

BEAUTY & THE BEASTS

ANALYZING BLACK & BROWN BEAUTY IN A EUROCENTRIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Since the Age of Exploration, the influence of European colonialism and culture have dominated the world, primarily western society. This paper will discuss the disastrous impacts of western-imposed Eurocentric beauty standards on western cultures and formerly colonized states, and the specific impact that these social standards have had on Black communities, both in the Americas and in Africa. Through this discussion, we will observe the root of this imposition upon these respective cultures, primarily as a result of colonialism and the ever-present specter of white supremacy (both implicit and explicit), and how it has led to three specific circumstances: the rise of colorism both within and beyond the Black community; the skin-bleaching epidemic throughout the Black community both in the western world and beyond; and the subsequent cultural appropriation of Black culture and, most specifically, physical features commonly found on Black women. Methodologically, this paper will utilize a historical analysis of the impacts of colorism and skin-bleaching among Black women of American and African origin, as well as the health-related, social, and financial impacts of these issues as well as cultural misappropriation. This paper will then conclude by first discussing the counterculture of empowerment among Blacks in America and Africa, as well as some efforts by prominent Blacks to create a culture of inclusivity within the beauty industry; then, by properly summarizing the situation at hand, the key issues that remain today, and what the prospects for reconciliation must be for the future.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper will be centered around two seminal scholarly articles and research reports in order to properly flesh out the general concepts of this paper. While many more sources will be used in order to bolster the analysis and data-driven information behind this report, we will limit our literary analysis to these two particular pieces in the interest of time and the avoidance of later redundancies brought about by discussion in the following pages.

A Study of Colonization

In an effort to further flesh out the problematic imposition of Eurocentric beauty standards on western society, this paper will discuss the critically adverse effect that colonization has had on western society. In fact, while we may owe western society as we know it to colonization itself, it exists as a bit of a catch-22 in that development has also come with disaster of a sociocultural nature. Dr. Carrie Bourassa's text¹, titled *Understanding the intergeneration effects of colonization: Aboriginal women with neurological conditions—their reality and resilience*, discusses the experiences of many Aboriginal women as they've suffered from neurological conditions due to colonialism.

This scholarly article, found in Volume 10, Issue 2 of the International Journal of Indigenous Health, is primarily authored by Dr. Bourassa, a Métis academic specializing in Indigenous research methodologies. Racism and stereotyping within the healthcare system and many other aspects of society are clearly demonstrated within this text, and this has served as an

¹ Bourassa (2016)., C., Blind, M., Dietrich, D., & Oleson, E. (n.d.). Understanding the intergenerational effects of colonization: Aboriginal women with neurological conditions-their reality and resilience. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijih.102201515113>

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opening to further discuss the harmful effects of colonization in modern times. This will be but a microcosm of the larger problems that colonialism has caused both native and African populations.

A Study of Colorism

In an effort to further flesh out the problematic imposition of Eurocentric beauty standards on western society, this paper will discuss the critically adverse effect that colorism has had on western society, especially both within and beyond the Black communities living in this society. Colorism has had an equally adverse derivative effect on the Black community (primarily with Black women) and it has factored a great deal into how Blacks are treated by society, even among other Blacks.

This has extended to the criminal justice system, which Professor Jennifer Eberhardt would explain in her paper² titled *Looking Deathworthy*. This research report would allow for further discussion about the way skin color factors into treatment on a societal level for Blacks. This serves as another element of the larger disparate impact on those that do not naturally conform to Eurocentric beauty and perceptive standards.

Speaking to the threat of white supremacy in society as a fuel for the three pillars to be discussed in this paper, the author begins with a clear statement—*race matters in capital punishment*, and clearly outlines how those that possess more African features are treated much worse than those that do not, regardless of the victim's racial identity.

² Eberhardt, Jennifer L.; Davies, P G.; Purdie-Vaughns, Valerie J.; and Johnson, Sheri Lynn, "Looking Deathworthy: Perceived Stereotypicality of Black Defendants Predicts Capital-Sentencing Outcomes" (2006). Cornell Law Faculty Publications. Paper 41. http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/lrsp_papers/41

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INTRODUCTION

“...we are beautiful, no matter what they say; yes words won’t bring us down,”³ sang Christina Aguilera, a well-known pop singer back in 2002, no doubt in the midst of a period of national resilience, pride, and collective encouragement in the months following the 9/11 attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. The song, titled “Beautiful,” was the second single from Aguilera’s fourth studio album, titled *Stripped*.

To no one’s surprise, this Aguilera single made it a point to address “issues of self-esteem and insecurity, promoting a message of self-empowerment and embracing inner beauty,”⁴ which would eventually win a Grammy for its message, continuing to be used today as a tool of musical empowerment. No matter what anyone might say, beauty does not lose its luster. Why would a song like this be necessary in 2002? Why would a song like this be necessary now?

Dating back to as early as the 19th century, the concept of race and beauty are two societal elements that have defined perceptions throughout the western and western-dominated world. As European colonialism has stretched across the globe in response to the Age of Exploration, many cultural norms have followed closely behind. As such, many native populations, each subject to European colonial domination, have had to adjust to shifting cultural norms.

