race and gender affect journalists' autonomy. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 15(3), 122-130.
- Maddox, K. B., & Stephanie, A. G. (2002). Cognitive Representations of Black Americans: Reexploring the Role of Skin Tone. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 250–259.
- McEwan, L. (2012, August 8). Gabby Douglas and her ponytail: what's all the fuss about? *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/gabby-douglas-and-her-ponytail-whats-all-the-fuss-about/2012/08/02/gJQAZiFZRX\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/gabby-douglas-and-her-ponytail-whats-all-the-fuss-about/2012/08/02/gJQAZiFZRX_blog.html)
- McGee, M. (2005). *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*. New York:Oxford University Press.
- McManus, M. (1976). The Essence Magazine Success Story. *Folio*.
- Miller, L., Brennen, B., & Edgerton-Webster, B. (2005). The construction of readership in Ebony, Essence and O, the Oprah Magazine. *Media Report To Women*, 33(1), 5-13.
- Millett, K. (1969). *Sexual Politics*. New York: Ballantine.
- Miss Bella (2009). Dark Girls: Preview. Message posted to <http://vimeo.com/24155797>
- Mitchell, J. (1966). Women: The Longest Revolution. *New Left Review*, (40), 11-37
- Mithun Kumar (2009). Dark Girls: Preview. Message posted to <http://vimeo.com/24155797>
- Moore, J. (1999). *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880 -1920*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.
- Moore, J. (2003). *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc.
- Mohanty, C. (1988). Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist Review*. 30, 61-88.

- Monique (2011, Aug. 10) Message posted to <http://officialdarkgirlsmovie.com/category/rise-women-rise/page/2/>
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.) (1981). *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of color*. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press.
- Morgan, J. (1999). *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Morrison, T. (1994). *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume Book.
- Mott, F.L. (1968). *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16 (3): 6–18.
- Munro, C.L. (1984). In Search of Our Mother's Gardens. *Black American Literature Forum*. 18 (Winter): 161.
- Ne-Yo (2008). Miss Independent. On *Year of the Gentleman*. USA: Def Jam.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Okri, B. (1984). Coloring Book. *New Statesman*. 107(June 22): 22-23.
- Owens, L. C. (2008). Network News: The Role of Race in Source Selection and Story Topic. *Howard Journal Of Communications*, 19(4), 355-370.
- Parini, J. (1984). *New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*. 6 (Summer) 634, 639.
- Pattillo, M. (2005). Black Middle-Class Neighborhoods. *Annual Review Of Sociology*, (31) 305-329.
- Peck, J. (2008). *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Poindexter, P. M., & Stroman, C. A. (1980). The Black Press and the Bakke Case. *Journalism Quarterly*, 57, 262-268.
- Ranks, N. (2009). Them a Bleach. On *Dancehall 101 Vol. 5*. USA: VP Records.
- Richards, A., & Greenberg, C. (2013). I Still Believe Anita Hill: Three Generations Discuss the Legacies of Speaking Truth to Power. (Richards, A., & Greenberg, C., Eds). New York: Feminist Press.

- Riggs, M. (1989). *Tongues Untied*. USA.
- Riggs, M. (1992). *Color Adjustment: Blacks in Prime Time*. USA.
- Rhimes, S. (2012). *Scandal*. USA: ShondaLand; ABC Studios.
- Rooks, N.M. (2004). *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them*. New Brunswick, N.J. Rutgers University Press
- Roscho, B. (1967). What the black press said last summer. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 6(3), 6-9.
- Ross, L. E. (1997). Mate selection preferences among African American college students. *Journal of Black Studies*, 27 (4), 554-569.
- Ross, M.E. (2009, August 19). Color-Struck Covers: Is the publishing industry really ready to depict black characters? (www.theroot.com). Retrieved from <http://www.theroot.com/views/color-struck-covers>
- Russell-Cole, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. E. (1992). *The color complex: the politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Rust, S. (2012, Jan. 17). Bill Duke airs dirty laundry of skin prejudice in 'Dark Girls'. *thegrio.com*. Retrieved from <http://thegrio.com/2012/01/17/bill-duke-airs-dirty-laundry-of-skin-prejudice-in-dark-girls/>
- Salina Gray (2013, June 23 @ 5:18 p.m.). Message posted to <https://www.facebook.com/DarkGirlsMovie>
- Sarah Andre (2013, June 26 @ 11:16 a.m.). Message posted to <https://www.facebook.com/DarkGirlsMovie>
- Schradie, J. (2012). The trend of class, race, and ethnicity in social media inequality. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(4), 555-571.
- Schneirov, M. (1994). *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893-1914*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shaheen, M. (2008). Use of social networks and information seeking behavior of students during political crises in Pakistan: A case study. *International Information & Library Review*, 40(3), 142-147.
- Singleton, J. (1991). *Boyz N The Hood*. USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation
- Sirk, D. (1959). *Imitation of Life*. USA: Universal Pictures.