This has had a negative effect on subjugated groups, as European colonial domination has brought with it the perception that all things European are superior and more desirable than those which are not. This has also been applied to beauty standards as an extension of white supremacy, which has fueled this ongoing colonial domination of non-white lands. But what is Eurocentrism? “The term 'Eurocentrism' denotes a world-view which, implicitly or explicitly, posits European

³ Beautiful by Christina Aguilera: Song Stories. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20140327020233/http://www.rollingstone.com/music/song-stories/beautiful-christina-aguilera>

⁴ *Ibid.*

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history and values as “normal” and superior to others, thereby helping to produce and justify Europe's dominant position within the global capitalist world system.”⁵

The imposition of western, Eurocentric beauty standards upon non-European cultures and communities has had a truly damaging effect upon those communities, and has served as a modernized form of western colonialism. This paper will discuss the historical backdrop of colonialism and white supremacy, the ensuing elements such as colorism, skin-whitening, and the cultural appropriation of non-white features to the benefit of white cultural figures.

This paper will also undertake a historical analysis of beauty norms throughout the Americas and Africa to explore what they would otherwise have been but for Eurocentric beauty standards and culture, then concluding with a culmination of the effects of these harmful western impositions; we will then conclude with a realistic solution to this at-times subtle attack on non-European physical features and beauty standards.

THE BREAKDOWN

Eurocentric beauty standards may have disastrous effects that will be discussed later on, but there is no real way of properly understanding how these standards began their domination of culture without first understanding the settings within which they were born. A simple look at the term *Eurocentric beauty standards* can easily lead one to suggest that these cultural expectations of beauty were born in Europe at some point. This is correct.

However, this is far from the complete story. As we will see shortly, the punishing effect of Eurocentric beauty standards has its roots in two major aspects of society that have a role in modern culture, even today, and they are the ongoing effects of European colonialism and the

⁵ Bielefeld University. (n.d.). Eurocentrism. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/cias/wiki/e_Eurocentrism.html

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pervasive elements of white supremacy that still make themselves known throughout not just the western world, but every sector of the world where European colonialism itself has either directly or indirectly impacted. These two will set the stage for the effects, and we will discuss them now.

The Result of European Colonialism

To the average person living in the United States, the concept of colonialism might now be considered to be a distant relic of a long-liberated past. Most American citizens are well-aware of the story of their country's independence, which would transform them from thirteen British colonies into the early version of the 50-state Union we know today. This is normal. But colonialism extends far beyond a 10th grade high school history class and into a very influential part of world history, particularly in the Americas, Africa, and the Mashriq. Colonialism is defined as "a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another...the practice of colonialism usually involved the transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin."⁶

Colonialism is not a new concept invented by the British or French, however. "The ancient Greeks set up colonies as did the Romans, the Moors, and the Ottomans, to name just a few of the most famous examples."⁷ One of the defining aspects of colonialism is the impact upon subjugated lands that colonialism has established. Take India for example. "During the heyday of British rule, or the British Raj, from 1872 to 1921, Indian life expectancy dropped by a stunning 20 per cent. By contrast, during the 70 years since independence, Indian life expectancy has increased by

⁶ Kohn, M., & Reddy, K. (2017, August 29). Colonialism. Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>

⁷ *Ibid.*

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approximately 66 per cent, or 27 years. A comparable increase of 65 per cent can also be observed in Pakistan, which was once part of British India.”⁸

The same would take place in Canada. “Aboriginal Peoples have endured over 500 years of colonial policies and practices aimed at destroying their cultural practices. While the assaults on culture may not be as overt as they were even 60 years ago, they are still seen in terms of the inequities of government funding of Aboriginal-specific initiatives relating to education, healthcare, and housing (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012).”⁹ Under colonial rule, as we’ve seen, new populations are often brought into colonized lands to live either alongside or separate from peoples subject to this colonization. But this is not the only element of colonization.

As European settlements began to litter Africa and the Americas throughout the centuries, European colonizers, when not busy subjecting indigenous populations in the Americas and Africa to enslavement, rape, and resource-pillaging, were draining those very lands of the resources that allowed whole civilizations to prosper for as long as they did prior to European contact. “If they failed to bring the required amount, their women were taken away and kept as hostages...in the harems of colonial government employees. If this method failed...troops were sent to the village to spread terror, if necessary by killing some of the men...they were ordered to bring one right hand amputated from an African victim for every cartridge used.” (Introduction To African Civilisations, John G. Jackson 310-311)”¹⁰

⁸ McQuade, J. (2020, April 28). Colonialism was a disaster and the facts prove it. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://theconversation.com/colonialism-was-a-disaster-and-the-facts-prove-it-84496>

⁹ Bourassa (2016).

¹⁰ Pheko, M. (n.d.). Effects of colonialism on Africa's past and present: Pambazuka News. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/effects-colonialism-africas-past-and-present>

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The Ongoing Pandemic of White Supremacy

To the modern American mind, the concept of white supremacy is one that is often associated with the Nazi Party of old or a group of fringe sects such as the white-hooded members of Klu Klux Klan. What the average person does not realize is that white supremacy, even now, remains alive and well, and continues to be fuel for an unwitting western liberal democratic project. If white supremacy is more than what the average person understands, what is it exactly? How is it defined in a way that can be properly understood for the purposes of this analysis and subsequent discussion?

According to the Anti-Defamation league, white supremacy is “a term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people.”¹¹ Often without realizing it, much of the western world believes that its culture should serve as a basis for global society, some neighborhoods should look a certain way at all times, and that certain aspects of white people--be it their physical features, culture, or language, are simply *better* than that which we see elsewhere in the world.

White supremacy, as an ideology, has, through both action and passive-aggressive cultural conditioning, spread like wildfire throughout the modern world. It has made its way through Colonial Africa, a bombed out and depleted Mashriq, the Indian subcontinent, and even as far east as East Asia, Oceania, and the faraway¹² islands of the Pacific Ocean. It has stretched across space

¹¹ White Supremacy. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/white-supremacy>

¹² At least by European standards, that is.

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and time, dominating western society in the modern age and going as far as to whitewash¹³ the past, serving as an erroneous example of confirmation bias. This can be seen in the whitewashing of many ancient figures, such as those found in the Jewish Torah and Christian Bible, for example.

Today, we have seen how the depiction of many Biblical figures and figures that lived during the time of ancient Egypt, more reflects a Swedish or Italian village than the distinctly African¹⁴ communes that they were. Figures like the pharaohs, Moses, and even Jesus of Nazareth himself, who could not be told apart¹⁵ from his own disciples on the night of his betrayal, have long since been made to resemble white-skinned European figures like Cesar Borgia and John Lennon, as opposed to the modern-day Ethiopians and Yemenites they most likely resembled. This would eventually be used as a tool for domination; with the idea that the figurehead of a major religion such as Christianity was white, it would lend itself to the idea that whites were, by definition, *closer to God* and superior to all other races on the earth.

In fact, western religious movements such as the Church of Latter-Day Saints, known more commonly as *Mormons*, integrated this misunderstood and misremembered theory of Black inferiority into their own religious doctrine, completely excluding Blacks¹⁶ from their membership until 1978, with one of their foremost figures in Brigham Young actually teaching and writing¹⁷ in opposition to the abolition movement in the United States. His explanation was that the

¹³ Meaning, “to alter (something) in a way that favors, features, or caters to white people: such as to portray (the past) in a way that increases the prominence, relevance, or impact of white people and minimizes or misrepresents that of nonwhite people. To alter (an original story) by casting a white performer in a role based on a nonwhite person or fictional character. See Whitewash. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/whitewash>.

¹⁴ Amp, M. (2003, June). THE “TABLE OF NATIONS” SCENE IN THE TOMB OF RAMSES III. Retrieved November 20, 2019, from <http://manuampim.com/ramsesIII.htm>.

¹⁵ This would be due to a combination of the late hour of his arrest and the physical resemblance that he bore with his followers. See Matt. 26:47-55 (NKJV).

¹⁶ Graham-Russell, J. (2016, August 29). What Is It Like to Be Black and Mormon in the U.S.? Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/black-and-mormon/497660/>.

¹⁷ Young, B. D., & Watt, G. D. (1854). *Journal of discourses*. Liverpool: F.D. Richards.

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enslavement of Blacks in America existed in accordance with the very commands of God himself, and abolition efforts would ultimately prove to be successful. He was obviously very wrong.

Even with the whitewashing of history doing the damage on historical accuracy that it did over the centuries, the concept of race as a true divider of nations as understood by today's world would not truly take shape until about the 19th century, taking the concept of racial differentiation of the ancient Egyptians and weaponizing it into a tool of oppression. Western society, then being fueled by their whitewashed interpretation of Christianity, would take their warped theology and use it as a tool to exert their perceived supremacy over the likes of Native Americans and Africans, going far enough as to weaponize the Biblical passages involving the Mark of Cain, Curse of Canaan, directives from God not to intermarry with Canaanite tribes, and 1st century doctrines of shunning non-Christians against the human rights of darker-skinned, non-white people.

This would be a driving justification behind the near-complete eradication of Native Americans, the annexation of Native American land, and the enslavement and colonization of Africans and their land. But this is merely the backstory of white supremacy. We will soon be able to see how this constant social conditioning of *if it's white it's alright; if it's black, send it back* would directly affect the very people subjected to subjugation over the decades and centuries.

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The effects of colonialism and white supremacy have far-reaching negative effects throughout the world, and no particular race, ethnic group, or community has felt more of the brunt of this negativity than Black people, whether in the Americas, Europe, or Africa. Because of the constant social and cultural conditioning of white supremacy through colonialism that western society has promoted, Blacks throughout the world have been subjected to a *hatred of self*--which

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is to say a collective disapproval of their own physical features and other elements unique to their respective cultures.

While there is no doubt that western society has benefited from the injection of Black culture into general pop culture, this has also managed to take place at the expense of Black people through the cultural appropriation of non-whiteness. Because of the continued impression and promotion of Eurocentric culture, physical features, and the like, this collective *hatred of self* has morphed into a cannibalization that has proven itself destructive, manifesting within the very communities themselves. This is seen through the perpetuation of colorism and skin-whitening both within and beyond the Black community, both which will be discussed below.