- Slack, J. D. (1996). The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies. In Morley, D. & Chen, K. (Eds.) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. (112–127). Routledge.
- Slack, J. D. (2005). Articulation and Assemblage. In Slack, J.D. & Wise, J.M. *Culture + Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Smith, V. (1992). The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African American Film. In *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. (Gina Dent, Ed.) Seattle: Bay Press.
- Smith, V. (1997). *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*. (Smith, V. Ed.). New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Smith, D.T. (2013, Aug. 5). Echoes of Cosby in Don Lemon's Call For Blacks to Clean up Their Act. *The Huffington Post Black Voices*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/cosby-don-lemon\\_b\\_3695673.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/cosby-don-lemon_b_3695673.html).
- Smith-Shomade, B. E. (2002). *Shaded lives: African-American women and television*. Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Staples, B. (2008, August 22). As Racism Wanes, Colorism Persists. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://theboard.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/22/as-racism-wanes-colorism-persists>
- Sundstrom, R. (2003). Douglass and Du Bois's *Der Schwarze Volksgeist*. In *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*. Bernasconi, R. and Cook, S. (Eds). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sweetser, K. D., & Kaid, L. (2008). Stealth soapboxes: political information efficacy, cynicism and uses of celebrity weblogs among readers. *New Media & Society*, 10(1), 67-91.
- Tebbel, J. & Zuckerman, M. (1991). *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tinuoye, K. (2013, Sept. 5). 7-Year-Old Forced to Leave Elementary School Over Dreadlocks. *www.thegrio.com*. Retrieved from <http://thegrio.com/2013/09/05/7-year-old-forced-to-leave-elementary-school-over-dreadlocks/>
- Thiyagarajah, N. (2010). *Shadeism*. Toronto, Canada: [www.shadeism.com](http://www.shadeism.com)
- Thompson, M. S. & Keith, V. M. (2001). The blacker the berry—Gender, skin tone, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. *Gender & Society*, 15 (3), 336-357.
- Valerius, D. (2008). *The Souls of Black Girls*. USA: Femme Noire Productions.
- Van Peebles, M. (1971). *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. USA: Yeah.

- Vigderman, P. (1983). From Rags to Rage to Art. *The Nation*. 237 (Dec. 17). 635-638.
- Viglione, J., Hannon, L., & DeFina, R. (2011). The impact of light skin on prison time for Black female offenders. *The Social Science Journal*, 48(1), 250-258.
- Walker, A. (1982a). If the present looks like the past, what does the future look like? *Heresies: A Feminist Publication On Art And Politics*, 4 (3)15, 56-59.
- Walker, A. (1982b, July). Embracing the Dark and the Light. *Essence*. 12(3) 66-121.
- Walker, A. (1982c). *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Walker, A. (1983). *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Wallace, M. (1978). *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: The Dial Press.
- Wheatley J. (1971). The Use of Black Models in Advertising. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8.
- Wilder, J. (2008). *Everyday colorism in the lives of young black women: Revisiting the continuing significance of an old phenomenon in a new generation*. Unpublished Dissertation Manuscript. University of Florida.
- Whitaker, C. (1995). "Essence" in *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines*. Endres, K. & Lueck, T.L. (Eds). Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Williams, E. N. (1970). Dimout in Jackson. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 9(2), 56-58.
- Zeldes, G., & Fico, F. (2005). Race and Gender: An Analysis of Sources and Reporters in the Networks' Coverage of the 2000 Presidential Campaign. *Mass Communication & Society*, 8(4), 373-385. doi:10.1207/s15327825mcs0804\_5
- Williamson, J. (1978). *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. London: Boyars.
- Wilson II, C., & Gutiérrez, F. (1995). *Race, multiculturalism, and the media: From mass to class communication*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Wilson, J. (2012, January 17). Beyonce Accused of Skin Lightening in New Album Promo Ad. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/17/beyonce-skin-lightening-ad\\_n\\_1210377.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/17/beyonce-skin-lightening-ad_n_1210377.html)
- Zeldes, G., & Fico, F. (2010). Broadcast and Cable News Network Differences in the Way Reporters Used Women and Minority Group Sources to Cover the 2004 Presidential Race. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13(5), 512-527. doi:10.1080/15205430903348811

Zeleny, J. (2010, January 10). Reid Apologizes for Remarks on Obama's Color and 'Dialect.'  
*The New York Times*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/10/us/politics/10reidweb.html>