The First Beast: Colorism

In order to properly decipher the meaning and impact of colorism, we must first explain what it is, what it means, what's happened as a result of it, and why it matters within the grand theme of beauty standards, cultural evolution, and tranquility. Colorism is the "practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin."¹⁸ In fact, "colorism disadvantages dark-skinned people while privileging those with lighter skin. Research has linked colorism to smaller incomes, lower marriage rates, longer prison terms, and fewer job prospects for darker-skinned people."¹⁹ We will discuss this further later on, but for now, we must look at colorism's origins.

Focusing on the United States, Colorism can be traced back to slavery, which, as we mentioned before, is rooted in white supremacy, during the age of African enslavement in

¹⁸ Colorism. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.nccj.org/colorism-0>

¹⁹ Nittle, N. (2020, January 30). The Origins of Colorism and How This Bias Persists in America. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-colorism-2834952>

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America, enslaved Africans were not only subjected to just physical and mental abuse, but sexual abuse as well. “In the United States, the racial dynamics of rape are shaped by a long history of white men raping their African-American female slaves,”²⁰ as though enslavement weren’t enough. “Because the women were chattel property, the owners (and often overseers) could and did use them sexually at will, with complete legal and social impunity. Because children born of slave mothers were slaves, regardless of their paternity, many slave owners benefited from rape by producing more slaves for themselves.”²¹

The children born of these egregious violations of personal sovereignty would inevitably possess the features of both parents, including lighter skin. This lighter skin, visibly different from the victimized mother, would subject the child to certain privileges not otherwise enjoyed by ordinary enslaved Africans. As a child of the slaver, they would thus be deemed more recognized and desirable, even living within the actual homes alongside any other children that the slaver might already have. Over time, this would morph into the concept that lighter-skinned people among Blacks would be viewed as more acceptable in society, due to the presence of more European features, such as lighter skin, smaller lips, less-coarse hair, and so on.

As a result of the constant sexual assaults visited upon enslaved African women, more and more lighter-skinned Africans would emerge within society. While still denied many of the rights automatically afforded to their white counterparts, lighter-skinned individuals would eventually begin to enjoy a more privileged (though unequal) existence in western society. “After the Civil War, lighter-skinned men of mixed ancestry continued in high-status positions. They enjoyed

²⁰ Whisnant, R. (2017, June 21). Feminist Perspectives on Rape. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-rape/>

²¹ *Ibid.*

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better educational opportunities, and many rose to positions of great social influence.”²² The easier someone could *pass* as white, the better off they would be in society.

Naturally, there would be a negative result from this systematic lightening of enslaved Africans. “This strategy was intended to cause separation within the enslaved community, pitting darker-skinned people against lighter skinned people.”²³ This would serve as an effective perpetuation of colonization, ensuring that subjugated populations are too busy fighting amongst themselves to resist being subjugated by the real threat. But this would only be part of the equation. “Later, in the early 1900s, another strong example was the establishment of the brown paper bag test within African American communities. This discriminatory act required that an individual’s skin color was the same color or lighter than a brown paper bag in order for that person to receive privileges.”²⁴ In the western world, “a growing body of research demonstrates that people more readily apply racial stereotypes to Blacks who are thought to look more stereotypically Black, compared with Blacks who are thought to look less stereotypically Black (Blair, Judd, & Fallman, 2004; Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Maddox, 2004; Maddox & Gray, 2002, 2004).”²⁵

This is the reality of society. “People associate Black physical traits with criminality in particular. The more stereotypically Black a person’s physical traits appear to be, the more criminal that person is perceived to be (Eberhardt et al., 2004).”²⁶ As such, almost as a sense of survivalism, Blacks would find themselves seeking to look, be, and live more like their European counterparts, doing all that they could to abandon their own identity, features, and even sense of self. This would

²² Jablonski, N. (2012). *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color*. University of California Press. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn64b

²³ Jeffries, A. Y. (2019, July 10). *Mental Health Effects of Colorism in the Black Community*. Retrieved from <https://www.mindpathcare.com/blog/mental-health-effects-of-colorism-in-the-black-community/>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Eberhardt (2006).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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move well into the modern world, as the manner in which Blacks are portrayed are subject to colorism, no matter who they are.

As recently as 2010, a New York Times report explained the financial impacts of colorism, explaining that lighter-skinned Latinos in the United States make \$5,000 more on average than darker-skinned Latinos.”²⁷ This would stretch into academics as well, with the education test-score gap between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans [being] as large as the gap between whites and blacks.”²⁸ With academics and criminal justice continuing to differentiate between shades of Black and brown, one must wonder how this impacts the very social lives of those affected by colorism.

An analytical look into music has also shaped (and even enshrined) colorism. “Historically, rap music has talked about skin tone in a way that elevated European standards of beauty, specifically lighter complexions. It was not uncommon for black male rappers in the 1980s and ‘90s to perpetuate skin tone bias in their music.”²⁹ This bias would not be subtle, either. “Big Daddy Kane once rapped, “Light-skin honeys of the red-bone breed. You got, you got, you got what I need” (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:159). Similarly, rap videos typically propped women in front of the camera who were lighter-skinned, advancing this infatuation of the light-skinned black woman (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992).”³⁰

Social conditioning, brought about by the aforementioned color-based social stigmas, would lead into coupling, with relationships often based upon how light-skinned a potential partner might be. “Heterosexual men of colour often perpetuate colourism by demonstrating it in their

²⁷ Vedantam, S. (2010, January 19). Shades of Prejudice. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19vedantam.html>

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Frierson, Whitney, "I Like . . . Red Bone:" Colorism, Rappers, and Black College Sorority Women at a Predominantly White Institution" (2019). Theses and Dissertations. 3317. <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/3317>

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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choice of partners, or in their descriptions of what they consider attractive in women (hooks, 2003; Jha and Adelman, 2009; Berry and Duke, 2013), as can be seen on Twitter.”³¹

Skin tone also affects personal income and social position. “According to a 2004 study among African Americans, 37 percent of people with dark skin tones were classified in the category of post industrial poverty stricken (or the underclass), while 25 percent were in a category considerably above poverty (or affluent).”³² The less money you have, the less able you are to live in safety and security. The less able you are able to live in safety and security, the better chance you have of negative health as a result of living in more unsafe areas.

No one, not even international superstar Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, is exempt from the influence of colorism as we know it. In a 2019 interview with SiriusXM's The Clay Cane Show, her father and manager Mathew Knowles was very candid on the impact of colorism on his daughter's career. "In the music industry there's still segregation," said Knowles. "Programmers, especially at pop radio, have this imagery of what beauty looks like. ... If you look back even at Whitney Houston, if you look at those photos, how they lightened her to make her look lighter-complexioned ... Because there's a perception and a colorism: the lighter that you are, the smarter and more economically (advantaged) ... There's a perception all around the world about color — even with black folks, there's a perception.”³³

The impacts of colorism as we know it are disastrous. As bad as it has been throughout the western world, the effect that it has had on Black women remains a blight on society. It is no different today. “Media-driven messages emphasizing the beauty and success associated with light

³¹ Phoenix, A. (2014). Colourism and the politics of beauty. *Feminist Review*, (108), 97-105. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/24571924

³² Jablonski (2012).

³³ Staff, V. (2019, June 19). Mathew Knowles Says Beyonce's Career Benefited, Kelly Rowland's Suffered From Skin Tone Bias. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://variety.com/2019/music/news/mathew-knowles-beyonce-kelly-rowland-lighter-skin-tone-bias-1203247823/>

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skin amplify existing societal preferences, creating a vicious cycle of aspiration to an unattainable ideal that affects men as well as women.”³⁴ What we are referring to here is what colorism has forced so many to turn to for the sake of upward social, political, and even financial mobility--the concept of skin-whitening.

The Second Beast: Skin Bleaching

In order to properly decipher the meaning and impact of skin-bleaching, we must first explain what it is, what it means, what’s happened as a result of it, and why it matters within the grand theme of beauty standards, cultural evolution, and tranquility. Skin-bleaching, which goes by different terms like skin-whitening, skin-lightening, and so on, takes place by decreasing “the production of melanin in melanocytes (melanin-producing cells). Most of them work by suppressing tyrosinase, an enzyme governing melanin production. The oldest known skin bleaches are mercury-based creams and ointments, sometimes known as mercurials.”³⁵

Amazingly enough, this has long been supported as a commercial enterprise within the western world. “The commercial development, production, and marketing of skin bleaching products began in the United States in the post-Reconstruction era, as segregationist Jim Crow laws restricted the opportunities and prospects of African-Americans, especially in the South.”³⁶ Even as the era of enslavement would evolve into a new era of oppression for Blacks everywhere, commercialized self-hatred would find its way to the shelves. “At a time when American culture was suffused with caricatures of African Americans with dark skin, “vicious” and kinky hair, and

³⁴ Jablonski (2012).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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apelike features, these new cosmetic preparations promised relief from discrimination along with social advancement.”³⁷

Essentially, to be beautiful, you not only had to have straight hair like white people, but your skin needed to be as close as possible to them, even if it meant dousing your skin with harmful chemicals. Beauty would be a key to success in modern society. While slightly different in cultural norms, the underlying valorization of beauty remains the same, even in eastern Asia. “Mongolian women invest in physical attractiveness and perform a form of beauty that is commonly associated with the wealthy in order to safeguard their social and economic standing and in the hope of upward economic mobility.”³⁸

But this would come at a cost. Though the desire to lighten the skin among Black women, whether throughout the colonized lands of Africa or the Americas, would run rampant throughout those respective communities, serious side-effects to these treatments would soon arise before long. Even then, such serious physical side-effects would be seen as a sign of status among certain communities. “During apartheid, Black women used skin bleaches to obtain jobs often reserved for Coloured women. The unsightly skin blotches that often appeared following repeated use of skin lighteners were seen as positive evidence of being modern.”³⁹ Harmful side-effects⁴⁰ of these skin-bleaching products have included dermatitis, permanent kidney damage, squamous-cell carcinoma, neurological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and psychosis, and scaling, as demonstrated in the following chart.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Liebelt, C. (2016). Manufacturing Beauty, Grooming Selves: The Creation of Femininities in the Global Economy – An Introduction. *Sociologist*, 66(1), 9-24. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/24755103