Zuckerman, M.E. (1998). *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

APPENDIX A:  
LITERARY REVIEWS OF  
*IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS: WOMANIST PROSE*

- Allen, B. (1984). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. *Smithsonian*. 14 (Jan.) 133-4.
- Bach, J. (1983). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. *Publishers Weekly*. 224 (Aug. 15) 62.
- Benet, M.K. (1984). Life-saving models. *Times Literary Supplement*. (Nov. 30) 27.
- Booklist*. (1983). 80 (S1) 22
- Brown, B. (1984). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. *C L A Journal*. 27 (March) 348-352
- Byrd, R.P. (1983). Sound Advice From a Friend: Words and Thoughts From The Higher Ground of Alice Walker: In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. *Callaloo*, 18 (Spring - Summer) 123-129.
- Choice*. (1984). 21 (May) 1311.
- Clark, B.L. (1984). Alice Walker. *Modern Fiction Studies*. 30, 334
- Cornish, S. (1984, Feb. 3). Alice Walker: her own woman. *The Christian Science Monitor*. B1
- Eder, R. (1983, Dec. 4). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. P1.
- Davidon, A, M. (1984). Beacons. *Progressive*. 59 (Feb.) 42.
- Hairston, L. (1984). Alice in the Mainstream. *Freedomways*. 24(3)182-190.
- Kirkus Reviews* (1983). LI(16) 957.
- Lewis, P. (1984). *Stand*. 26(1) 43-45.
- MGC. (1984). Books About The South. *Southern Living*. 19 (Jan.) 84.
- Mort, J. (1984, June 1). A prose of her own. *Commonweal*. 111, 345.

- Mort, M. (1983). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: womanist prose. *Library Journal*. 108 (2086).
- Munro, C.L. (1984). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. *Black American Literature Forum*. 18 (Winter) 161
- New Yorker, The*. (1983). 59 (Nov. 7):184.
- Okri, B. (1984). Coloring Book. *New Statesman*. 107(June 22): 22-23.
- Parini, J. (1984). *New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*. 6 (Summer) 634, 639
- Rhodes, J. P. (1984). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. *America*. 150 (Feb. 25)137
- Smith, V. A. (1985). Creating Connections. *The Sewanee Review*. 93(2).xxxii-xxxiii, xxxiv
- Vigderman, P. (1983). From Rags to Rage to Art. *The Nation*. 237 (Dec. 17). 635-638.

APPENDIX B:

*ESSENCE* MAGAZINE ISSUES REVIEWED

| YEAR | RANDOM ISSUES     |
|------|-------------------|
| 1970 | May, Sept. Nov.   |
| 1971 | March, Nov., Dec. |
| 1972 | Jan., Nov., Dec.  |
| 1973 | July, Sept., Dec. |
| 1974 | April, Nov., Dec. |
| 1975 | Aug., Sept., Dec. |
| 1976 | March, June, Nov. |
| 1977 | April, May, Sept. |
| 1978 | Jan., June, Sept. |
| 1979 | June, July, Sept. |
| 1980 | Feb., May, Oct.   |
| 1981 | Jan., March, Aug. |
| 1982 | April, July, Aug. |
| 1983 | Feb., Oct., Nov.  |
| 1984 | Jan., May, Dec.   |
| 1985 | April, July, Aug. |
| 1986 | April, Aug., Nov. |

|      |                   |
|------|-------------------|
| 1987 | July, Sept. Nov.  |
| 1988 | Feb., March, June |
| 1989 | Jan., June, Oct.  |
| 1990 | Jan., Feb., March |
| 1991 | July, Sept., Dec. |
| 1992 | March, June, Oct. |
| 1993 | March, Oct. Nov.  |
| 1994 | Jan., March, Nov  |
| 1995 | March, July, Nov. |
| 1996 | March, June, Aug. |
| 1997 | Feb., June, Aug.  |
| 1998 | Sept., Oct., Nov. |
| 1999 | Feb., May, June   |
| 2000 | Jan, March, July  |
| 2001 | Feb, Aug, Oct.    |
| 2002 | Aug, Sept., Oct.  |
| 2003 | July, Sept., Oct. |
| 2004 | Feb., May, Nov.   |
| 2005 | Feb., June, Dec.  |
| 2006 | June, Aug., Oct.  |
| 2007 | June, July, Nov.  |
| 2008 | May, Aug., Dec.   |
| 2009 | Jan., June, Sept. |

2010 Feb., July, Sept.

2011 April, June, Aug.

YEAR COLORISM-SPECIFIC ISSUES

1974 January – Beauty Issue

1982 July – “Is Color Coming Between Us?”

1987 August – “Am I Black Enough?”

1988 November – “Light-Skinned Black Men: Problems and Privileges”

1991 September – “Who Is Black?”

1991 November – “Colorstruck and Black Men”

1993 January – “Mirror, Mirror”

1994 September – “The Color Thing”

1999 May – “Sisterhood Apart”

2004 May – “Don’t Play in the Sun”

2011 December – “Colorstruck”