³⁹ Jablonski (2012).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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Agent	Mechanism of action	Harmful side effects
Mercurials	Suppression of tyrosinase	Dermatitis (skin inflammation), hyperpigmentation (excess pigmentation), permanent kidney damage, neurological symptoms (anxiety, depression, and psychosis)
Hydroquinone	Suppression of tyrosinase	Dermatitis, hyperpigmentation, redness, stretch marks, ochronosis (darkening and thickening of skin), squamous-cell carcinoma
Arbutin, kojic acid, azelaic acid, and flavonoids	Suppression of tyrosinase	Dermatitis, redness, increase in melanin production after prolonged use
Niacinimide	Inhibition of melanosome transfer into keratinocytes	Dermatitis, redness
α -hydroxy acids (glycolic, retinoic, salicylic, and linoleic acids)	Exfoliation and inhibition of tyrosinase	Dermatitis, redness, scaling, and drying
Vitamin C, Vitamin E	Reduction of melanin production through antioxidant activity	Dermatitis, redness

Catastrophic. It should come as no surprise to find that Africa, the world's most melanin-rich continent, would become an epicenter for the skin-bleaching earthquake of social upheaval. "In Southern Africa, colorism is just one of the negative inheritances of European colonialism. The ideology of white supremacy that European colonists brought included the association of Blackness with primitiveness, lack of civilization, unrestrained sexuality, pollution, and dirt."⁴²

As far back as 1930, French fashion would not be kind to dark skin. "The association of Blackness with dirt can be seen in a 1930 French advertising poster for Dettol. The poster shows

⁴² Glenn, E. N. (2008). Yearning for Lightness: Transnational Circuits in the Marketing and Consumption of Skin Lighteners. *Gender & Society*, 22(3), 281–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208316089>

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a drawing of a dark African man washing his hands, which have become white, as he declares, ‘Le Savon Dirtoff me blanchit!’ The soap was designed not for use by Africans but, as the poster notes, *pour mechanciens automobilises et menagers*—French auto mechanics and housewives.”⁴³

A strange irony in this would be found in Madam C.J. Walker, remembered in history as the first self-made millionaire⁴⁴ in U.S. history, Black or white (she was Black). While she is remembered for her activism and entrepreneurial prowess in an era when most (if not all) Blacks were disenfranchised, she too benefited from the skin-whitening craze. “The Madam C. J. Walker Company encouraged buyers with its invocations to “add beauty to brains for success,” while Palmer’s Skin Success cream promised that its users would experience ‘a whole new world.’”⁴⁵

This would not sit well with the more conscious members of Black society. “The lofty rhetoric of this advertising competed with sharp criticism from social reformers, educators, ministers, and journalists in African American communities, who argued that skin bleaching only reinforced the association between color and character that had already caused so much suffering and disenfranchisement.”⁴⁶

White supremacy, colonialism, colorism, and skin-bleaching remain an oppressive and divisive irony, and society will continue to demonstrate these ironies through the first two concepts and their inherent flaws. But these ironies would be overshadowed by one large demonstration of our first two oppressive concepts, a demonstration that would render the concepts of colorism and skin-whitening confusing yet tragic on the part of Black people all around: the misappropriation of Black culture and features for Eurocentric gain.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Glazer, J. (2018, April 24). Madam C.J. Walker: America's First Female Self-Made Millionaire. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://convene.com/catalyst/madam-c-j-walker-americas-first-female-self-made-millionaire/>

⁴⁵ Jablonski (2012).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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The Third Beast: Cultural Misappropriation

In order to properly decipher the meaning and impact of cultural misappropriation, we must first explain what it is, what it means, what's happened as a result of it, and why it matters within the grand theme of beauty standards, cultural evolution, and tranquility. Cultural misappropriation is defined as “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.”⁴⁷ Examples of this can be seen throughout social media and popular culture, with white women masquerading⁴⁸ as Black or mixed-race women for the sake of increased traffic to their respective social media accounts. Emma Halberg, as recently as October 2019, is a frustratingly unfortunate example of this. “Emma Hallberg’s Instagram is filled with pictures of her glowing brown skin, thick ebony curls and noticeably glossy pout. It was a shock, then, for one follower to discover that Hallberg is actually white.”

It continues. “Dreadlocks, braids, cornrows and afros on black women are deemed unclean and unprofessional. Yet, once they are donned by Kylie Jenner, these same hairstyles are admired and imitated throughout a massive fan base.”⁴⁹ This has been a common story throughout the years, as voluptuous, full-figured white women with equally full lips--all features often seen on women of African descent--are celebrated, while their darker-skinned counterparts are, to put it simply, not. “The erasure of black women from their own culture is not limited to hair. Elements of their bodies have been adopted and exploited by white female

⁴⁷ The Week (Ed.). (2020, January 20). What is cultural appropriation? Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.theweek.co.uk/cultural-appropriation>

⁴⁸ Gawronski, Q. (2019, October 15). Black Instagram influencers call out 'blackfishing' white women for racial appropriation. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/black-instagram-influencers-call-out-blackfishing-white-women-racial-appropriation-n1064856>

⁴⁹ Alvarado, A. (2018, November 11). Alvarado: The Appropriation of Black Women's Beauty. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2018/11/11/alvarado-the-appropriation-of-black-womens-beauty/>

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celebrities. Lip-fillers, fat transfers to the buttocks and breast augmentation have helped white public figures attain an exaggerated silhouette, one often perceived as “grotesque” on black women.”⁵⁰ The injustice is ever-present in society.

This is not limited to their bodies, but their whole identities as Black women, as seen in the case of Rachel Dolezal, a white woman living in Spokane, Washington that essentially masqueraded as a light-skinned Black woman while working as a civil rights activist. As recently as 2015, Dolezal was “branch president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and chair of Spokane’s police ombudsman commission, she was well known and respected for her civil rights activism.”⁵¹ What enraged Black America was not her whiteness as she advocated on behalf of Black lives everywhere, but the fact that she essentially wore *blackface*⁵² while doing so.

What is *blackface*, exactly? *Blackface* is “dark makeup worn (as by a performer in a minstrel show) in a caricature of the appearance of a black person.”⁵³ *Blackface* can be traced back to the 19th century, when “white performers darkened their skin with polish and cork, put on tattered clothing and exaggerated their features to look stereotypically “black.””⁵⁴ It wasn’t enough then to mimic Black appearances, so “the first minstrel shows mimicked enslaved Africans on Southern plantations, depicting black people as lazy, ignorant, cowardly or hypersexual, according

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Aitkenhead, D. (2017, February 25). Rachel Dolezal: 'I'm not going to stoop and apologise and grovel'. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/25/rachel-dolezal-not-going-stoop-apologise-grovel>

⁵² McGreal, C. (2015, December 13). Rachel Dolezal: 'I wasn't identifying as black to upset people. I was being me'. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me>

⁵³ Blackface. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blackface>

⁵⁴ Kaur, H. (2019, February 08). This is why blackface is offensive. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/02/us/racist-origins-of-blackface/index.html>

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to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).”⁵⁵
This is why masquerading as a Black person is so problematic today.

Returning to the case of Rachel Dolezal, this was a white woman that had been masquerading as a Black woman long enough to actually fool many within the community into believing that she was, in fact, Black. She would take this all the way, even changing her hair into dreadlocks to mimic the appearance of coarser hair and deepen the hue of her skin tone⁵⁶ through various tanning treatments. It would all come to a head in 2015 when she would be confronted about her racial identity in an interview with KXLY 4 News⁵⁷, at the time wearing a tan and head of tightly-coiled hair. She then refused to answer whether she was the daughter of two white people. She would later change her name⁵⁸ to Nkechi Amare Diallo, a clearly more African-sounding name, after this whole saga would come to an end.

This would not be the first episode of cultural misappropriation, nor would it be the last. But with these problems clearly stated now, how can we find solutions to these ever-present problems? How do we reverse the imposition of Eurocentric beauty standards and the erasure of Black beauty? These are all questions worth answering, and that is what will happen next.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Alter, C. (2015, June 12). Rachel Dolezal: The Question of Black, White and Racial Identity. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://time.com/3919220/rachel-dolezal-spokane-naacp-black/>

⁵⁷ O'Connor, B. (2015, June 06). Spokane NAACP President's Mom Says Daughter Pretending to Be Black. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://gawker.com/spokane-naacp-presidents-mom-says-daughter-pretending-t-1710788405>

⁵⁸ Associated Press. (2017, March 02). Former Washington NAACP leader Rachel Dolezal gets new name. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://kfor.com/news/former-washington-naacp-leader-rachel-dolezal-gets-new-name/>

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In today's world, the effects of colonialism white supremacy exist as shadows of Eurocentric beauty standards being imposed everywhere. We know the problems. We know the origins of these problems. But how are affected communities responding to this issue? How has the community managed to survive under these circumstances? How can society come together to solve this issue of social sectarianism brought about by the relics of colonialism and white supremacy? While the answer is easier said than done, the truth is that it can, must, and will be done. We will explore this shortly.

A Beautiful Response

“Black is beautiful.” For anyone attuned to modern American popular culture dating back to the 1970s, this term has been standardized throughout the Black community dating back to the 1930s. The phrase became widely popular in the 1960s, building upon the legacies of Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, who were well-known in Harlem.”⁵⁹ Existing as a counterculture to the ongoing Eurocentric beauty standards, the “Black is beautiful” movement coincided with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and Steve Biko-led Black Consciousness movement in apartheid South Africa. Biko “worked throughout his life to empower black people. In the mid-to-late 1960s, he founded the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), a grassroots South African anti-apartheid activist movement.”⁶⁰ It would be

⁵⁹ Sayej, N. (2019, March 26). Black is Beautiful: Celebrating the significance of Kwame Brathwaite. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/26/kwame-brathwaite-photographer-black-is-beautiful>

⁶⁰ Black Is Beautiful: Remember Steve Biko. (2012, September 12). Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.cbc.ca/strombo/news/black-is-beautiful-remember-steve-biko.html>

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around this time that Blacks all around the United States began allowing their hair to grow, and women would begin moving away from chemically relaxing their hair, resulting in afro hairstyles.

This empowerment period would move into mainstream Hollywood media. “Empowered by the black cultural movement, African Americans increasingly demanded more roles and more realistic images of their lives, both in mainstream and black media. Black journalists used the talk-show format to air community concerns. Television programs featuring black actors attracted advertisers who tapped into a growing black consumer base.”⁶¹ But naturally, with any pro-Black empowerment movement, this was met with resistance—often violently. “In February 1973, the apartheid regime “banned” Biko as a result of his political activities. The ban meant he was no longer allowed to speak to more than one person at a time or speak in public, had to stay in his home region, and could not write publicly or speak with the media.”⁶²

Advancements in modern-day social media representation and acknowledgement have also shed light on Black beauty and excellence, with the fashion multimedia brand EveryStylishGirl serving as an example. “Founded in July 2016, ESG initially launched as a social media platform that delivered inspirational stories from a diverse group of stylish and ambitious women in media... From the very beginning, the ESG mission was simple: highlight the women of color in media who are often ignored by mainstream fashion mediums.”⁶³

Founder Nana Agyemang was clear in her platform’s purpose. Another major purpose of ESG is to make sure Black women are credited for their contribution to fashion and beauty trends, and not appropriated. “Since WOC are the trendsetters, they are the voice of fashion,” said Nana.

⁶¹ National Museum of African American History and Culture (Ed.). (2020, April 24). Black is Beautiful: The Emergence of Black Culture and Identity in the 60s and 70s. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/black-beautiful-emergence-black-culture-and-identity-60s-and-70s>

⁶² Black Is Beautiful (2012).

⁶³ Rasool, A. (2018, November 28). This Platform Is Trying to Stop Fashion Magazines from Appropriating Black Culture. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/every-stylish-girl-interview-black-women-in-media>

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"We are constantly imitated and because we aren't in many of those fashion spaces, we can't set the narrative straight and curate the ideas. We need more women of color to be journalists and to diversify fashion magazine covers — to set the tone and be the one bringing diversity to the table. It's not enough to have one seat at the table anymore."⁶⁴

The entertainer Rihanna, herself a Black woman, has also taken it upon herself to normalize Black and brown skin in beauty standards, a sharp call-back to Madam C.J. Walker's initial business ventures, with her launch⁶⁵ of Fenty Beauty in 2017. As discussed in *Essence*, "most dark-skinned women have a complicated relationship with makeup. We struggle finding the right colors that not only match our skin tone but compliments our undertones. There's much mixing and blending and shading to be done. When applying makeup, we become someone between a scientist and a painter, experimenting with colors until they make sense, make a masterpiece."⁶⁶

The influence of U.S. beauty standards, like with much of their culture, extends to many other countries as well. In an interview with social media influencer and cosmetic designer Djulicious, "a lot of the French beauty trends gained inspiration from American beauty trends. Djulicious said this constant mix of sharing ideas about beauty from different people's nationalities and origins has made her and other women in France more confident."⁶⁷ This is what will ultimately serve as a real solution to Eurocentric beauty standards—the door must open to everyone. As we've seen throughout the world and media, beauty comes in many different shapes, sizes, colors, and national origins.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Acquaye, A. (2017, September 29). Fenty Beauty is a Love Song to Women of Color. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://www.essence.com/beauty/fenty-beauty-love-song-to-women-color/>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Dettmann, A., Vazquez, A., Cho, N., Garcia, S., Ly, C., Wherritt, C., . . . Covell, N. (2019, November 20). Exploring Beauty Standards Worldwide: Black Beauty In America & France. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from <https://jetsettimes.com/beauty-standards/black-beauty-in-america-france/>

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Anyone with a clear mind can look at the Miss Universe pageant and observe how women can be beautiful while not conforming to Eurocentric beauty standards. This continued investment in beauty products that better reflect the wide variety of skin tones will make women feel more seen and recognized for who they are. The world should not revolve around Eurocentric beauty, and recent developments in that industry have made it so.

CONCLUSION

Eurocentric beauty standards were not born overnight; they have arrived as a result of colonialism and white supremacy perpetuating itself throughout the world. For the longest time, whiteness was viewed as pure, acceptable, civilized, and superior, and to the chagrin of the world, many still believe this to be the case. We have seen this toxic ideology impress itself upon colonized peoples both in the United States and around the world. We have seen how this toxicity has extended itself to colorism both within and beyond the Black community, skin-bleaching to better resemble a more-approved lighter complexion, and the cultural misappropriation of African features. But Black fashion and Black culture has proven itself to be a resilient entity, with leaders from among Black communities both in the U.S. and abroad striving for empowerment, even in the face of violence, discreditation, and ridicule. This can and must continue as the world moves into the future. Ultimately, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and while these Eurocentric beauty standards have proven themselves disastrous for the non-white world, we can rest assured that things are starting to turn for the better, even now.

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